



Harvard Family
Research Project



Family Engagement as a Systemic, Sustained, and Integrated Strategy to Promote Student Achievement

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Family engagement in education is related to a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of high school graduation. The strongest research evidence indicates that parental beliefs, attitudes, values, and childrearing practices, as well as home–school communication, are linked to student success.ⁱ Furthermore, investing in family engagement can be cost effective. For example, schools would have to spend \$1000 more per pupil to reap the same gains in student achievement that an involved parent brings.ⁱⁱ

These research-based findings align with a key principle of Harvard Family Research Project—namely that schools alone cannot meet students’ needs, especially the needs of those students who are the most disadvantaged. These students in particular need the benefits of a **complementary learning** approach, in which an array of school and nonschool supports complement one another to create an integrated set of community-wide resources that support learning and development from birth to young adulthood. We offer an expanded definition of family engagement that is based on research about children’s learning and the relationships among families, schools, and communities in support of such learning.ⁱⁱⁱ A clear and commonly shared definition of family engagement can—and, we believe, will—inspire policy and programmatic investments in family engagement, which will in turn contribute to school improvement and student success.

This expanded definition of family engagement rests on research showing that families play significant roles in supporting their children’s learning not only in the home, but also by guiding their children successfully through a complex school system, and strongly advocating for their children and for effective public schools. Reflecting a systemic approach to education from birth to young adulthood, this definition consists of the following principles:

- First, family engagement is a **shared responsibility** in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children’s learning and development.
- Second, family engagement is **continuous across a child’s life** and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.
- Third, effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the **multiple settings where children learn**—at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool and summer programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community.

This definition of family engagement focuses on children’s learning in a variety of settings—not just in school—and reflects the many different ways in which families and schools engage with and support one another. Taken together, these three principles support the creation of new pathways for family engagement that honor the dynamic, multiple, and complementary ways in which children learn and grow.

1. Shared Responsibility

Education policymakers and other stakeholders are raising expectations that all students should be prepared for careers, college, and lifelong learning. Meeting such expectations is a collective effort and, at the local level, a shared responsibility in which schools and other community organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.

Unfortunately, many educators and parents still hold the view that learning happens only in schools, and thus is solely the school's responsibility. Many schools, for example, make little effort to reach out to parents and, when they do, often define "engagement" as the need to support school goals and priorities rather than to create a mutual responsibility for supporting students' academic success. Given that learning takes place even before children enter school, and also beyond the school walls, **a shared responsibility for children's learning is foundational.** Schools and families together communicate high educational expectations that reinforce students' own academic expectations and influence their college and career readiness. High academic expectations predict performance, courses taken, college attendance, and career aspirations among youth. When school staff and parents together share high expectations for high school students, students are more likely to attend college.^{iv}

Family engagement consists of the opportunities that schools and communities offer parents and other family members to support and enrich their children's learning. When teachers invite family engagement and communicate specific actions that family members can take, family members are more likely to respond positively, and their engagement is associated with students' homework completion and academic improvements.^v

Co-Constructed Roles for Educators, Parents, and Students

Family engagement as a shared responsibility also consists of mutually agreed upon, or co-constructed, roles. Families and schools should actively engage in dialogue about their complementary responsibilities and strive to reach agreement on family roles as consumers of education, partners in student learning, and advocates for high performance. Parent-teacher conferences illustrate one arena of co-construction and partnership for student learning: School leaders communicate their goals and mechanisms to teachers and parents; teachers review student work and prepare an agenda; and parents learn about their child's school performance, share their own thoughts, and ask how best to support their child's academic progress.

Family engagement roles vary across the school system. Superintendents and principals set the district-wide and school-wide tone and expectations for partnerships with families. To demonstrate the value and importance of building family engagement, administrators must establish clear expectations, policies, accountability standards, and processes for staff.^{vi} Such activities include writing and regularly updating family engagement policies, tying family engagement efforts to school improvement plans, hiring administrators and school-level staff

focused on family engagement, and including family outreach and engagement opportunities in assessment rubrics for principals. Among teachers and other educators—including early childhood educators, afterschool staff, and coaches—regular and responsive communication is particularly important because it lays the foundation for strong partnerships.

Finally, all families can support their children’s learning in some way, even if it is as simple as asking their child, “What did you learn in school today?” Family activities that support children’s success can include establishing a stable daily routine for homework, household chores, meals, reading, and bedtime; monitoring out-of-school activities by checking children’s whereabouts and enrolling them in afterschool programs; setting clear and age-appropriate expectations about school performance, behaviors, and manners; and motivating lifelong learning by supporting their children’s interests and talents and showing interest in school and educational activities.²

2. Continuous Across a Child’s Life

From the time children are born, parents influence their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Nurturing, warm, and responsive parent–child relationships, participation in children’s play, and reading to children are just some of the behaviors that are more likely to contribute to young children’s cognitive and social-emotional development.^{vii} Even in the earliest years of childhood, parents’ interactions and activities help shape children’s readiness for school. Consistent family engagement in education during children’s elementary school years is also related to positive academic and behavioral outcomes.

Family engagement remains important in adolescence and predicts healthy youth behaviors and higher rates of college enrollment. Families that maintain continually high rates of parent engagement in elementary school are more likely to have children who complete high school than less-engaged parents,^{viii} and families that link schoolwork to career aspirations and communicate expectations for graduation positively influence student achievement. Youth who report supportive and trusting relations with parents are more likely to make academic progress, exhibit self-reliance and healthy social behaviors, and avoid delinquency.^{ix} Understanding how family engagement supports student growth at different stages of child and youth development can help families and educators tailor their engagement strategies to ensure that they are developmentally appropriate and effective.

Early Childhood

Children’s educational trajectories are significantly influenced by their early learning experiences at home and in the community. Long before children enter formal schooling, parents help shape their language and literacy development, as well as their general curiosity for exploring and learning new concepts. Families can help facilitate young children’s growth by creating literacy-rich home environments, taking children to visit libraries and other places that stimulate their interest in learning about their surroundings, and constantly talking to them about what they see, do, hear, and feel.

Elementary Years

In the elementary grades, parents' efforts to foster literacy; help and supervise homework; and manage children's activities in the home, school, and community have all been linked to student achievement.^x The start of formal schooling brings children into contact with many new classmates and adults who help shape their understanding of their environments, their interests, and their growing sense of competency. Positive home-school relationships—in which parents communicate with teachers, help out in the child's classroom, and participate in school activities—promote children's educational engagement. Parents' presence at the school, whether in classrooms or at other activities, reinforces children's sense of school as a welcoming environment and facilitates their ability to see learning as a continuous process, not just something that takes place within the school walls away from their homes.

Middle/High School Years

Effective family engagement during adolescence differs from the types of involvement parents find successful during earlier years, and these changes reflect adolescents' changing developmental needs. Effective family engagement during this developmental period involves academic socialization, including communicating parental expectations about education and its value, linking schoolwork to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies, and making preparations and plans for the future.^{xi} This type of involvement—in which families openly talk about their expectations for their children, and promote opportunities for their children to take independent responsibility for their schoolwork and develop concrete plans for the future—is far more effective with adolescents than standard homework assistance or more traditional school-based parent involvement.

3. Carried Out in the Multiple Settings Where Children Learn

Effective family engagement is carried out in the multiple settings where children learn—at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in afterschool programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs. Parents who connect and guide their children to community resources support achievement. For example, enrolling children in afterschool and summer programs enhances children's social, civic, and leadership skills as well as improves their academic performance. When afterschool programs, in turn, collaborate with families, they ensure that programming meets the needs of youth and families.^{xii} This is essential to sustain youth participation and engagement so that they can reap the benefits these programs have to offer.

Parents make important decisions about whether or not their children will take advantage of learning opportunities outside of school. Parent behaviors around learning activities such as reading, conversations about school-related matters, and visiting the public library are linked to improved reading comprehension in children.^{xiii} In addition to being smart consumers, families can reinforce the skills, lessons, and values that children acquire in these nonschool learning settings by being involved with the programs and by parenting their children at home. For example, when parents provide direction in choosing library books and internet-based learning

resources, their children spend more time reading and acquire more knowledge compared to children who are left to navigate library resources on their own.^{xiv}

While parents undoubtedly play an important role, they share responsibility with the staff of agencies and organizations providing learning opportunities outside of school. Staff set the tone for communicating with families when recruiting and enrolling students and provide families with opportunities to be involved—whether by volunteering, participating in decision making, or visiting the program to understand what their children are learning there. Because staff in community-based learning settings are often members of the community and have preexisting relationships with the families who live there, staff are well-positioned to share ideas for supporting learning at home and for facilitating family connections to schools.

Promoting family engagement across learning settings is supported at multiple levels of government, from federal policy to city systems. At the federal level, several early childhood programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, and Even Start, include mandates for family involvement. Additionally, 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) afterschool programs can use funds to support parental involvement. Increasingly, cities are looking at how they can develop systems that leverage family engagement to increase participation in afterschool programs. This effort includes building program capacity to engage families through professional development and other structures and ensuring that families have equitable access to and information about afterschool opportunities.

Schools, families, and other learning institutions need consistent and aligned support to help children achieve their academic potential. Providing that support by recognizing and investing in family engagement policies and practices in nonschool learning settings is key to closing the achievement gap and supporting success for all students.

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