

Making it Meaningful

FROM INVOLVEMENT TO ENGAGEMENT WITH FAMILIES

by Holly Delgado

It's 8:30 a.m., and children and families are beginning to arrive at the HighScope Demonstration Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Erica, one of the two classroom teachers, places herself by the classroom door to greet the children and their family members by name as they arrive.

Ethan bounds through the door. Glancing up at his father, he begins telling Erica excitedly about the garbage truck he saw on his walk to school: "Then the big arm came out and picked up the can and took it high into the air. It dumped all the garbage into the truck, like this!" He raises his own arm slowly into the air, imitating the hissing and popping sounds of the garbage truck. Erica, kneeling in front of him, copies Ethan's arm movement and sound effects. "It went like this?" she asks. "That sounds like it was really exciting. Your story reminds me of a book we have in our book area." Ethan immediately identifies the book Erica is talking about.

"It's *I Stink!*!" he exclaims, referring to the popular children's book by Kate



Meaningful family engagement outside the classroom has been shown to improve a child's school readiness.

and Jim McMullan. After Ethan hangs his coat on his hook and signs in, Ethan's father asks him, "Would you like to go find the book about the garbage truck?" Nodding, Ethan takes his father by the hand and hurries over to the book area. Together, they retrieve the book and began reading it on the rug, giggling when they turn the page to the garbage truck's lunch of "dirty diapers...puppy poo...and zipped up ziti with zucchini."

Recent research (Gelber & Isen; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda) shows that meaningful engagement of families in their children's early learning experiences has a positive impact on school

readiness and future academic success. But what exactly is meaningful engagement, and how do early childhood programs do this in meaningful ways?

Traditional models of parent involvement encourage increased participation in school-related events. However, mere attendance at parent workshops, meetings, and other school activities is not highly correlated with changes in family members' interactions with their child (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009). Thus, early childhood programs must focus their efforts beyond traditional models of parent involvement and consider ways in which their actions impact family engagement outside of the school day.

In other words, teachers can best influence parents to support and extend at home what children are learning at school by providing families with strategies that help them interact with the curriculum content on a day-to-day basis, facilitating a fluid home-school connection.

Invite Families In

Perhaps the single most important factor in family engagement and participation is how welcome families feel when they are in the school or classroom environment itself (Halgunseth et al., 2009). Before programs can expect family members to extend learning into the home environment, they must ensure the school environment is warm and inviting: “A welcoming environment implies that a program has focused efforts on maintaining an atmosphere that is inviting to families

and honors their presence” (Constantino, 2008, p. 25).

The first step in creating a welcoming environment is to invite families in. Greet children and other family members by name as they arrive each morning, and encourage them to stay for greeting time and message board. When Erica found a moment during greeting time to meet Ethan at his level — both physically and emotionally — and have an authentic conversation about a garbage truck, she was not only building a social-emotional connection between school and home, but also modeling developmentally appropriate

adult-child interactions for all of the parents and family members in the room. She also took the opportunity

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to create a direct link to a curriculum content area (Language, Literacy, and Communication). When early childhood

Parents who sit in on classes should be encouraged to join their child in play.



educators capitalize on “the conversations and activities initiated by children [that] provide a window into their interests, thoughts, and experiences outside of school” (Epstein, 2014, p. 78), they build relationships with both the child and the family.

If parents have the availability in their schedules, let them stay beyond greeting time and invite them to stay for planning time, large-group time, or whatever the next component of the daily routine might be. When parents choose to stay, remind them that their children are watching them; thus, encourage them to be actively engaged in all activities alongside their children. If parents are present for large-group time, have additional materials such as wind ribbons, instruments, or carpet squares for their use. If parents stay for work time, suggest that they join their child in play, following the child’s lead.

School is often seen as separate from the family; link home and school together by starting off the school year with expectations that children and families play and learn together in the classroom. Provide families with tips to help them support and scaffold their child’s learning and interact in ways supportive of the HighScope Curriculum. Offer evening events that family members can enjoy together, like potlucks, regular evenings on the playground, or parent support groups. Family workshops that delve into topics of the parents’ choosing may also encourage a higher level of family engagement. Share curriculum information through evening events focused on a HighScope Curriculum content area, such as an Art Night, a Math Night, or a Literacy Night. Be sure to provide families with information and materials to take home after such events, to further extend learning at home.

Find Frequent Opportunities for Communication

Maintaining open, two-way communication is vital to building relationships and increasing family engagement (Halgunseth et al., 2009). Informal communication, such as daily, face-to-



Events like evening potlucks and field trips encourage family engagement.

face interactions during pickup and dropoff times, can provide teachers an opportunity to briefly discuss with family members both what the child did at school and what is occurring at home. Many of these conversations occur naturally; however, when a teacher intentionally plans for a specific conversation to take place, he or she can tailor the exchange to meet the individual needs of the child and the family. Early childhood educators should use these conversations as a way to further define the HighScope Curriculum content and extend learning into the home, as shown in this conversation between Luis, his teacher, and Luis’s father:

Teacher: During work time for the past two days, Luis has been using our small farm animals in the toy area. Yesterday, he began tossing them, trying to get them to land on their feet. We counted how many landed right-side-up. Today, Michael joined him. Together, we drew targets.

Parent: He has a target at home that he shoots his bow and arrow at.

Teacher: I could tell he had seen a target before. He drew it himself. Then, we graphed how many times each animal landed on its feet.

Luis: The horses won! They landed on their feet 16 times!

Teacher (to Luis): I wonder how

you could play a game like this at home?

When teachers use concrete, play-based examples involving the children to define active learning and draw correlations between these examples and the specific content-based skills, such as graphing and counting, families have a “better understand[ing] of how children learn and how the curriculum supports

Cultural sensitivity is vital to maintaining authentic two-way communication with family members.

active learning, [thus] they are better able to be partners in the educational process” (Epstein, 2014, p. 79).

Ensure Cultural Sensitivity

Biases, whether conscious or unconscious, can “harm the partnerships between programs and families and discourage families from participating” (Halgunseth et al., 2009, p. 9). In order to fully understand the cultural beliefs and practices of the children and families enrolled in a program, early childhood educators should begin by reflecting on their own personal stories

(Epstein, 2014). Consider your own family tree, and think about the following questions:

- What type of diversity, whether visible or invisible to the casual observer, is present in the past few generations?
- What did home life look like for your ancestors? What does it look like for you today?
- What beliefs and attitudes does your family hold in regards to childrearing practices?
- How do you use humor or sarcasm?
- What pastimes or diversions from day-to-day life do you engage in as a family?
- How do you spend your money?

Reflecting on the whats, hows, and whys of our own lives provides us insight into our own personal background that

When families and educators work together in a partnership that values the role of the parent, parents view themselves as more capable of helping their children grow academically.

shapes and influences, albeit unintentionally, our interactions and perceptions of families. Taking time to share our



Photos of kids engaged in active learning, distributed via email, blogs, text, or social media, can encourage similar activity at home.

own stories with coworkers, not only at the beginning of the school year but on an ongoing basis, promotes a higher level of respect for the individual differences we will come into contact with as educators and supports cultural understanding (Epstein, 2014).

Cultural sensitivity is vital to maintaining authentic two-way communication with family members (Halgunseth et al., 2009). Be sure to consider language and cultural differences when determining the best method of communication for families. Even when a parent has a strong grasp on the language spoken by the teachers, some individuals may still experience discomfort when communicating with teachers in a face-to-face setting; instead, these families may prefer written communication. Conversely,

parents who have a more limited knowledge of the language spoken in school may rely heavily on nonverbal communication cues; thus, these families may prefer face-to-face contact rather than phone conversations or written communication (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

In this age of smartphones, tablets, internet, and social media, early childhood educators should also consider the comfort levels of families in interacting with technology as a means of communication. Text messages, email, blogs, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and child assessment parent portals (like the one linked to COR Advantage) are additional ways educators can keep communication open and maintain a home-school connection. Teachers can post or send pictures of children engaged in active learning, link what is occurring in the photo directly with curriculum content, and offer extensions that family members can do at home to encourage similar learning. For family members uncomfortable or unfamiliar with these types of technology, or those with limited access to it, curriculum-focused bulletin boards and newsletters with similar pictures and captions can also be used.

COR
Advantage

Family Network

A secure online portal for families to connect with their child's teacher. Explore more at coradvantage.org/family-engagement.

Promote Active Learning at Home and in the Community

When families and early childhood educators work together in a partnership that values the role of the parent, parents gain confidence in their abilities and view themselves as more capable of helping their children grow academically

Link school content with events or outings in the community.

(Driscoll & Nagel, 2008). Many programs have found home visits to be beneficial in both building these partnerships and helping early childhood educators bring more learning opportunities into the home, since “teachers play a critical role in ‘translating’ the curriculum for parents and other family members and suggesting ways to apply active learning principles to everyday family situations” (Epstein, 2014, p. 75).

Use home visits as an opportunity to get to know what resources your children and families have access to on a daily basis. Paperwork should be left for the end of the visit, and the focus should first be on relationship building and play. One way to keep the home visit focused on this goal is to ask parents beforehand if you can take photos of the child’s favorite toys throughout the visit. For parents new to home visits, this provides them with a knowledge base of what to expect throughout the visit and can help to ease any apprehension they may have about inviting an educator into their home.

During the home visit, as the child shows you his or her toys, take time to interact and play with the child in developmentally appropriate ways. Throughout this interaction, ensure that the parent or other family members are engaged in this play as well; if necessary, ask direct questions or hand materials over to family members to elicit interaction between them and their child.

Following the home visit, compile photos to create a classroom book titled “Our Favorite Toys” and use these “favorites” as a way to individualize learning throughout the school year, both in and out of the classroom. For example, if you discovered a child’s love for robots on the home visit, have robot books available in a lending library for the family to check out. Send home recyclable art materials for the family to create a robot together, or provide suggestions to incorporate additional learning into the toys already at home, such as writing a story about a robot adventure together.

In addition to connecting curriculum with the home, early childhood educators can also link school content to events or outings in the community. For example, if a family regularly grocery shops or heads to a local farmers market together on Saturdays, share literacy and mathematics ideas for the shopping expedition: writing a shopping list, going on an

alphabet hunt through the aisles, or sorting, counting, and weighing vegetables. Likewise, teachers can share science and physical development connections that families can discover at a local park, on a walk through the neighborhood, or during an evening on the porch — for example, talking about weather and climate while running and crunching through leaves that layer the ground, discussing animal habitats and tracking footprints through freshly fallen snow, or graphing the moon as it waxes and wanes throughout the month.

You can also share information about local events sponsored by the public library, parks and recreation department, health department, and so on. When providing parents with fliers or information about these events, add a short paragraph or bullet-point list that links the event to learning outcomes. For example, Lego Night at the local library can be connected to math and fine-motor skill key developmental indica-

Share connections to weather and climate for families to discover on trips to the park or outings in the woods.



tors (KDIs), while a local parade may encourage children to recognize diversity or community roles, KDIs in the area of social studies.



Family engagement cannot be boiled down to any one meeting, event, or activity in which children and families participate together. Rather, it is a series of partnerships: child and teacher, family and teacher, child and family. It is the day-to-day interactions our families have with their children during the few

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hours they are at school — and, perhaps more importantly, the interactions that occur during the hours when the child is not in our care. Building and maintaining relationships based on the strengths of the child, the uniqueness of the family, and the idea that home plays an equally important role as



Link home and school by starting off the school year encouraging children and families to play and learn together in the classroom.

school will help engage parents and children in learning outside of our school walls. ■

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Informal communication can give teachers a chance to discuss with family members what the child did at school and at home.

