



Best Practices

Parents and caregivers are a child's first teachers. As their child begins formal schooling, a family's participation and support is crucial, both at home and in the early learning environment. The insights and information family members can share with early childhood educators can help shape that child's early learning experience.

Many parents and caregivers are not sure how to contribute in their child's learning. Some are unfamiliar with the education system and the expectations that come along with it. Educators can support families by building positive, collaborative relationships and by giving families strategies to help them extend the learning at home.

When educators and families work together, children experience *instructional coherence*—the messages they hear in the learning environment and at home are the same. Together, educators and families can shape a child's academic success.

Build Relationships with Families

A child's social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development is strengthened when educators and families work together. When a child sees a positive relationship developing between educators and family, the child recognizes that the important people in his or her life are working together and trust each other, and he or she will do the same. This collaboration also provides a strong foundation for communication about children's learning. To foster family involvement, interactions between educators and families should be positive, purposeful, reciprocal, and consistent.

- **Communicate with families often.** When there is good communication between educators and families, learning is collaborative, accomplishments are acknowledged, problems are recognized, and solutions are provided.
- **Communicate the positive and the negative.** Families will have a better sense of their child's behaviors and accomplishments if all behaviors are reported (not only those that are negative or challenging).
- **Foster two-way communication.** It is as important for the educator to hear from the parent or caregiver what the child is doing at home as it is for the parent or caregiver to hear what the child is doing in the early learning program. Share what children are learning and how parents and caregivers can offer support. Ask for feedback from families about the child's academic and social development outside of the program.
- **Use multiple modes communication.** Create a constant flow of communication. Engage with families in person at drop-off and pick-up; keep a journal for each child that

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families can read and contribute to, set up a Parent Information Board, write regular newsletters or blog posts, and send emails or text messages.

- **Understand each family's expectations and views about their involvement.** What some parents and caregivers view as family engagement may be different from other parents and caregivers. For example, in some cultures families believe that the most respectful way to treat an educator is not to question, suggest, or share information. Be explicit about the kind of involvement that you expect and welcome from families, but also honor the limits families may want to maintain.
- **Approach the relationship with respect.** Treat the educator and family relationship the way you would treat any important relationship in your life. Work to create a respectful and reciprocal relationship—one in which families feel valued and supported.

Why is it important for educators to build relationships with families?

- Families and educators each have unique knowledge about a child.
 - A parent or caregiver can share information with educators about how the child feels, thinks, and learns outside of the formal learning environment.
 - An educator can offer insight about how the child learns and behaves in group situations, as well as on his or her own.
- Strong relationships between educators and families can strengthen children's emotional health. They show children that they can trust the adults in their lives because those adults trust each other.
- Children's academic growth benefits from instructional coherence (when the learning that is happening in the program is supported by learning at home and vice-versa).
- Respectful relationships between educators and families provide children with models for how to create positive relationships with others.

What are some helpful ways to share information about what children are doing and learning?

- Set up a Parent Information Board in the drop-off and pick-up area to post learning objectives, key vocabulary words, and explicit examples of ways parents can reinforce the learning. For example, *Today we read a book about scientists. We learned how scientists look, touch, smell, listen to, and learn about the world around them. On your way home, ask your child to look, touch, smell, and listen as he or she practices being a scientist.*

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- Use blogs, newsletters, text messages, and social media pages to keep families up-to-date on learning, provide ideas on home connections, share photos, and encourage families to share home experiences with educators.
- Keep a journal for each child. Educators can write weekly entries about each child, highlighting a new project, a new learning, a new challenge, or a new development. Family members can read and contribute to the journal.

Help Families Extend the Learning

Young children need many opportunities to practice and reinforce all that they are learning in their early childhood programs. Educators can help families extend the learning by communicating regularly to families what children are learning and by providing examples of ways to build upon the learning.

- **Provide families with clear and explicit examples** of ways to use key learning strategies and activities at home. For example, say, *We worked on counting by two's today. As you go about your day, ask your child to join you in counting things that come in two, like when putting away pairs of shoes or socks.*
- **Help families establish fun daily routines** that require reading, mathematics, and science strategies, such as singing the "ABCs" when in the car, on the bus, counting placemats while setting the table, observing and predicting while on a walk, and so on.
- **Show families how to naturally integrate learning activities within everyday activities** such as cooking, grocery shopping, and bedtime routines.
- **Provide families with strategies to engage children in conversation** such as asking open-ended questions: *What was your favorite thing you did at school today? What did you eat for lunch today?* This helps build the child's vocabulary and thinking skills.

Why is it important for families to extend the learning at home?

- When school and families work together on the same skill or strategy, they create instructional coherence, which, in effect, doubles the child's ability to learn. The child hears the same language, uses the same skills, and learns the same concepts in the learning environment and at home.
- Young children thrive when there is consistency in their lives. When families and educators work together, the child sees and knows that there is consistency, collaboration, and trust between them.

What suggestions can educators make to families about extending the learning at home?

- Directly relate the learning to what learning is happening that day (or week) in the early learning program. Children will then experience a clear connection between program activities and home activities. For example,
 - If children are learning how to sort in math, families might be encouraged to elicit their child's help in sorting laundry, utensils, or toys during household chores.
 - If children are learning a particular letter that week, such as the letter "s" and letter sound /s/, families can reinforce the learning during the evening meal preparation by asking their child to find the letter "s" on ingredient packages or to name items on the table that begin with the letter sound /s/.
- Use daily routines to extend the learning at home. For example, during weekly grocery shopping, a parent could have their child sort and count apples as they are placed in a bag, look for particular letters or numbers on signs during a walk, or count flowers as they water the garden.
- Identify organic learning opportunities in everyday activities. For example, if children are focusing on counting in their early learning program, families can integrate counting naturally by encouraging their child to count stairs as they climb or descend, count napkins when setting the table, or count bath toys.
- Engage children in conversation. Young children benefit from lots of talking. Educators can encourage families to engage children in conversation as much as possible and to integrate it naturally into daily routines—in whatever language they are most comfortable with. For example, families can ask children to tell them about their day; about the ways they are stacking blocks, about the illustrations they see in a book, and so on. These interactions work to strengthen children's language and social development.

Glossary

instructional coherence: the experience learners have when messages that come from different sources (families and educators, for example) are the same or build on each other

cognitive development: the process of knowing, thinking, reasoning, and remembering

language development: the process of developing language skills to understand and engage in conversation

self-regulate: the ability to regulate or control one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior

social development: the ability to use appropriate social skills to communicate and interact with others

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.