Human-Centered Design:
An Innovative Tool for Professional Learning in Family Engagement

Global Family Research Project

Have you ever used a Swiffer to clean your floor? Your answer is probably yes, but did you know that it was invented through a process known as human-centered design?

In the mid-1990s, the consumer-goods giant Procter & Gamble sought to develop a new product to make floor cleaning better. As expected, they turned to their engineers, who began designing new chemicals and soaps. But they also explored a different option—human-centered design. A group of employees visited homes to watch how the people mopped their floors. And they learned that mops were a drag: It's cumbersome to change old buckets of water. It takes time to clean the mop and mix new solutions. And bending over to do the task takes a toll. Over time, Procter & Gamble realized it's not a better soap the consumers needed but a better mop! And from there the Swiffer was born—a disposable wipe built into a broom handle![1]

The Swiffer story is a testament to the power of human-centered design. How by placing people—rather than products and programs—at the center, new ideas and innovations come to be.

What is human-centered design?

Human-centered design is a process used to create new products and services based on knowing and empathizing with people. It has become increasingly popular in many academic and professional spaces because as a process, it sparks innovation by placing users at the heart of any endeavor. The human-centered design process involves three overlapping steps:

- *Inspiration* means observing people, talking with them, and stepping into another's shoes to understand problems and opportunities that exist in their lives;
- *Ideation* is the process of defining a problem and brainstorming different ideas and ways to solve it; and
- *Implementation* involves prototyping and testing innovative and new ideas, delivery, systems, and strategies.

Human-centered design is a first step to embracing a way to continuously engage families in innovation and improvement. The process and approach it embodies can be used in standalone workshops and integrated into continuing practice.
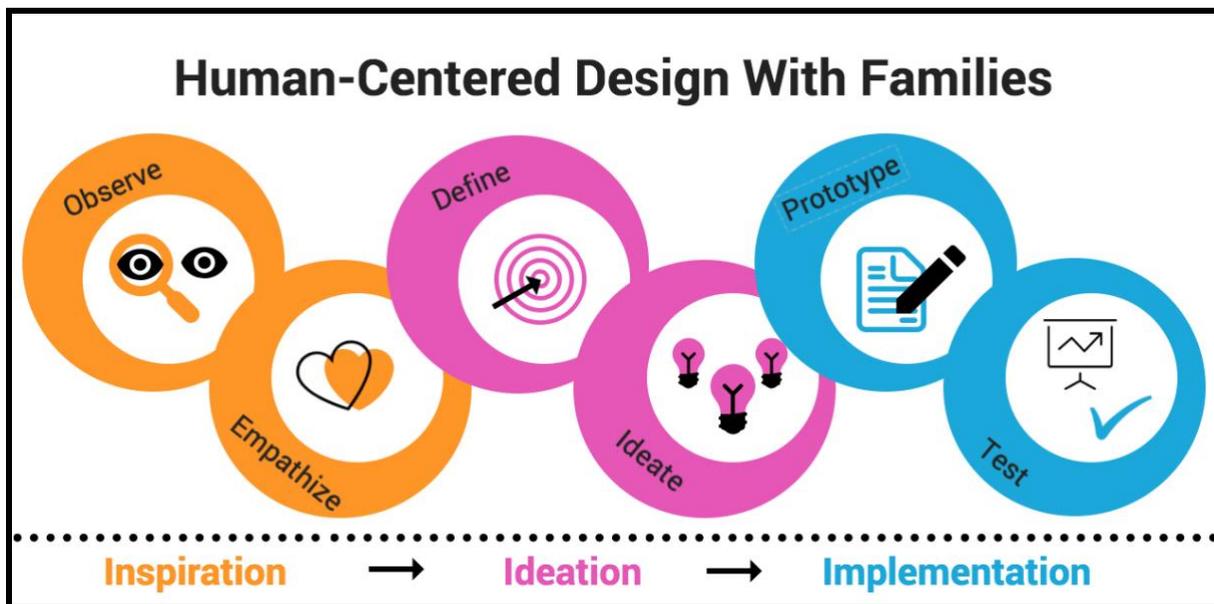
*Inspired by IDEO's Human-Centered Process

How is Human-Centered Design Useful for Family Engagement?

Human-centered design is a powerful tool for promoting family engagement because it opens new possibilities for reinventing how families and educators in various school and community organizations partner and collaborate. In family engagement, families' voices, experiences, and needs become the center from which new ideas, processes, and services are developed. When families and educators work together, human-centered design:

1

Creates a platform for raising up families' voices and perspectives
All too often, initiatives developed for families fail to be designed with families as partners. By creating a platform in which educators listen to families, and create solutions with them, the human-centered design approach creates an "us *with* them" mentality as opposed to an "us versus them" stance.[2] Families' perspectives should be considered standards rather than suggestions because their contributions will always be more aligned to a true solution that fits their needs. This mind shift is one way to foster and bring about parent leadership and empowerment.

2

Builds strong relationships and understanding between families and educators
When families and educators truly listen to one another, a deep sense of trust develops. Families feel more connected to schools and community organizations when they share their stories and know they have been heard. And educators develop understanding for families and often recognize mistaken assumptions they may have held. This trust creates deeper and more authentic collaborations and partnerships.

3

Leads to the development of more-effective family engagement practices, strategies, and programs
A human-centered design approach moves from family engagement practices that *educators* think families need and want to those based on what *families* desire and value. This in turn can lead to high participation rates, more meaningful engagement, more differentiated services, and stronger child outcomes.

Family-Centered Design in Action: Two Cases

At Global Family Research Project, we have utilized human-centered design approaches to promote family engagement in a variety of ways. The following examples illustrate how human-centered design has shown to be effective in two professional learning contexts: working with children's librarians and collaborating with education leaders around the transition to kindergarten.

Topic		Library Program for Families with Young Children	Transition to Kindergarten
Background		Librarians used human-centered design to better understand family needs for programming.	School and community leaders used human-centered design to inspire innovative transition-to-kindergarten practices.
INSPIRE	**Observe**	Librarians observed families of babies ages 0–12 months during a nursery rhyme story time.	Leaders reflected on their own lived experiences with families in their community.
	Empathize	Librarians interviewed families about their experiences with young children, challenges they faced, and the role of the library.	Leaders read and thought about research highlighting what families need and want during the transition to kindergarten.
IDEATE	**Define**	Librarians analyzed observations and interviews and uncovered that families wanted more opportunities to connect with other parents and discuss parenting questions with their peers.	Leaders identified a problem in their local community that was creating a barrier to family engagement in the transition to kindergarten.
	Ideate	Librarians quickly brainstormed as many ideas as possible to create peer learning during story time, and shared these ideas with one another.	Leaders brainstormed ideas and solutions that engaged all types of families and leaders and created linkages across different community organizations.
IMPLEMENT	**Prototype**	Working together, librarians used materials to create a representation of their ideas for a question board to promote social connectedness between families.	Leaders worked with clay, Legos, straws, sticky notes, pipe cleaners, and popsicle sticks to prototype how the different community contexts could become more connected.
	Test	Acting out their ideas in the form of a skit helped librarians to immediately test out how their new question board would work.	Leaders presented their ideas to different groups and demonstrated how their prototypes worked.

Related Resources

We are eager to hear your experiences with human-centered design. Let us know if you try these ideas and how it goes!

Human-Centered Design Overview

- [IDEO] Design Thinking Overview

- [Edutopia] Using Design Thinking to Build a Culture of Innovation

- [Stanford d.School] A Virtual Crash Course in Design Thinking and Equity-Centered Design Framework

Human-Centered Design in Practice

- [Global Family Research Project] Use Design Thinking to Raise Up Family Perspectives

- [Kaiser Permanente Design Consultancy] Human-Centered Design and Performance Improvement: Better Together

- [Huron Consultancy Group] How Design Thinking Can Transform the Hospital Experience

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[1] Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M. Grunow, A. & LeMahieu, P. (2015). Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Lopez, M. E. (2016). "Why We Need a Human Centered Approach to Family Engagement." http://nafsce.org/why-we-need-a-human-centered-approach-to-family-engagement/.
[2] Brown, T. (2009). *Change by design*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, p. 58.