Partnering with Families for Early Language and Literacy

Research-based Strategies for Early Childhood Educators

Developed by the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center

Barbara J. Boone, Patrick D. Cunningham, Hadley F. Bachman, and Meredith E. Wellman

This document was written by:
The Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center
at
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Send inquiries to boone.32@osu.edu.

This document was created for early childhood teachers who want to improve the way they partner with families for children's language and literacy development. Working together with families is a lot like working at NASA's mission control. Just like a space launch needs astronauts, mathematicians, and scientists to succeed, we need schools, families, and community partners all working together to launch student success. When families, schools, and their community partners form strong collaborative partnerships, children make positive gains in reading acquisition, language, vocabulary learning, conceptual development, and literacy achievement.[11, 62, 67] At the heart of this partnership is a trusting relationship. When there is trust between the home and school, there is a positive difference for children's learning.[8, 18, 21, 68] Strong family and teacher partnerships include open communication, respect for differences, commitment, trust, and sharing power as partners.[61, 67] The following strategies drawn from research offer opportunities for teachers to build stronger partnerships with families to support children's language and literacy development. At the end of the document, there is a simple tool to organize your reflections and your plans for moving ahead to new and improved partnerships.

Strategy #1

Welcome families as partners.

Language and literacy for young children begins at home and is nurtured by family members. Family members across all incomes, educational backgrounds, races, and ethnicities share in learning at home with their children.[37, 59, 71] All families have funds of knowledge.[44] These are interests, skills, language, hobbies, faith traditions, recreational activities, chores, and work they teach to their children. When formal literacy instruction begins for children in school, families continue to play important roles in their children's learning, including their literacy skill development. Research demonstrates that family support for language and literacy activities at home is positively related to children's outcomes, including reading acquisition, language, vocabulary learning, conceptual development, and literacy achievement.[11, 57, 62] There are strong connections between family engagement and children's success in learning.

Families are interested in how they can support their child's skill development, they find satisfaction in adding to their child's education, and they can provide teachers with valuable information about their children.[43] A parent or caregiver's decision to partner with their child's teacher is influenced by several factors. These factors, which teachers can affect, include parents' and caregivers' beliefs about their role in their child's literacy development, their sense of efficacy—their thinking about their ability to be successful—for helping the child learn to read, and the opportunities the teacher or school provides for them to learn about and support their child's learning.[27] Families are impacted by their prior experiences with schools and other systems, influencing their confidence in their ability to provide instruction at home or to jump in and try strategies suggested by the school. Families also differ in the time and resources available to support their child's literacy skills at home. However, with effective family-school communication, a commitment to the ability of all families to engage, and a re-imagining of what authentic and effective family engagement looks like, it is possible to build strong partnerships with all families.

To encourage families to take on an active role in providing support for their child's growing language and literacy skills, teachers should communicate that families play an important part in their children's early literacy experience.[27] Specifically, schools can improve the ways they communicate with families, focusing on clarifying adult roles for supporting their child's early literacy skills. Yet simply telling families how to support

their child's growing literacy skills is not enough to support families. Teachers have a key role in building parental efficacy for helping their child develop these skills and extending welcoming opportunities for families to learn and implement new literacy activities with their child. Teachers can also build adults' skills and knowledge about home practices that support their child's early literacy development and provide families with home practices that are a good fit for their personal level of time, energy, and other resources. This involves engaging in two-way communication, listening to families, and learning from one another regarding the children's interests, motivations, progress, and development. This type of family engagement must be on-going, with regular interactions with families, rather than focusing on a few events each year. Supports for families should be provided throughout the year, in a variety of accessible ways so all families can participate.

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Communicate to families that their active role in their children's language and literacy development is valued and wanted.[27] Let them know how it can be a benefit to their children.
- Be positive and encouraging about families incorporating conversation, reading, and writing with their children in any way during their busy days.[6, 59]
- Actively welcome and engage families at all events taking place at school, in the community, or virtually, demonstrating a posture of openness to their participation and ideas.[51] Also, provide multiple varied opportunities to families, and assume best intentions if families do not respond to some opportunities planned for them. Being persistent and offering varied opportunities for engagement increases the likelihood that families may find an opportunity that suits their schedule, skills, and comfort level.[23]
- Ask families to recommend texts that relate to their interests, culture, and values.[1, 2]
- Provide online or in-person spaces for families to get to know other families and to talk to one another about how they support language and literacy growth at home.[19]
- Provide literacy activities to families that fit families' schedules.[43]

Strategy #2

Promote family-friendly practices.

Children's motivation to read impacts the amount of reading they do and their reading outcomes.[25, 26, 72, 73] Therefore, literacy activities provided to families and children to complete outside of school should be enjoyable. When children enjoy reading and are intrinsically motivated to read, they have positive associations with reading; however, when they are forced to read, they may enjoy reading less.[60] Teachers can support families in establishing home-literacy environments that are fun and offer the child positive experiences while avoiding the use of forced home reading assignments, such as mandatory home reading logs.[55] Instead, teachers can support children's internal, personal drive to read by sharing ideas with families for encouraging positive family interactions during shared reading time and other language and literacy supporting activities at home.[33]

Unconstrained language activities at home, such as one-on-one reading and storytelling or talking during mealtimes, promote significant gains in language skills when compared to constrained language activities at home, such as explicit instruction on letter names/sounds and teaching how to read a book.[42] Constrained skills are defined as skills that are teachable and with a maximum limit that most children will master, including learning the letters of the alphabet and their sounds. Unconstrained skills are defined as skills without limit that are learned gradually and through various forms such as vocabulary and critical thinking. The difference in effectiveness between these two types of activities is likely due to the time that is already spent in schools on constrained language activities, leaving opportunity for families at home to explore literacy in an unconstrained way. For example, mealtime conversations between adults and children, an activity that happens at home and not at school, are an important source of vocabulary development, which is critical to language and literacy development.[65] Encouraging families to engage in unconstrained language activities relieves the pressure for families trying to "teach" their children reading skills. Thus, families are better able to create a fun and engaging home literacy environment.

Another vital component of a home literacy environment is access to books and other reading materials. Children's access to books in school and at libraries is predictive of their reading achievement.[57] When families are provided with books, many read and talk with their children about the stories. Though access to literacy materials is a primary concern, families also benefit when teachers share methods for engaging their children

with reading and talking about books together.[59] The use of literacy bags with reading activities, guided-discussion bookmarks, or journals to help families respond to the stories together can help guide family participation in their child's literacy development.[6, 41, 57] Providing books and other literacy materials for children is especially critical for families in rural communities as well as families in transitional housing, refugee families, and others who tend to have more limited access to community resources, such as libraries and early literacy materials.[9, 36] Every school has the opportunity to improve access for many families and students.

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Emphasize with families that you want them to enjoy reading with their child.[60]
- Encourage families to do unconstrained literacy activities such as reading books, making up stories, talking about the world around them, and talking about new words.[42]
- Do not assign reading logs. Instead, children and families can use journals to write or draw about the story.[55]
- Help families access books in the school and community through the library or other organizations, such as Ohio's Imagination Library, which provides free books monthly to enrolled children.[48] Bring books and literacy events to parks, laundromats, and grocery stores.[9]
- Assist families in selecting books for shared reading at home that make reading enjoyable. Ideal books are related to the children's and families' interests, have appealing narratives, and engage the children through humor, adventure, and problem-solving.[58] Young readers may also be more engaged by books that have large, bold print, few words per page, and repetitive print. The illustrations should be large, appealing, and incorporate print when possible.[33, 58]
- Consider promoting literacy through interactive technology such as educational apps.[3] Teachers can help guide families toward apps that teach literacy skills, such as Sesame Workshop[63] and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)[49], and steer them away from apps that have no evidence to support their use. Also, share that while these apps can be helpful, they should not replace familial interaction during literacy activities.[3]
- Point families toward digital resources that promote family engagement in language and literacy development. Ready4K sends 3 evidence-based engagement reminders to families in the form of text messages each week.[54] Day by Day Ohio provides daily literacy activities to families.[10] These digital resources complement the provision of books and other physical literacy resources.

Strategy #3

Share information and tools with families.

All families care about their children, and many families want to know more about how to support their children's learning, particularly with language and literacy.[24, 59] They have questions about how to help their children learn to read, or they may want to know what is appropriate for children of different ages and grade levels.[71] In the early grades, family life is the best place to connect what children hear and read to the real world. To support families in making this connection, teachers can provide families with guidance on how to help children at home with language and literacy skills.

Teachers can encourage the most effective shared reading practice – families talking with children about what they are reading.[6, 41, 57, 62] Research indicates that shared reading, in which adults guide children toward becoming storytellers, is helpful for children as they develop their language skills. This could be done through formal, structured practices to encourage families to engage with their child during shared reading or through informal conversations about literacy during unstructured times.[6, 59] Teachers can easily help families learn these shared reading skills. One study provided only 15 minutes of demonstration for families and found positive results.[31] Families do not need to master these skills perfectly; regular communication with their children about reading is what matters.

Teachers should share techniques with families that increase collaboration between parents/caregivers and children including (1) Pausing for the child's comments between pages; (2) Letting the child pick the reading location; (3) Increasing the child's opportunities to physically interact with the book, such as by holding it or turning the pages; (4) Matching reading to the child's abilities and interests, and modifying the story or discussion to make it more enjoyable; and (5) asking the child to "read" the book to the parent/caregiver, even if the child is making up a story rather than actually reading.[32]

Families can participate in shared reading and support their child's language and literacy development by talking about the letters and words on the page of a storybook, cereal box, sign, or game. These unstructured shared reading and language development activities are linked to advances in children's literacy skills in several areas of print and word awareness.[12, 31, 32, 33] This type of learning connects language and

literacy to the real world of each family and child. Verbal print referencing can be in the form of questions (e.g., "Can you find a letter A?" or "Where should I begin to read?") or comments (e.g., "That letter M is the same as the one that starts your name!" or "I'm going to start reading at the first page"). The tone of conversations, questions, and comments should be encouraging, engaging, and pleasant so children create positive associations with reading. Nonverbal print referencing involves pointing to the print on a page while reading. Speaking and pointing to words on the page connects spoken words to print. No matter the approach, teachers should keep the focus on making shared reading and other activities fun and engaging for families.[25, 26, 72, 73]

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Demonstrate shared reading activities that can be done at home and allow families to practice with their children. Families can ask children Who/What/When/Where/Why questions, ask children to make connections to their own experiences, and ask children to recall and retell the story.[71]
- Send video links to families showing effective shared reading practices.[52] The Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast provides a series of videos for families scaffolding parent and caregiver engagement language and literacy development activities.[53] Also, consider sending home guided-discussion prompts[17] for shared reading in the form of bookmarks to help families engage meaningfully.[41]
- Share ideas with families for how reading and writing could be connected to the real, everyday activities of families such as driving in the car, shopping, cooking, and watching television.[12, 31, 32, 33] When looking at environmental print, families can ask, "What do you think it says?" and "How do you know".[12]
- Families can engage in a "picture walk"[50] - reviewing the illustrations - prior to reading the book to increase children's interest.[7]

Strategy #4

Invite families to partner in progress monitoring.

As teachers monitor and measure children's literacy skill development, communication with families is important. Teachers should share information with families on children's language and literacy skills relative to grade-level standards and classroom goals.[30] This information gives families a point of reference to understand the type of supports their children need so that they can work with teachers to set goals for their children's language and literacy development. As families gain a firmer understanding of literacy development, they are more likely to prioritize relevant practices in their daily literacy engagement with their children. Therefore, teachers should communicate with families regarding developmentally appropriate strategies along with brief explanations of why they are recommended for their individual child's learning needs. Communication between families and teachers has been found to be positively associated with student achievement.[23, 37, 71] When teachers reach out to families with information, families are more likely to contribute to their child's education[20, 71] and children are more likely to be engaged in learning.[34]

A national study indicates that many families consider the report card the best way to know how their children are progressing.[38] The same study shows that without clear, timely information on their children's progress, families are not able to advocate for their children's education. Teachers should provide information to families about their children's progress frequently, so families know that their children are progressing. Families can then collaborate with their child's teachers to change supports for their children's learning when needed. The content of the information teachers provide makes a difference for families. Families need understandable descriptions about their children's progress in their ordinary home language, without the use of technical literacy terms. Assessment scores should always be provided with clear explanations of their interpretation and implications. All communication from teachers to families about children's literacy project should have a friendly, non-threatening tone, should invite feedback from the family, should use strengths-based and Growth Mindset language, and provide clear information about what the teacher will do to support the child at school. Teachers should share this information in formal and informal ways through families' preferred means of communication. Families benefit from having a perspective of how their children are progressing related to their peers, grade-level standards, and their own prior performance.

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Use families' preferred methods to communicate children's language and literacy progress, including how they compare to grade-level standards and classroom goals, what they do well, and what they could improve.[34, 35, 37] You could also send home folders of children's work to families for review and commentary.
- Give families specific messages about how their child is progressing, what their child is working on, and how they can support the child at home.[30]
- Avoid jargon and technical wording that may not effectively communicate to families how they can help their child. Keep all communication friendly and accessible to all families.[15]
- Tailor communication to the family's needs.[15] Consider weekly or bi-weekly phone calls to build a lasting positive relationship and to inform about progress with the families of children who are struggling with language and literacy skill development.
- Establish two-way communication from the first contact with families.[15] Plan to include time and questions for listening to families in all meetings.
- Respect families' funds of knowledge and empower them to have confidence, building on what they are already doing to support their child's literacy development.[12] Listen closely to how your families are partnering with you to support their child's progress and communicate with families your appreciation when they share what is working well at home.

Strategy #5

Build accessible and equitable home-school partnerships.

Teachers should always treat families respectfully and as the experts about their children no matter who they are or where they live. A school-wide system should be in place to support all teachers establishing two-way communication with families—both listening to and informing each other.[23, 24] Effective two-way communication, in which families and teachers equally contribute to questions, information sharing, and feedback, helps to establish a culture of trust and leads to positive outcomes for teachers, families, and children.[16, 22, 34] For children, these positive outcomes include improved test scores, homework completion, and attendance rates. These student achievement outcomes are supported when teachers have high levels of trust and set high expectations for their students and families. This emphasis on two-way communication is particularly important when seeking to understand families' culture, skills, and interests.

Understanding and valuing children and their families provides teachers with the ability to connect classroom instruction to children's cultural knowledge and prior knowledge (e.g., farming, crafting, cooking, car mechanics, construction, business, etc.), assisting in the development of their literacy skills.[43] Prior to providing recommendations regarding literacy practices, teachers should adopt the perspective of a "learner" to get to know their students and families.[36, 40] Families' "funds of knowledge",[69] or their cultural and familial knowledge and skills, can be utilized by teachers to create appropriate and engaging literacy lessons for their students.[12, 44] Gaining an understanding of these historical and cultural sources of knowledge provides for a more positive and realistic view of children and their families. Teachers can learn from families about students' needs, how they learn best, and their interests and hobbies while also showing families how to use their funds of knowledge to engage in formal and informal literacy activities at home.[6, 43] They can also learn families' schedules, so they know how much available time a family has for reading or helping with other literacy activities, and how much help each child will receive. Partnering with families in these ways helps to empower them to incorporate literacy practices into their daily lives.[12]

It is also important that teachers provide and recommend books to families that feature people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. This is important for all children,

even those in homogenous communities, as the absence of people of color in children's books reinforces whiteness as normative and subtly supports the disenfranchisement of people of color.[4] Further, it is particularly critical for children from marginalized groups to see people from their race or culture represented in the books they are reading as this leads to more rapid literacy gains[4, 64] and promotes the development of positive self-concept.[5, 46] After gaining an understanding of their students as individuals and sourcing representative material, teachers can tailor lessons and promote home literacy activities that engage students' prior knowledge to connect it to the literacy curriculum.[40, 41, 43] One study demonstrated that home literacy interventions that are not aligned with families' values, strengths, and goals are less effective and that families often discontinue the intervention prematurely.[6]

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Reflect on how you currently view the family of each student you work with and inventory your prior knowledge of their supports for literacy.
- Have "Get to Know You" conferences, in-person or virtual, during the 1st month of school or earlier where families are the experts. Teacher prompt: "Tell me about your child as a reader" and "Tell me about your child as a writer".[40]
- Request that families share information about their funds of knowledge. One way is to use a handout[47] to fill in about the family's and child's interests, skills, and home routines before the school year begins.[2, 44] Utilize this knowledge to view students and families through a strengths-based lens.
- Accommodate families by meeting at a convenient time and place.[15] Prioritize visits with families that historically have not had a strong connection to the school.
- Recommend books and other texts to families that feature people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.[4]
- Use study groups of families and teachers to discuss differences in understandings or backgrounds between households and classrooms and develop classroom language and literacy practices that involve connections between the home and the classroom.[44]
- Refrain from using texts and other materials with biased depictions of cultures and races.[23] Let families know you welcome their feedback on the books their children are reading in school, or those sent home.

Strategy #6

Enhance family partnerships for children learning English.

Being responsive to the cultural experiences of families is important when collaborating with all families, but particularly with families of children who are learning English. For newly immigrated families, teachers can assist families in understanding how their children are learning to read if it is taught differently from their countries of origin.[2] Diversity and cultural differences are assets for our schools and communities and can be celebrated and valued by teachers.[12, 14] For example, teachers can familiarize themselves with the benefits of multilingualism and emphasize to children and families their support of learning and speaking multiple languages.

When working with non-native English-speaking families, teaching from a strengths-based rather than deficit lens is important for student success.[45] Getting to know each family personally, understanding their unique strengths, improves the overall relationship and can lead to other positive outcomes.[70] One study also showed that teachers who practiced a strengths-based view of families were happier with their jobs and more responsive to the needs of their students whose families were in poverty.[23] It is helpful when teachers are inviting and provide families with opportunities to observe reading instruction in-person, via video, or through print examples. Schools should also seek out and develop relationships with bilingual/multilingual staff or community members to be cultural brokers for family engagement when possible because it has been shown to increase the engagement of families who speak languages other than English.[37, 56] Cultural brokers act as a link between schools and diverse families by facilitating two-way communication between families and schools, building relationships with families, and empowering families to engage in practices that guide the school, such as providing feedback and participating in the decision-making process.[66] When used effectively, cultural brokers build capacity both for schools and families, enhancing the roles of all members of the school community.

Teachers should encourage families to use their first language at home, both for speaking and reading.[7, 56, 59] Reading in a native language facilitates reading skills in English. Children's learning of their home language does not hinder their abilities to learn a second language at school. When families use their native language, they are more likely to have conversations that support learning.[27] Further, one study

demonstrated that providing dual-language books to students allowed families to read with their children and to talk about their languages.[57] In that study, families of children learning English as a second language were as likely to read and talk with their children about the stories as were families whose first language was English.

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Provide books in the home language of families or send home books that are translated to create dual language books.[36, 57] Some texts in languages other than English can be found through the [International Children's Digital Library](#).[29]
- Include bilingual staff or use interpreters in family meetings.[37, 56]
- Provide a transcriber for families who request assistance with writing at family events involving writing.[1]
- Learn about the home language and culture of each family in your classroom.[36, 40] Encourage the child's language and literacy development in their home language and in the language of the school.[7, 56, 59]
- Explain reading practices and invite families to observe reading instruction by another parent or teacher in person or by providing informal videos.[7]
- Consider visiting a family at home to learn more about their family and to build a welcoming, trusting relationship with the school.[36]

Strategy #7

Individualize partnerships for meeting reading challenges.

While the strategies listed earlier in this brief promote opportunities for engagement for all families, there are special considerations when it comes to partnerships with families of children who need literacy instruction beyond to the core instruction provided to all students.[24] It is critical to carefully consider the way that families are approached at each juncture in the reading intervention process to form relationships based on trust and to optimize student success. Families should be viewed as equal partners and empowered to be a part of the problem-solving process, the development of goals and effective interventions, the identification of potential barriers to achievement, and the monitoring of progress.

When navigating the intervention process to increase supports for children who face reading challenges, families may feel confused, frustrated by the limits of their understanding about how to help their child, or dismissed by teachers when expressing concerns about their child's progress.[24, 39] These emotions can be mitigated and potential barriers with families can be bridged in several ways including by taking the time to listen to parents as they discuss concerns[39] and through the proactive use of data to engage with families in conversations about their children's progress.[24]

Both family-child and family-school interactions can be improved when progress data is used proactively and explained in ordinary and accessible language. This allows all parties to develop a mutual understanding of the challenges a child is facing and then to collaborate when problem-solving.[24] Data-based conversations help parents and caregivers to better understand their child's strengths and areas for growth and the grade-level expectations for language and literacy development. Collaborative partnerships between teachers and families can lead to families increasing the amount of time they spend at home in literacy activities with their children.

One additional area where teachers and families can collaborate regarding children who are struggling with reading is by partnering for supporting children's positive self-concept. Children with dyslexia or language or literacy differences may sometimes feel confused, helpless, or inferior to their peers.[13] Collaborative discussions about how to support and foster the development of a positive self-concept for these children is

particularly important and may include ideas such as providing a safe and secure environment for learning in school and at home, helping the child to engage with feelings, broadening learning experiences, and reinforcing the development of autonomy and personal responsibility both in school and at home.

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Involve parents early and often in the intervention process by using data-centered conversations to share student progress and collaborate on the development of goals and interventions.[24]
- Take the time to listen to families and engage their concerns with the progress of their child or their frustrations with school services by asking clarifying questions in a gentle and supportive manner.[39]
- Consider engaging with families in conversations around promoting the healthy development of child's positive self-concept along with their academic growth.[13]
- Avoid the use of educational jargon. Explain data and interventions in ways that all families can understand. Also, ask for feedback about how reading interventions are being experienced by the child and by the family.[24]
- Provide families with ordinary explanations (e.g., using demonstration videos) of intervention activities and strategies so that families can support learning activities at home.[7]

Reflections

Use this tool to reflect on each strategy. Collaborate with colleagues to identify current practices and opportunities for improvement.

Strategy	Glows What can we celebrate about our current work?	Grows What are our next steps?
1. Welcome families as partners.		
2. Promote family-friendly practices.		
3. Share information and tools with families.		
4. Invite families to partner in progress monitoring.		
5. Build accessible and equitable home-school partnerships.		
6. Enhance family partnerships for children learning English.		
7. Individualize partnerships for meeting learning challenges.		

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