

Introduction

When you work with young children, you work with their families as well. You partner with families to get to know children and support their development and learning. Families and teachers both have information that can be exchanged as part of an ongoing reciprocal relationship. Together, you support the healthy development and learning of each child.

Families benefit from these partnerships while learning more about child development in general and as applicable to their own children. Research shows that family engagement can enhance children's learning. Researchers at Pennsylvania State University found the following benefits:

- › Family engagement in the preschool years contributes to the success of children.
- › Children in families with low incomes experience added benefits from their early childhood education when their families are engaged with their child care or school.
- › Families with many stress factors including low incomes face more barriers to participating in the school community, though they need the support most, and programs that are most effective respond to the individual needs of diverse families.
- › Intensive efforts such as home visiting and parent group membership have the strongest impact on child outcomes. (Bierman, Morris, & Abenavoli 2017)

Family engagement includes the systems and practices used by programs and teachers to enhance connections between families and the early childhood community. It is an essential part of high-quality early childhood education.

Family engagement takes many forms, and you can use a variety of strategies to build meaningful relationships with families. Consider these examples of effective practice.

- › Ms. Kerrigan, a family child care provider, knows that once a child turns 2 years old, many families are eager for him to be out of diapers and using the toilet with regularity and ease. She has helped many toddlers learn to use the toilet but wants to acknowledge that each family knows their child best. She shares general information about the readiness signs for this milestone with a resource she found by searching “potty training” on the Zero to Three website (www.zerotothree.org). She encourages families to let her know when they see signs that their child is ready, and when that happens, she partners with the child's family to coordinate a toilet learning approach that works for the family child care program and in the child's home. Their ongoing communication helps to keep family expectations realistic and helps the child achieve this developmental goal.

- › The pre-K program at Primrose Lane Elementary School begins in September and ends in June, as do the K–3 classes. At the start of the year, the whole school community is invited to a celebration and orientation picnic. For children who do not have older siblings at the school, this event can be overwhelming. The pre-K teachers plan a series of smaller afternoon get-togethers in the classroom. This allows children and families to feel relaxed while becoming familiar with the setting, teachers, and classmates.
- › Every Sunday evening, the families of children in Mr. Schultz’s prekindergarten class eagerly await his weekly email newsletter, delivered in Spanish and English. Mr. Schultz recounts the events and experiences of the last week with a focus on what the children are gaining from their activities and how much he enjoys being their teacher. Although family members are encouraged to visit the classroom at any time, he knows that for many working parents, this is quite difficult. His weekly updates give everyone an opportunity to “see” their children’s learning.

In these examples, teachers responded to the individual needs and interests of children and families and used a strategy that was a good fit for their setting’s distinct features.

Research Says . . .

In the early childhood years, family involvement is clearly related to children’s learning outcomes. High levels of family involvement were associated with positive outcomes for children learning literacy, language, math, and social skills in children attending Head Start (Bulotsky-Shearer et al. 2012).

This book offers examples of effective family engagement practices that contribute to mutually respectful and reciprocal relationships that benefit everyone involved. Young children achieve goals jointly set by teachers and family members, teachers witness the outcomes of their intentional efforts, and families gain a sense of confidence as their child’s first and forever teachers.

In this book, the focus is on partnerships—the reciprocal process of getting to know individual family members and sharing your own unique characteristics and experiences with them. Each partner learns about the other—interests, cultures, languages, preferred interaction style, assets, abilities, and challenges. Partnerships like this result in meaningful and productive experiences for all.

Family engagement is a big task, and striving to create and implement practices that reflect the diversity of families can seem overwhelming. However, you can use the information in this book to make small changes (e.g., translating and redesigning the infant room sign-in sheet so it is easier for all families to use) or large ones (e.g., creating a family advisory group to provide input and feedback on program practices and policies). The advisory group can help you establish a cohesive approach to engaging families or add to what you already do.

In this book you will find guidance and examples for educators who work directly with children and families, although all early childhood professionals can learn how to support family engagement. Throughout the book, educator and teacher are used interchangeably to refer to all educators whose days are spent nurturing young children's learning and development in a variety of settings, including family child care homes and classrooms.

The book includes six chapters and an appendix:

Chapter 1, "Understanding Family Engagement," describes the characteristics of families with young children and summarizes the support for family engagement that comes from local, state, and federal entities.

Chapter 2, "The Role of Teachers in a Comprehensive Family Engagement Approach," reviews what early childhood programs do to begin developing meaningful reciprocal partnerships with families.

Chapter 3, "Family Engagement in Action," describes strategies, actions, activities, and projects to make family engagement successful, fun, and rewarding.

Chapter 4, "Communicating with Families," describes how a program and school can develop a family communication plan that keeps families informed and involved and invites them to partner with educators to support children's development and learning.

Chapter 5, "Connecting Home and Program Teaching and Learning," defines home-program connections and offers strategies that acknowledge every family's role as their child's prime educator.

Chapter 6, "Partnering with the Community," reviews the benefits of teaming up with community groups and provides a process for establishing and maintaining partnerships.

The Appendix, "Family Engagement Resources" is an annotated list of articles, books, and other tools to use to engage families.

As you finish each chapter, consider the Reflection Questions that appear on the last page. Use them to think about how the content applies to you as a professional and as a member of your early childhood community. These questions can also be useful starting points for study groups that are reading the book and for ongoing staff meetings, coaching, and other forms of professional development about partnering with families.