The Literacy Link

Reading activities as a mechanism to strengthen family engagement

By Sherine Tambyraja

Preparations for the new school year are probably well underway, and in addition to getting the classroom ready for a fresh start, you may also be thinking about ways to enhance engagement and collaboration with your students' families.

Teachers already know that what research suggests is very often true: Children whose parents are engaged in their learning are likely to have positive learning experiences. Teachers also know that keeping families engaged is not always easy. Although some are open and responsive to classroom involvement, there are others who just don’t seem interested.

Involvement vs. engagement

An important distinction of interest is the nuanced understanding that family involvement is different from family engagement. Family involvement is often teacher-initiated, unidirectional communication to keep parents informed about their child’s learning experiences. A common example is a newsletter that highlights the week’s main activities.

These efforts to keep parents apprised of their child’s learning and development are important. However, true engagement requires bidirectional and ongoing conversations where both teachers and parents share information about the child’s learning.

Theoretical models of family engagement are based on the idea that teachers have the knowledge and skills to empower families to be wholly engaged in their child’s learning—both at home and at school. In addition to communicating clearly with families about classroom activities, teachers can also provide guidance to parents regarding how they can work with their child at home. Engagement can be conceptualized as a communication cycle including both teachers and families.

Connecting school to home through literacy

For any age group, but particularly for preschool and early elementary-age children, literacy and reading-oriented activities provide an accessible context to link school–home learning and increase family engagement.

Parents already know that reading with their child is beneficial, and many already do so on a regular basis. Providing additional guidance for home literacy activities and asking parents to share information about those activities is likely to be both welcomed and feasible. Parents will know that their home activities are supplementing their child’s school activities, which may make those experiences particularly valuable and purposeful.

Depending on the age group, different types of engagement activities can be implemented. For very young children, teachers may share copies of books they
have read in their classrooms and provide guidance on topics for parents to talk about with their child while reading.

For emerging readers (in kindergarten through first grade), teachers may send home books and ask parents to jointly maintain a journal in which both parents and teachers can record notes about reading progress. Parents might share observations regarding certain words that were particularly tricky for the child to sound out. Teachers can then use that information in the next day’s instruction.

For more confident readers (in second and third grades), comprehension may be the larger focus. In this case, teachers may engage with parents in several ways. First, families may be asked to share book titles that the child enjoys at home so that teachers have a general understanding of the home literacy activities and interest. Teachers may provide parents with “interview” questions to ask their child about a book recently read and have them record the child’s answers regarding their comprehension and retelling of main story elements. On the basis of those responses, teachers can vary the questions or give freedom to parents to ask their own questions.

These examples of bidirectional communication that focus on the child’s learning have the potential to boost the child’s development, provide additional and specific information about the child’s abilities to the teacher, and empower the child’s parent to play an active role in his or her growth.

**Barriers to engagement**

In a perfect world, any of these methods would work beautifully and a teacher would have a classroom full of children with wholly engaged families. In reality, it is not that easy. The reason family engagement is so sought after and a hot topic is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there are many barriers that both teachers and families face. The biggest barrier is time. Some teachers have classrooms with upward of 25 students, and the notion of engaging with 25 families on a consistent basis is daunting. Likewise, families are busy. Between work, sports, and other obligations, time for these types of activities may be difficult.

In addition, another often-reported barrier is parental beliefs and attitudes toward taking on an active role in their child’s learning. Some parents may feel they do not have the knowledge to engage in such activities. They may feel that these are the teacher’s responsibilities rather than a parent’s. How you conceptualize your role in facilitating family engagement. What level of communication are you comfortable with? Do you prefer digital communication, paper/journal activities, or some other method? What is realistic for you in terms of frequency of engaging with families? What are the literacy goals of the classroom that most families could reasonably participate in?

As the year continues, assess the progress. Consider which families are less engaged and why that might be. Identify any other barriers that may be impeding family engagement. Perhaps most important, recognize the successful activities and consider ways to build upon them.

**Next steps and considerations**

Fostering family engagement may be its own learning experience. Every class is different, and with each year, you may find that different methods work well, while in other years, they might not. As you start the new school year, take some time to reflect upon how you conceptualize your role in facilitating family engagement. What level of communication are you comfortable with? Do you prefer digital communication, paper/journal activities, or some other method? What is realistic for you in terms of frequency of engaging with families? What are the literacy goals of the classroom that most families could reasonably participate in?

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Engagement between teachers and families is a powerful mechanism for boosting children’s academic success. Children who receive positive and consistent support at home and school are well positioned to be high achievers. Working with families throughout the school year may not always be easy, but the effort is worthwhile.