PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum
Best Practices Early Childhood Education
Kostelnik Soderman Whiren
Fifth Edition

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Adult family members should feel welcome in the program so that they will be involved in the child's learning. Krista Greco/Merrill

participants, advisers, and knowledgeable consumers of services in all phases of Project Head Start, in the education of children with disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004), and in federally administered child care (U.S. Department of Education 2009). Increasingly, state governments have followed suit. As a result, in early childhood programs across the United States, family members are involved in children's education at all levels—from tutors at home to classroom participants, from volunteers to paid employees, from advisers to program decision makers. Those involved include first-time parents, teenage parents, older parents, single parents, dual-career parents, stepparents, parents of children with disabilities, grandparents, foster parents, aunts, uncles, and older brothers and sisters (Chang, Salazar, & DeLeong, 1994; Gullo, 2006). Moreover, although originally targeted at programs for very young children, family participation efforts have reached beyond such programs into elementary, middle, and high schools (Weinstein & Mignano, 2006). All this has transpired because we as educators have discovered that children, parents, and programs benefit immensely when family members take an active part in young children's education.

Barriers to Family Engagement

With all the benefits that result from family engagement, you might expect that both teachers and families would be eager to partner. Yet, frequently families and professionals have misperceptions about each other that hinder the development of effective home–school relations (see Table 8.2) (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2008). They may also interpret different ways of doing things as wrong or as subtle criticisms of their approaches or as deliberate attempts to undermine their goals. None of these perceptions foster feelings of trust and cooperation.

Further barriers to productive home–school relationships develop when families have the following experiences (Weinstein & Mignano, 2006; Berger, 2008).

- ❏ They believe that their lack of formal teaching skills prevents them from making meaningful contributions.
- ❏ Family members are unsure of what to do to get involved.
- ❏ They get the message that their involvement is of little worth because they are asked to do only menial tasks (cutting string for an activity, putting out napkins, bringing the cupcakes to parties).
- ❏ They assume that the only thing programs want help with is fundraising.
- ❏ They interpret program invitations to get involved as insincere because no one gets back to them when they offer their time.
- ❏ Family members feel like they are intruders when they visit the program.
- ❏ They believe no one in the program appreciates the time they put into children's learning at home.

TABLE 8.2 Mutual Misperceptions of Teachers and Families

Teachers Wonder Why Family Members	Families Wonder Why Teachers
Tend to linger after saying good-bye to their child. (Don't families know this makes the separation process more difficult?)	Are in such a rush to get them out of the room. (Don't teachers know this makes the separation process more difficult?)
Push for academics too soon. (Don't families know how children learn?)	Do not make the program more like "real" school. (Don't teachers know I want my child to learn?)
Get upset when their child gets dirty. (Can't families see this is a sign of learning?)	Do not keep their children cleaner. (Can't teachers see this is a sign of learning?)
Do not do a better job teaching children to behave. (They can't control him at home but want us to control him in the program.)	Do not do a better job teaching children to behave. (They can't control him in the program but want us to control him at home.)
Always criticize them. (Can't families see we're doing our best?)	Always criticize them. (Can't teachers see we're doing our best?)

These obstacles to family engagement are intensified among low-income families, who often feel stigmatized by society, and who may have had unfavorable school experiences of their own. Unfortunately, their negative perceptions are reinforced if teachers and administrators appear to be insensitive to the family's incredible financial and work constraints or get in contact with them only when their children are having problems (Magnuson & Duncan, 2002). These negative encounters contribute to families' feelings of shame, anger, distrust, and hopelessness, all of which detract from their motivation to become involved in their children's education.

Some additional barriers to family engagement have practical considerations. For instance, schedule conflicts arise when the activities are at times when parents are unavailable to participate. Families that are temporarily homeless are hard to reach and may be very concerned about maintaining custody of their children. Poor working families, dual-career families, and single-parent families frequently experience *role overload* (Weinraub, Horvath, & Gringlas, 2002). This basically means that there is too much to do and no time to do all of it. Regardless of family members' level of interest in partnering with professionals for the well-being of their children, they inevitably experience time and energy constraints (Bracey, 2001). Likewise, immigrant families and others whose primary language is not English often encounter communication challenges, as do English-speaking families when teachers use jargon (Eldridge, 2001). In addition, families raised in other cultures may be unaccustomed to any type of parent involvement and do not always know how to respond because the practice is atypical for their cultural group. Additionally, recent immigrants may be concerned about their own or their children's legal status and may be hesitant to get involved.

In addition to all of this, family engagement requires a lot of the teacher's time, and teachers are already busy. Moreover, it is discouraging when families are unresponsive to program efforts to become involved. As a result both families and programs sometimes miss opportunities to enhance children's learning through greater family engagement.

Both a readjustment of the attitudes of educators and family members and more concerted efforts to emphasize the partnership aspects of family engagement are needed if these obstacles are to be overcome. Evidence currently indicates that the early years are the optimal period in which to address such problems (Briggs, Jalongo, & Brown, 2006). As you read through this chapter, you will learn how to overcome common barriers and to support families.

Characteristics of Effective Family Engagement

As educators have become increasingly aware of the benefits of family engagement and the obstacles that sometimes hinder its development, their attention has shifted from answering the query "Why?" to exploring the question "How?" Consequently, recent research has focused on discovering variables that characterize effective family engagement efforts. From these studies, four key

elements have been identified: collaboration, variety, intensity, and individuation. A brief overview of each follows.

Collaboration

Collaborative relations between early childhood personnel and families are most apt to develop when families and teachers recognize each other's importance in the child's life. Because neither school nor family has the resources to do the entire job of educating the young, it is not in the best interests of either to attempt to duplicate each other's efforts. Rather, children's education is enhanced when home and school see themselves as distinct entities, performing complementary, interconnected functions (Berns, 2009). Family members have special information regarding their children (Driscoll & Nagel, 2008).

- ❏ Interests
- ❏ Play activities
- ❏ Eating habits
- ❏ Family experiences
- ❏ Previous educational or child-care experiences
- ❏ Kinds of playthings
- ❏ Influence of extended family members
- ❏ Fears
- ❏ Response to stress
- ❏ Difficulties
- ❏ Health
- ❏ Family reading patterns
- ❏ TV viewing habits
- ❏ Home discipline

Teachers can provide family members with equally useful and important information (Driscoll & Nagel, 2008):

- ❏ Interactions with peers
- ❏ Strengths and limitations
- ❏ Favorite activities
- ❏ Response to success and failure
- ❏ Memory
- ❏ Persistence at tasks
- ❏ Leadership/follower roles
- ❏ Contributions to the group

Collaboration is enhanced when mutual respect and open communication exists between professionals and families and when they both work together to enhance children's learning (Brewer, 2007; Epstein, 2009). Thus, family engagement represents a balance of power between families and teachers—a partnership. In this partnership, each member is valued and recognized as a "child expert." Families know their own child better than anyone else does. Teachers know many different children and have specialized knowledge of child development, program content, and educational strategies. When family members and teachers combine their areas of expertise, collaboration becomes a reality.

Variety

Lisa Digby is the room mother for her son's second-grade classroom. She belongs to the PTO and the library committee. Whenever a job needs doing at school, Mrs. Digby can be counted on to help.

Carole Wilson has been to school once, the day she enrolled her daughter for kindergarten. She works an 8-hour shift at a shirt factory and has a part-time job at Red's, a local convenience store. She has little time to spend at school volunteering.

If you were to talk to these mothers, you would find that both are keenly interested in their child's early education, and both want to be included in some way. However, what works for one will not necessarily suit the other.

Family members differ in the extent to which they are willing or able to take part in educational programs and in how they want to be included. Consequently, effective family engagement encompasses a variety of means by which family members can participate and does not require all family members to be involved in the same ways, at the same time, or to the same degree (Epstein, 2009).

FIGURE 8.1 Variable Characteristics of Parental Engagement

Kind of Contact
Predetermined agenda – – – Informal structure
Scheduled – – – Spontaneous
Face-to-face – – – Indirect

Format
Written – – – Spoken
Goal directed – – – Open ended
Presentation or discussion – – – Hands-on experience

Purpose
Provide input – – – Elicit input – – – Collaborate
Establish, maintain, or change – – – Relationships, goals, or strategies

Who Initiates
Child – – – Family member – – – Program personnel

Location
Home – – – Program – – – Community

Frequency
One time event – – – Repeated events – – – Continuous

Resources Required
Little time and energy – – – Lots of time and energy
General skills – – – Specialized skills

Role of Family Member
Receiver of information – – – Program supporter – – – Audience – – – Home tutor – – – Classroom participant – – – Co-learner – – – Decision maker – – – Advocate

Variety can be considered in terms of the kinds of contacts that occur between home and program, the format they take, the purpose for which exchanges are made, who initiates them, where they occur, how frequently they occur, the type of parental response necessary for success to be achieved, and the resources required for participation. These variations are outlined in Figure 8.1.

More variety across the whole array of contacts is better. When a broad mixture of family engagement opportunities is created, educators demonstrate their interest in and acceptance of many kinds of families. Also, families receive visible proof that they may contribute according to their preferences, talents, resources, and degree of comfort (Berger, 2008). For example, varying the location from the school to a public library may encourage family members who are uncomfortable in schools to attend an event related to story reading in addition to helping them get library cards for themselves and other family members.

Intensity

The more we get together, together, together,
The more we get together, the happier we'll be.

This familiar children's song makes an important point that can be applied to family engagement. Parental participation outcomes are more likely to be positive if contacts are more frequent (NAESP, 2005). Regular, focused contact is necessary to promote the development of trusting relationships between parents and practitioners. Also, when opportunities for engagement are numerous, families can more easily find entrées to programs that better suit their needs and interests. Frequent, varied contact across time conveys the message that the educators value parents and that parental inclusion is not simply tolerated but welcomed and expected.

Individuation

Educational programs are most likely to elicit a positive response from families when opportunities for participation are tailored to meet families' particular needs and perceptions (Epstein, 2009). No one formula for family engagement, and no single program, can be generalized successfully to every population. Instead, the best outcomes emerge when a match exists between

Show genuine interest by listening carefully and responding respectfully. Anthony Magnacca/Merrill

what early childhood programs set out to do and what families want, when congruence exists between the strategies implemented and those to which family members feel receptive. When program designers consider family constraints such as child care and transportation needs, employment obligations, and economic, psychological, or physical stress, the chances for collaboration improve; as collaboration becomes greater, so do opportunities for individuation.

As you might assume, families are more likely to become partners in their children's education when practitioners take into account collaboration, variety, intensity, and individuation. Because these dimensions of family engagement are so important, they provide the backdrop for the rest of this chapter. Next, you will read about specific strategies for creating partnerships with families around children's early education.

Effective Family Engagement Techniques

All the strategies suggested in this section may be used in individual classrooms or generalized to whole programs. We have listed about 50 ideas to give you a wide array of options to consider. However, note that no single educator would institute every strategy. A more likely approach would be to adapt one or two ideas from each of several categories to create a comprehensive family engagement plan. Such plans would be individualized to meet the needs of the children, families, and staff members within your program. Regardless of how simple or elaborate a family engagement plan might be, the goal is always the same: to reach out to families and help them feel included and an integral part of their child's education (NAESP, 2005). The first step is always the same, too: to establish positive relationships with families.

Establishing Relationships with Families

It's important to me that families know as much as they can about me so that they can feel comfortable leaving their child with me. It's not easy leaving your child with a stranger.

—Texia Thorne, teacher

I think they're terrific. The teachers seem to care not only for my children, but they care about me. When I come in looking tired, they ask me, "How are you doing? What can I do to help you? How are you feeling?"

—Debbie King, Kristine's mom

No matter what your position is in an early childhood program—practitioner-in-training, teacher, or administrator—you can begin to establish positive relationships with the families of the children in your group. The following simple guidelines will help you to forge closer ties with the most significant people in children's lives.

Show that you truly care about each child. An old Danish proverb states, "Who takes the child by the hand takes the mother by the heart." Keep this message constantly in mind and recognize that, first and foremost, families want early childhood professionals to pay attention to their children and treat them as special (Reisman, 1996). To show that you care, treat each child as an important, valued human being by your words and deeds each day. Recognize, also, that a loving education includes ensuring that children go outdoors with all the clothing their family sent that day, that children's noses get wiped, that children's tear-stained faces get washed, and that notes from home are read and answered. Oversights of these "details" speak volumes to families and may give the unintended impression that you are too busy or uninterested.

Make personal contact with families. No substitute exists for face-to-face communication between people. If you are fortunate enough to work in an early childhood program in which families come into the building to drop off or retrieve their children, take advantage of these times to

greet family members, inquire about their day, and have a friendly word. This means being available rather than rushing around making last-minute preparations or focusing solely on getting the children into their coats to go home. If you do not see families regularly, take advantage of the times when you do see them. Mingle with family members at program events rather than chatting with your colleagues. Greet family members and see that they have activities to do or people with whom to talk. Family members who are not English speakers still recognize "Hello, Mrs. Garcia," and respond to smiles and nods of recognition.

Treat parents and other family members as individuals. Communicate with them on a one-to-one basis, not only in groups. Use an adult interpreter with families whose primary language is not English. Periodically provide time for family members to talk with you privately. Interact with them as interesting adults, not simply as Felicia's mom or Pedro's dad.

Show genuine interest in family members by listening carefully and responding. A real barrier occurs when family members form the impression that early childhood personnel are too busy or too distant to give much thought to what family members are thinking or feeling. Dispel this notion by doing the following:

- ❏ *Provide openings for family members to share their concerns or inquire about their child's program experience.* "What changes have you seen in Jack recently?" "What are Anne's favorite play activities at home?" "Do you have anything you're wondering about regarding Suman's development?"
- ❏ *Ask questions relevant to family comments.* Invite family members to elaborate on what they are saying. Reply, "Tell me more about that" or "Then what happened?" Such comments help family members to feel heard and valued.
- ❏ *Respond to family members' questions honestly and directly.* If you do not know the answer to something, say so. Promise to find out. Then do it.

Be courteous to family members. Treat family members with consideration and respect. Pay attention to nonverbal behaviors (e.g., facial expressions, posture, and gestures) and words. Implement the following strategies daily.

- ❏ *Greet family members when you see them.* Address them by their proper names, using *Mr., Ms., Mrs.,* or *Dr.* Pronounce family names correctly. Use the correct surname for each adult. Adult surnames may differ from the child's surname.
- ❏ *Avoid using professional jargon unnecessarily.* Using **jargon**, or technical terminology, that people do not understand implies an unequal relationship and sometimes makes families feel unwelcome or uncomfortable talking with you. Use familiar words to explain what you mean (e.g., talk about "children working together" instead of "cooperative learning"; "pretend play" instead of "imitation and symbolic play"; "acknowledging the child's point of view" instead of "reflective listening").
- ❏ *Avoid addressing notices and newsletters to be sent home with the words "Dear Parents."* Doing so implies that all children in the program are living in two-parent families. A more inclusive salutation would be "Dear Family Members."
- ❏ *Arrange to have program materials translated in the home languages of the families in your classroom.* Provide a translator (perhaps a family member from another family) to facilitate conversations between you and new families whose home language you do not speak. Learn a few words in each family's home language. If family members feel embarrassed about their English skills, one strategy that is sometimes helpful is to share how frustrated you "feel at not being able to communicate in the parents' language. This helps to break down any tinge of superior/inferior perceptions from the relationship, and keeps both of you on the same level as human beings" (Lee, 1997, p. 58).

Honor family confidentiality. Mrs. LaRosa's husband left her this morning. Shannon O'Malley is thinking about going back to school. Vincent Kaminski has been diagnosed with a serious illness. Family members trust you to keep private information to yourself. Remember that personal information should never be shared with anyone not directly involved in the problem, including coworkers, members of other families, and outside friends. Not only is violating this trust unethical,