

# Accessible Family Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

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*What strategies enable families to be full and active participants in their young children's educations? This practical framework can be implemented in classrooms serving today's diverse families.*

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Denise Hampton works an 8 to 5 job that leaves almost no time to spend in her daughter's early childhood classroom. The teacher, Ms. Pam, sends home a weekly newsletter describing the group's accomplishments. Ms. Pam also occasionally distributes information about the class via e-mail. She feels she is doing a better than average job in communicating with families about their children's education.

Denise appreciates this information, but would like to genuinely participate in her child's learning, so she expresses her wishes to Ms. Pam. Their discussion alerts Ms. Pam to the fact that she could provide a range of opportunities for working families to become more fully engaged in their children's learning experiences.

Family involvement in early childhood classrooms benefits children, school staff, and families (Bradley & Kibera, 2006; Epstein, 2001). The development of a strong relationship between early childhood programs and families is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practices (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2009).

The work of Epstein (2001), Swap (1993), and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004) serve as a foundation for the description of family involvement in early education upon which this article is based. Family involvement encompasses the participation of the parent (or any family member or fictive kin) in the child's education. This participation occurs in and outside the school, including two-way communication that involves child learning. The activities family members are involved in

- support the child's learning process (at home, in the classroom, and within the community),
- exchange information about the child's learning process (child's progress, early childhood curriculum,

developmental and cultural activities in the community),

- offer opportunities to participate in school decision-making leadership regarding the child's education, and
- enable families to support children as learners in their homes.

In developing a plan for partnering with families, there is no one blueprint or single set of practices that define a family-school partnership (Decker, Decker, & Brown (2007).

## Benefits and Challenges of Family Involvement

Several researchers pinpoint a positive correlation between family involvement in their children's education and children's achievement (see Epstein, 2001; Fan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Redding, 2006). Positive family involvement leads to better

- social,
- behavioral, and
- academic outcomes

for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds (Ball, 2006; Marcon 1999).

Family participation in their children's educations can be critical because it nurtures cognitive and emotional resilience, especially in the face of life stressors such as poverty and neighborhoods with few resources (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Low-income families' ongoing participation in preschool and kindergarten activities has been associated with children's higher reading achievement, lower rates of grade retention,

and fewer years in special education when children were in eighth grade (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Families who are involved in their children's early learning classrooms have a better understanding of their children's education (DiNatale, 2002). Families and teachers who regularly learn about one another's interests and cultures can develop a richer and more varied early childhood curriculum.

When teachers establish a liaison with children's families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers (Tozer, Senese, & Violas (2006). The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). Family participation is certainly an excellent way to improve the quality of early childhood programs.



Photo courtesy of the authors

*Positive family involvement leads to better social, behavioral, and academic outcomes for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds. Family involvement in their children's education and children's achievement are closely linked.*

**Family participation improves early childhood program quality.**

A number of factors affect families' abilities to be actively involved in their children's education. In the past, parents were encouraged to be little more than passive participants in children's educations (Ranson, Martin, & Vincent, 2004). This is no longer true in high-quality programs.

Awareness of cultural differences and expectations can also improve levels of participation. Asian and Latino families, for example, may feel excluded from participating in schools because some professionals may have been trained to believe that they knew what was best for children (Tozer, et al., 2006).

Respect for family traditions and cultures is essential to assure that they feel welcome and honored by all program staff.

Time also impinges on families' abilities to be involved (Becker & Epstein, 1982). The typical 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday does not easily give some family members much flexible time to participate in classrooms.

Fortunately, family involvement in education is much broader than being present during the school day. Teachers and schools can encourage and support family participation with a variety of strategies such as those recommended here.

**Framework for Accessible Family Involvement**

One comprehensive perspective on family involvement evolved from a review of studies from preschool through high school that included educators and families (Epstein, 2001). Epstein's framework includes six types of involvement:

1. *Parenting*—home environments that support achievement
2. *Communicating*—two-way information sharing between school and home
3. *Volunteering*—helping with planned activities in and outside the classroom
4. *Learning at home*—parents assisting children in the learning process at home
5. *Decision making*—parent involvement in school decisions
6. *Collaborating with the community*—use of local services and resources to help children learn

The early childhood family involvement model presented here has at its heart Epstein's research-based work, grouped into four components:

- Staff and Family Communication [*Epstein types 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5*]

## Accessible for Family Involvement

- Family-Child Collaborations [Epstein type 4]
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building [Epstein types 2, 6]
- Community Connections [Epstein type 6]

Effective teachers will use features from all four components of this model, selecting strategies that enable family members and any other person interested in supporting the child to decide how they wish to be involved.

## Components of Accessible Family Involvement

- Staff and Family Communication
- Family-Child Collaborations
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building
- Community Connections

## Staff and Family Communication

Teachers can implement a number of initiatives such as the following to support

- school and family communication exchanges,
- family decision making roles,
- meaningful volunteer opportunities, and a
- positive parenting process.

*Family center.* If space is available, create a homey space with comfortable furniture that invites families to talk informally with each other and their children's teachers. Place a Family Notebook in a convenient spot where families can write comments and questions for teachers. Set up a computer with Internet access for families to use. Offer take-home

activities such as bags with children's books and games to explore together, articles on child development and parenting issues, and other information of interest to families.

*Family bulletin board.* In a visible area in the Family Center, classroom, or hallway, post daily information about children, their learning experiences, and school events. The board might include volunteer request sign-up lists for activities such as playground cleanup day and extended family visits. Ask for recommendations about what families would most like to see and encourage them to contribute resources as well.

*Family-teacher conferences.* Flexibility is essential when scheduling

conferences with families. Factors to keep in mind include transportation needs, child care arrangements, availability of interpreters (Cellitti, 2010), and scheduling convenient times.

At the beginning of the school year, families can be encouraged to share information with teachers about their children, such as food allergies, family traditions, and their expectations for children's learning. A packet of information for families is generally given upon enrollment in the program, so questions can be discussed early.

Teachers are encouraged to hold at least two more family conferences each year, plus being available at any time to communicate with families



Photo courtesy of the authors

*When teachers establish a liaison with children's families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers. The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers.*

in person, by phone, or through e-mail. Face-to-face conferences, conducted in the family's home language, are by far the most effective. Teachers can share children's portfolios, ask for family insights about children's experiences, and encourage families to become more familiar with and involved in classroom learning opportunities.

*Newsletters.* Either on paper, DVDs, or electronically, provide weekly information about children's learning, community resources, and school events such as parent advisory meetings (Sanchez, Walsh, & Rose, 2011). Offer newsletters in multiple languages as needed. Find creative ways to involve families in writing, photography, and producing the newsletters.

**Communicate detailed information on a school Web site.**

*Web site.* A school Web site is ideal to communicate detailed information about the classroom and school. Upload photos of children's learning experiences (obtain releases first) to more fully share daily events with families. Offer parenting/child development informational videos and other resources. Provide links to community resources and events. Families may be eager to assist with photography, sharing event information, and even designing and updating the site.

*Program events.* Early childhood programs often encourage family members to take an active role in classroom activities such as breakfasts with featured guests, field trip planning and travel, community-worker visits, and traditional holiday

celebrations. Ask families for ideas about events that appeal to them, and encourage them to take leadership roles in their planning and implementation.

### Time and Technology Issues

When teachers offer a variety of ways for families to actively communicate with them, including electronically, family time constraints on participation become less of a factor. Communicating electronically on blogs and social networking sites must be done in a professional manner and confidentiality is essential (Harte, 2011).

A limited-access class Web site is suggested because user-friendly layouts make it easier for family members to browse and search for information. The site must be password secured to assure there is no public access to it. Even so, specific information about students, their families, and/or teachers is not appropriate on a class Web site.

Whenever possible for meetings, conferences, and school events, arrange for child care to help assure that families who wish to participate may do so.

### Family-Child Collaborations

Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to encourage families to nurture their children's academic growth and value learning. Children benefit from their family's emotional and social development support. Families believe their efforts help their children and that they are expected to do so by the educational system (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., (2001).

These are some at-home learning experiences from which families and their children can benefit. Be sure to share information about these activities, and their importance, in the

family's first language. Ask families for ideas about other ways they enjoy learning together.

- *Family learning opportunities* that build on classroom learning experiences such as observing nature together, children interviewing family members, or joint art explorations
- Hands-on *take-home kits* selected by the child to complete with a family member at home. Activities elaborate on the curriculum
- Early reading, math, writing, and other *academic explorations* that children do with family members
- Assignments in which *children present information* researched with their families to their classmates

### Teacher-Family Relationship Building

Communication is at the heart of the third component of this family involvement framework as well. Solid collaborative relationships are built during these and other direct interactions among families and teachers.

- Home visits
- Parent-teacher conferences
- E-mail list serve from teacher to families
- Daily updates for families at drop-off and pick-up times

Regular opportunities for direct communication with family members are essential for accurate and timely exchanges of information. Licensed and certified interpreters are preferred when working with families who speak languages other than English (Cellitti, 2010). Interpreters are essential, particularly when



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dealing with sensitive issues. Be sure to consider factors such as the level of information to be presented, the interpreter's relationship to the family, and cultural issues.

Families' perceptions of the school staff, and any barriers they experience in trying to establish contact with their children's schools, can influence families' decisions to get involved in their children's school experience (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Faculty and administrative commitment—and a welcoming school climate—are imperative to a successful family involvement process (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

### Community Connections

Links to community resources and activities that enhance children's learning are readily available to families in high-quality early childhood programs. Disseminate the information in various formats to assure that all families have access, and can add to it.

Community involvement by children and their families can strengthen children's learning, while positively influencing the family and the school. Teachers who tie community-based participation into the curriculum extend children's learning far beyond the classroom. These are some types of community activities that may appeal to families as volunteers and/or participants:

- Education and information fairs
- Health and fitness resources
- Sports events that appeal to or engage young children
- Cultural events such as children's concerts and plays
- Public library services
- Community center events
- Organizations that provide activities and services for children and their families

## Summary

The family involvement strategies that Ms. Pam implemented resulted in a more comprehensive effort to increase access of families to her classroom. Families, teachers, and children can expect to experience different positive results from each type of involvement (Epstein, 2001).

Early childhood teachers are urged to implement strategies from all four components of this framework during the course of the school year. Selecting more than half of the suggested strategies from each of the four components would likely ensure a stronger partnership between teachers and families. Implementing all identified strategies is far more likely to lead to genuine family involvement.

Family participation in children's early care and education enhances children's cognitive, social, and emotional development while augmenting teacher/family relationships that reinforce mutual beliefs and practices. Family involvement can be a positive experience for everyone involved.

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