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Family-School Partnerships in Elementary School

Working Together For Kids

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Decades of research have documented the positive effects of family-school partnerships on elementary school children, regardless of backgrounds and needs. To support children's learning and development, educators should strive to set high expectations for family-school partnerships, and shared responsibility for student success. Meaningful collaboration between home and school should be viewed as a necessity rather than a luxury. This guide provides an overview of the benefits of family-school partnerships as well as suggestions for how teachers and other school personnel can promote strong partnerships. We offer tips for promoting partnerships with diverse family groups and challenging contexts common in Nebraska. However, not all family situations can be addressed in this brief, therefore we also offer a list of additional resources including information on abuse and addiction. In this guide we use the terms family and parent to refer to caregivers including guardians, extended family, and close friends.

Children's Interconnected Worlds

Children grow and learn in interconnected systems and environments. For 5-to 11-year-old children, schools and homes represent two equally important contexts for learning. Learning takes place through structured interactions with teachers and classmates at school, and family interactions at home. Nurturing and supportive interactions across settings foster improved

developmental outcomes for children such as increased social and academic skills. Families and schools have a significant influence on children's success academically, cognitively, and socially. Furthermore, connections between families and schools (e.g., parent-teacher relationships) are critical to children's positive development. When homes and schools communicate effectively and work as a team, changes can be made in both settings to promote the highest quality outcomes for children. In short, children learn and grow best when effective connections and continuities exist between home and school.

Understanding Family-School Partnerships

Family-school partnerships provide a connection between the two most influential contexts in which children's learning and development occur.

Family-school partnerships are bidirectional, emphasizing the relationships between those who are primarily responsible for children's development—adult family members (e.g., parents, guardians, primary caregivers) and teachers. Family-school partnerships provide a connection between the two most influential contexts in which children's learning and development occur. The belief that families and schools are both essential and must share responsibility for student success is a key part of all successful family-school partnerships. Such partnerships emphasize the development of an intentional and ongoing relationship between families and schools. Through this relationship, both parents and teachers can enhance children's learning and development, as well as address any obstacles to learning. Family-school partnerships are founded on the principles of: (1) shared goals of maximizing learning experiences and outcomes for children; (2) strengthening relationships within and among the settings where children learn and grow; (3) addressing concerns for children across home and school; and (4) increasing cooperation between home and school.

Collaboration among families and schools provides multiple opportunities across settings for bolstering children's cognitive and social development. Family-school partnerships have been associated with several important child outcomes, including: (1) improved social skills and adaptive behaviors; (2) increased academic engagement, homework completion, reading fluency, math performance, and overall academic achievement; (3) decreased disruptive behavior concerns and school problems; and (4) decreased risk of conduct problems and alcohol and drug abuse in later life. Partnerships between families and teachers can greatly enhance the amount, quality, and scope of services available to help children meet their learning and behavioral goals. When compared to programs that target only one setting (home only or school only), programs that focus on family-school partnerships show greater improvements in children's social-emotional and academic functioning. Thus, partnerships between families and schools are a critical component of children's academic and social-emotional success.

Parent-Teacher Relationships

One key aspect of a family-school partnership is the relationship between parent or caregiver and the teacher. Parent-teacher relationships in elementary school often shape the family-school partnership throughout a child's education. An important foundation of this relationship is

communication. The classroom teacher is many parents' primary connection to their child's elementary school. Most home-school communication happens between the parent and teacher, and is important for enhancing both teacher and parent outcomes. Good communication between parents and teachers improves teachers' practices and use of effective strategies in their classrooms and increases parents' participation in and support of their children's learning, behavior, and social-emotional competencies. High quality parent-teacher relationships—those demonstrating trust, support, shared values, and shared expectations and beliefs about each other and the child—are associated with positive child behavioral, social-emotional, and academic outcomes. These early relationships send messages to parents about the value of their involvement. Positive, high quality relationships with their child's teacher can be a first step for parents in fostering strong school connections and overcoming barriers to their children's school success.

Home-Based and School-Based Parent Involvement

Developing and maintaining family-school partnerships include identifying and promoting meaningful ways for parents to be engaged in their children's learning. Parent involvement in children's education takes place in both the home and the school environments. Though they take place in different ways, both types of parent involvement are important for children's learning and development. There is no single activity or approach that is a good fit for all families or situations. Schools should consider options that work for families with limited literacy, English proficiency, and internet access. Schools may need to collaborate with families to include a multiple supportive adults (e.g., extended family, neighbors) with whom they can partner and a variety of activities that fit the family situation.

Home-based Involvement

Home-based involvement includes all the practices parents do in the home setting to provide cognitive stimulation and support children's learning. Home-based involvement can also be something as simple as asking children about school activities, inviting them to demonstrate something they learned at school, or talking about their favorite part of the school-day. Other examples of involvement might include reading and counting together, visiting museums or libraries, and providing educational materials and toys that promote learning. It also includes communicating educational and social expectations and aspirations that parents have for their children. This type of parent engagement has benefits not only for children's academic skills, but for their social-emotional and self-regulation skills as well.

Promoting home-based involvement

It may seem challenging for teachers to promote home-based involvement, because they are not directly involved; however, there are many ways this can be done. Teachers can help parents learn about free or inexpensive community activities that they may take their children to, such as activities at the community library. Teachers can also send home specific activity ideas for parents, such as printouts of literacy- or math-based games for parents and children to play together. Teachers can encourage parents to engage with their children in creative ways. For example a teacher might explain that, rather than assigning homework, they are encouraging

families to talk about a school-related topic (e.g., a science project, the child’s favorite part of the school day). Teachers can also provide parents with specific guidelines on how they can help children with their homework.

In addition to traditional paper and pencil methods, there are several free apps that promote parent involvement through technology. Schools should consider a streamlined approach to adopting parent engagement tools, and provide training to the parents or caregivers in how to use the tools. This will help avoid overwhelming parents with too many options or excluding parents without smartphones or computers, or with limited English proficiency. Each of these activities sends a message to parents that the parent-child relationship is important, and that parents play a critical role in supporting their child’s education. See Table 1 for a list of tools, their function, and parent engagement application.

Table 1: Tools for Promoting Home-Based Involvement

Tool	What It Does	How It Promotes
Weekly home-school folders	Provides structured system for sending and receiving written communication between home and school. Provides a simple, streamlined system for sending home a variety of information (e.g., positive postcards, community events, educational games, homework tips).	Encourages parents to engage child about Provides a standard way for parents to view
Daily home-school notes	Provides individualized two-way communication for students working toward specific individualized goals. Provides a low-tech option for families with limited access to the internet.	Promotes praise and rewards at home and in school Informs parents and teachers about student progress
Seesaw (app)	Empowers students to demonstrate and share their learning with teachers and families. Creates an electronic learning portfolio for each student; students and teachers can add to the journal, and parents are notified when anything is added. Students can “show what they know” by recording videos, completing learning activities, and taking pictures of their work.	Allows for an “open door” classroom Parents are engaged via updates and are able to instantly view student work By viewing students’ work in the app, parents can gain valuable insights into their child’s learning and support their development Parents and teachers can also collaborate on student work
ClassDojo (app)	Teachers can encourage students to practice skills, and track their progress. Students can showcase and share their learning by adding photos and videos to their own portfolios.	The app allows for rapid communication between teachers and parents Parents have the ability to see their child’s progress, which behaviors are rewarded and which behaviors are discouraged in the classroom

Tool	What It Does	How It Promotes
	Teachers can also send messages and photos to the entire class and to individual parents.	
	Offers translation services.	
	Teachers can send personalized or class updates, as well as upload pictures and videos.	Increases two-way communication and connects parents to the classroom.
Bloomz (app)	Individualized student portfolios offer opportunities to showcase students' work and behavior.	Makes it easy for parents to reach out and volunteer.
	Provides a classroom calendar and online sign-up sheets.	
	Provides secure text messaging between teachers and parents, both individually and to the entire class.	Provides an avenue for communication.
Remind (app)	Teachers can also send PDFs, photos, and voice clips to parents.	Translation options allow everyone to be reached, regardless of language.
	Offers translation services for more than 90 languages.	
TalkingPoints (app)	Provides two-way text messaging between teachers and parents in the parents' preferred language.	Enhances home-school communication.
	Provides translation services for more than 30 languages.	Breaks down language barriers and meaningfully engages parents.

School-based Involvement

School-based parent involvement promotes a direct connection between children's two most important learning environments: the home and the school. Parents can be involved directly with the school by visiting the school, going on field trips with the class, attending conferences, joining the parent-teacher association or organization, and volunteering in the classroom. These school-based engagement activities can help parents learn about upcoming events, acquire new strategies to support their children's development and education, and gain resources to benefit their family. These things may also promote meaningful parent-child interactions outside of the school, and contribute even more to children's learning.

Promoting school-based involvement

It may be challenging for some parents to visit the school during school hours. Regardless, it is important for schools to reach out to families to initiate positive relationships. Teachers can support parents by being flexible. Offering different times and days for classroom volunteer opportunities may help. For some parents, it may also help to schedule volunteer hours far in advance so they can make arrangements. Some parents may not ever be able to visit during school hours, and it is important for teachers to remember that this is not because they do not care or want the best for their child. When families are unable to visit the school, teachers can provide creative ways for them to get involved. Scheduling meetings via Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom and other online video conferencing services can help facilitate parent-teacher

communication when face-to-face visits are not possible. Hosting family nights in which a student’s family can visit the classroom in an informal and relaxed setting can help build the parent-teacher relationship and give parents the chance to see what their child does on a day-to-day basis at school. The tools mentioned in Table 1 can also be useful in promoting parents’ school-based involvement without having to be present in the classroom. Providing resources for parents and keeping an open line of communication will help them get the information they need from teachers and the school; this, in turn, helps parents to feel like valued and important partners in their child’s schooling.

Matching Family-School Partnerships to Children’s Needs

Just as teachers and parents provide different types and degrees of support to children depending on need, family-school partnership practices should also vary depending on children’s needs. Some family-school partnership practices are universal and should be implemented for all children. Some children need more targeted interventions and family-school practices. At times, some children need individualized intervention and corresponding family-school practices. Effective universal practices lay the groundwork for more intensive practices, and can increase engagement in and effectiveness of targeted and individual supports. See Table 2 for examples of family-school partnership practices at each of these levels to meet each family’s needs.

Table 2: Levels of Family-School Partnership

Level	Definition	Who Receives It	Examples
Universal (Tier 1)	Intentional and structured strategies for communication and engagement	All families	Parent surveys to gather parent input on school; resource room; parent-teacher conferences
Targeted (Tier 2)	Targeted practices for students who are at-risk for academic or social failure	Some families	Additional skills practice at home; deliver resources; email/text message communication
Individualized (Tier 3)	Individualized practices for students with intensive and/or chronic challenges	Individual families	Functional behavior assessment for home; individualized strategies with complementary components; individualized parent and teacher support; individualized communication

Promoting Family-School Partnerships with Diverse Families

Many factors—including family ethnicity, socioeconomic disadvantage, geographic setting, and educational transitions—influence the development and maintenance of family-school partnerships and require unique consideration.

Cultural and Linguistic Minority

Cultural and linguistic differences may make it difficult for parents and teachers to form relationships with each other. Culture influences parents' educational expectations, and how they view their role in children's education. Understanding cultural norms and expectations may help teachers improve their interactions with parents from different cultural groups. When parents and teachers are true partners, the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of the family are respected, appreciated, and recognized as meaningful for students. Long-standing factors such as institutional racism and disproportionate use of discipline may contribute to a lack of trust in schools. It is important for schools to acknowledge these barriers, and to work on developing trust with culturally diverse families, which can be done through making and keeping agreements and repeated positive interactions focused on getting to know the family and learning about their culture and unique needs. Conveying a genuine interest and creating an inviting tone can help culturally diverse families feel like they belong at the school. Effective cross-cultural communication practices include: showing respect for diversity; using a shared perspective-taking approach; remaining open and flexible; and approaching interactions with a desire to learn. It is also important to communicate with families in their preferred language and format, which may require using translation and interpretation services. Avoiding jargon, using descriptive and concrete terms, and providing frequent summary statements can also help to decrease misunderstandings. Schools may also consider identifying cultural ambassadors to help engage families and inform culturally sensitive school practices. Regardless of resources available, educators can improve their practices with minoritized families by adopting an open mind and a reluctance to place blame.

Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Socioeconomic disadvantage is one of the biggest factors preventing parents from developing relationships with their child's teacher. The stress associated with living in poverty may mean that parents have few resources and limited energy for involvement in educational activities, and may interfere with the development of quality relationships with their child's teacher. For example, the time burden faced by trying to make ends meet and the inflexibility of many low-wage jobs likely interfere with the opportunity for, and quality of, parent-teacher interactions. It is important to consider these family characteristics when conceptualizing the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for the parent-teacher partnership. It is also important to show genuine interest and concern in understanding the family's experiences. Further, teachers may need to reframe their belief that the family is uninvolved to one that acknowledges the efforts the family makes to address basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing. It is also important to help parents develop a meaningful role in their child's education, and enhance their self-efficacy for helping their child be successful in school. Fortunately, high quality parent-teacher relationships have a positive influence on student and parent behavior. When parents and teachers are able to overcome barriers and each perceive their relationship to be positive, students tend to have better academic and social skills and lower instances of behavior problems compared to teachers with negative parent-teacher relationships.

Supporting Families and Students Who Are LGBTQ

Students and families who are LGBTQ often report feeling as though they do not belong to the school community, and even report feeling unsafe at school. Therefore, it is critical for schools to take steps to connect with these families and to provide a space where students and families can feel safe. A safe space is a place where a person can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm. It is essential that schools and classrooms provide welcoming environments so that LGBTQ students and families feel safe and comfortable. Teachers and administrators should avoid making assumptions about a student's background, and instead ask families about their values and preferences. Schools can make connections to local and online LGBTQ resources, and support teacher and parent learning through workshops and classes around LGBTQ issues. Teachers can collaborate with each other, school specialists, administrators, and community partners to increase their knowledge and develop inclusive practices. Teachers can visually show support for LGBTQ families through "safe space" stickers and posters. Teachers can also adapt classroom rules and lesson plans to be more inclusive and address issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in a positive way. For example, teachers can include books in their classroom that highlight diverse family structures or LGBTQ characters. Paperwork and forms can be adapted to be more inclusive by using terms such as "parent/guardian" or "families" rather than "mother" and "father." Such inclusive practices convey a welcoming message to all families and students.

Family-School Partnerships in Rural Communities

Rural schools are uniquely positioned to foster strong family-school partnerships. Rural schools are often at the center of local communities, community relationships tend to be more stable, and class sizes are often smaller than in urban and suburban schools. However, rural communities face barriers to family-school partnerships. For example, parents may be reluctant to discuss their children's behavioral or academic challenges with teachers in rural communities that have many over-lapping relationships and limited privacy. Another common challenge is transportation. Families living in rural communities often have to travel longer distances to access resources and visit their children's schools, and there are often very few options for public transportation. This problem is often exacerbated by lack of high-speed internet, which limits options for electronic communication and may negatively impact the frequency of home-school contacts. Fortunately, rural communities have a long history of creative problem-solving and a commitment to doing what it takes to support local children. For example, community-wide efforts led by local community leaders outside the school (e.g., church pastors, local government officials, business owners) may provide resources to promote family-school partnerships, such as sponsoring transportation and meals for school events, acting as connectors between school service providers and parents to help build trust. Rural schools can capitalize on their unique position as the "heart of a community." For example, popular events held at the school, such as sporting events and performances, provide opportunities for informal and positive parent-teacher interactions. To increase communication, rural communities can capitalize on written notes or technology to increase communication over long physical distances (see Table 1).

Transitions in schooling often pose challenges in how families relate to schools. The transition from preschool to elementary school is associated with many changes for children and their parents, as they must adapt to new settings and expectations and build relationships with new teachers and classmates, and often even new schools. The transition to kindergarten may interrupt useful patterns of interaction that families developed with early childhood programs. Although parents typically communicate frequently and collaboratively with their child's preschool teachers, the frequency of home-school communication decreases in kindergarten and more so with each passing year. In particular, family-school contacts during kindergarten, and throughout elementary school, tend to be less frequent, more selective (e.g., only to discuss problems), and more formal (e.g., conferences and meetings) than during the early childhood years. Kindergarten classrooms often have more rigid academic routines than most preschool classrooms, and parents may not see the value of their role in this more structured setting.

However, when parents are engaged partners with schools during the transition to elementary school, adjustments are smoother and children typically do better. Schools can involve families during periods of major transitions to help support children in making successful adjustment to new situations. This may include orienting families to new settings, new grade levels, new teachers and staff, and new expectations and requirements for assessing students' work. Elementary schools might consider adopting the parent engagement practices of early childhood programs to strengthen and increase their family-school partnerships.

Tools and Tips for Effective Family-School Partnerships

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Teachers and Parents as Partners website (cyfs.unl.edu/TAPP) provides many research-based ways to foster family-school partnerships during elementary school. These techniques are designed to create healthy family-school partnerships to help educators and parents make the most of children's elementary school years. Additional strategies can be found at cyfs.unl.edu/TAPP.

- Invest in relationships right away
 - Initiate contact. Reach out to families as soon as possible to introduce yourself and establish expectations.
 - Invite families in. Prior to the start of school year, teachers are encouraged to invite families to tour the school, introduce themselves and other teachers, and address expectations for the classroom.
 - Get to know one another. Children benefit when parents and teachers know one another, and have basic information about “how things work” at home and school.
 - Focus on strengths. A basic building block of a strong parent-teacher relationship is that teachers and parents are united in helping children by focusing on their strengths.
 - Convey a genuine interest in collaboration. Use language that implies shared responsibilities and appreciation, such as “we,” “our,” and “us,” and

highlight mutual goals. This type of language places responsibility on what parents and teachers can do together rather than in isolation.

- Stay connected. Make contact with families during the first few days of the school year. Share information about how the child did the first few days of school, and see if the family has any questions, suggestions, or concerns.
- Create ways to stay engaged
 - Make positive connections. Make it a goal to reach out to one or two parents each week—send home a positive postcard or email, or make positive phone calls home.
 - Stay in touch. Over time, efforts to remain connected—no matter how small—will help create deep and meaningful consistency for the child at home and at school. Continue to communicate with families about “how things work” at home and school.
 - Provide multiple options for involvement. Use parent volunteers in classrooms, provide parent-training workshops, and incorporate families into lesson plans.
- Keep lines of communication open
 - Share ideas. Both parents and teachers have important information to share when it comes to a child they both know well.
 - Communicate frequently. Make sure that communication is frequent and clear, and that everyone has an equal chance to speak and to listen.
 - Provide structure. Set up systems such as weekly home-school notes, wherein parents and teachers can have regular communication about the child’s progress.
 - Translate materials into languages spoken at home.
- Structure consistent learning opportunities
 - Find common opportunities. Look for similar ways to create structured learning opportunities across home and school. These connections can help children be successful in both places.
 - Celebrate success across settings. Reinforce children’s positive behaviors at home and school to help them experience consistent messages.
 - Encourage the school to help families create homes that maximize children’s learning by:
 - Providing families with information about the learning standards for their child’s grade level.
 - Providing parents with learning activities that can be done at home, and that align with classroom curriculum.
 - Providing workshops or other resources with parents that encourage positive parenting practices.
- Collaborate to achieve goals and solve problems
 - Work together. Both parents and teachers have important information and ideas that can help when a student is having a problem. Parents and teachers can work together to create a plan, decide on strategies, and practice them at school and home.
 - Jointly set home-school goals for students each year. Share academic and behavioral goals with children’s parents and ask parents to write down goals or

wishes for their child early in the year. Know what goals are meaningful to parents, and support those goals in the classroom when possible.

- Engage in transition practices
 - Plan ahead. Intentional transition practices can help facilitate home-school relationships between grade levels, particularly between preschool and kindergarten.
- Share information. Kindergarten teachers can request information from parents about children's individual needs that will make the transition smoother.

The tools and tips described above have been shown to lead to success; however, when it comes to family-school partnerships, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. Schools and teachers are encouraged to alter their approach to meet the needs of their communities and individual students and families. However you make connections, remember that investing in family-school partnerships results in better outcomes for children, teachers, families, and schools.

National Resources

Books/Articles

Edwards, C. P., & Fleharty, H. (2013). *Family-school Partnerships: Promoting Family Participation in K-3 Teacher Professional Development*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1669&context=psychfacpub>

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Lines, C., Miller, G. E., & Arthur-Stanley, A. (2011). *The power of family-school partnering (FSP): A practical guide for school mental health professionals and educators*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Redding, S., Murphy, M., & Sheley, P. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook on family and community engagement*. Academic Development Institute/Center on Innovation and Improvement. <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/downloads/FACEHandbook.pdf>

Sheridan, S. M. (2014). *The tough kid: Teachers and parents as partners*. Pacific Northwest. <http://toughkid.com/tk-products/tapp.html>

Websites

Family Equality Council provides a list of strategies for LGBTQ parents and allies to advocate for inclusive schools that meet their needs. <http://www.familyequality.org>

Global Family Research Project provides various resources and strategies for improving family engagement. <https://globalfrp.org/Articles>

Human Rights Campaign Foundation provides resources for creating LGBTQ inclusive schools. <http://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/>

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) offers tips and e-books for promoting family engagement within a PBIS structure. <https://www.pbis.org/resource-type/ebooks-monographs#family>

Understanding the Diverse Needs of Children whose Parents Abuse Substances. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3676900/>

Local Resources

Nebraska ACLU LGBT website provides updates on Nebraska issues relevant to the LGBTQ community. <https://www.aclunebraska.org/en/issues/lgbt-rights>

Nebraska Department of Education provides a Family and Community Engagement Toolkit. <https://www.education.ne.gov/ciptoolkit/family-community-engagement/>

Nebraska Department of Education also provides resources for supporting a family-school partnership framework. <https://www.education.ne.gov/family/educators/#1543606535872-59a50dcb-e163>

Nebraska's Multi-tiered System of Support (NeMTSS) provides resources for engaging families. <http://nemtss.unl.edu/resources-library/>

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