



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT

# Partnering with Families to Support Mental Health

Research-based Strategies for Educators

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## Introduction

Families and schools both play a critical role in supporting the mental health of children and adolescents.<sup>10, 38, 39</sup> While individuals can make a difference on their own, when schools and families come together, the impacts can be amplified. In this research brief for educators, you will find five well-researched home-school partnership strategies for supporting students' general, everyday mental health and well-being. We share opportunities that educators and families can use within each strategy so that ALL students experience the benefits of mental health supports at home and school.

## The Five Strategies

1. Encourage supportive relationships at home.
2. Engage families in nurturing teacher-student relationships.
3. Ensure that home and school routines and rituals support students' stability and sense of identity.
4. Cultivate a sense of belonging for students and families within the school community.
5. Promote problem-solving and self-regulation skills at home and school.

For this research brief, we primarily reviewed research on protective factors, promotive factors, and adaptive success in the face of trauma. **Promotive factors** are assets in an individual's life associated with desirable life outcomes at all levels of risk.<sup>52</sup> **Protective factors** are viewed as particularly beneficial when a child is facing high levels of adversity.<sup>52, 53</sup> These factors buffer against other factors in an individual's life that diminish well-being. There is significant overlap between protective and promotive factors, and for the purposes of this research brief, we focus on factors that fall into both categories.

This research brief contains specific, high-impact protective and promotive factors that have been shown to benefit the mental health of children by buffering against trauma. Each of the five strategies in our brief is backed by a wealth of research. For each strategy, we provide a broad overview accompanied by a discussion of associated outcomes for students. We then describe opportunities for partnerships between schools and families to proactively build these factors together into everyday life for children.

## Strategy #1

### Encourage supportive relationships at home.

Supportive and nurturing family relationships serve as a protective factor for children against the negative impacts of adversity and trauma.<sup>9, 52, 53, 95, 98</sup> The research on at-home relationships demonstrates that family relationships defined by nurture and connection help to promote children's self-identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.<sup>41</sup> As such, partnerships between schools and families that celebrate and strengthen relationships between children and their caregivers provide critical support to children with *long-lasting* positive impacts.

Every family looks different, with unique strengths, but all families care for their children, and finding the right way to support that as a school is a worthy task.<sup>23</sup> In Dr. Joyce Epstein's<sup>25</sup> model of parental involvement, she names six key types of family engagement in education, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein describes how schools can come alongside families as partners to support families in their roles. In her first key, parenting, she highlights that all caregivers establish environments to care for their children. It is essential to consider the role of schools in supporting families in parenting. To properly partner with families in this role, schools must first seek to understand and honor the families in their school. After establishing this genuine connection, schools can better work to support relationships at home by creating a welcoming school environment, establishing partnerships that support the family unit, and valuing and celebrating how families care for children. This can also involve schools providing information about child development and what it might look like to support their child at home. Families can and should be active co-creators, sharers, and evaluators of the quality of these informational supports.<sup>6</sup>

Studies have also demonstrated the importance of partnerships focused on supporting parents/caregivers' mental health.<sup>33, 50, 95</sup> When parents and caregivers have support for their own needs (i.e. physical, relational, and mental health needs), they have an increased capacity to form home environments that foster the healthy development of their children. Many formal and informal programs address the home environment by supporting parents and caregivers in tending to relationships with their children at home. Some formal, evidence-based examples include the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P),<sup>81</sup> Strengthening Families Program (SFP),<sup>47</sup> and the Incredible Years program.<sup>100</sup> Awareness and promotion of these programs, or other similar locally developed programs, can help provide support to all families in your community.

Additionally, informal support and community efforts can also strengthen family relationships. For example, research shows that schools can improve children's mental health through efforts to build community among families or address caregiver well-being.<sup>77</sup> School-based parent networks can increase family well-being by providing families with opportunities to connect.<sup>22</sup> Further, schools should recognize that many parents and caregivers may have had negative experiences with school, shaping their views on interacting with their child's school.<sup>40</sup> By

intentionally creating a welcoming environment, emphasizing positive messages and strengths, and promoting open communication and trust, schools can help to support all families.

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS:**

- Adopt a strengths-based approach to family engagement by finding ways to celebrate the role that families play in a child's development and social/emotional well-being.<sup>25</sup> In communications home with families, thank them for the important role they play in their child's well-being. Find opportunities within classroom conversation to help students see and value the many ways their family supports their education and well-being.
- Take inventory of the contact points with families in your school and evaluate whether these interactions are building or eroding relationships. For example, consider a practice of making regular, positive phone calls home as opposed to only calling home when there are concerns.<sup>34</sup>
- Provide time and a process for teachers to learn about the families of their students.<sup>62</sup> Set high expectations of staff to connect with all families. Share [active listening strategies](#)<sup>36</sup> with school staff to use in conversation with families.<sup>54, 93</sup> You can also share this [bookmark](#)<sup>31</sup> with school staff.
- Consider the particular needs of families in [kinship care](#)<sup>68</sup> relationships, ensuring they are connected with the necessary support.
- Share information and resources with families about how to help promote their children's [self-esteem](#)<sup>51</sup> and [self-efficacy](#).<sup>64</sup>
- Strive to ensure that, schoolwide, expectations of students for out-of-school time are not so rigid that families lose quality time together to play, bond, and take care of their mental and physical health. Share supportive messages and examples of family bonding and healthy activities that represent the diversity of families in the community.
- Build [school- or community-based parent networks](#),<sup>77</sup> which can provide a space for families to develop ties, discuss care and support for their child, seek parenting advice, share tangible resources such as clothing, games, and caregiving responsibilities, and share educational information with one another.<sup>22</sup>
- Provide families with a list of mental health resources in your community.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES:

- Find time in your daily routine to listen to your child about how they are feeling and what is on their mind. Use [active listening](#)<sup>36</sup> and [supportive communication](#).<sup>27, 84</sup> If your child is not communicating openly with you on a regular basis, seek ideas and help from other adults who know your child well, or a mental health professional.
- Have fun together as a family.
- Talk to other families about what is and isn't working as you support your child's mental health and well-being.<sup>22</sup> Ask your child's school or other community organizations (like the local library) if there are parent/caregiver networking groups you can join.
- Advocate for the development of a [school-based parent network](#),<sup>77</sup> where families can connect with one another regarding their role as parents and build a strong sense of community.<sup>22, 25</sup>
- Browse resources from [On Our Sleeves](#)<sup>73</sup> on topics such as "How to Deal with Stress" and "How to Help Kids Manage Anxiety."
- Consider participating in a program to strengthen your family's relationships with each other, such as the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P),<sup>81</sup> Strengthening Families Program (SFP),<sup>47</sup> and the Incredible Years program,<sup>100</sup> if these are being hosted in your school or community.

## Strategy #2

### Engage families in nurturing teacher-student relationships.

A trusting and caring relationship with an adult outside of the home has been shown to serve as a protective factor for children.<sup>28, 104</sup> Children spend a significant amount of time in school, which increases the need for children to feel as though they are nurtured and cared for in this setting. Positive relationships between teachers and children lead to positive outcomes, including increased school engagement and academic achievement.<sup>21, 79</sup> However, research demonstrates that teacher-child relationships are not the sole responsibility of schools. Other adults have been shown to influence teacher-child relationships.<sup>103</sup>

The quality of teacher-child relationships is related to children's social functioning, engagement in learning activities, adjustment to school, and academic achievement.<sup>21, 80</sup> Higher quality relationships have been characterized by warmth, empathy, and encouragement of learning, and negative relationships are characterized by qualities such as conflict.<sup>79</sup> It is believed that high-quality teacher-child relationships lead to feelings of emotional security, autonomy, and competence on the part of children, which lead to increased engagement in school and academic achievement. These relationships are also impacted by the wellbeing of the teacher, suggesting that a schoolwide emphasis on teacher wellbeing could yield more positive teacher-student relationships.<sup>90</sup> Much more can be said about how to build these relationships with students, but a few specific strategies include creating opportunities to get to know students and their families personally, creating a social contract with the class, establishing routines and rituals, using positive behavior reinforcement, and positively redirecting negative behavior.<sup>12</sup>

Although teacher-child relationships are often perceived as the sole responsibility of schools, family engagement is an important factor related to these relationships. Wyrick and Rudasil<sup>103</sup> found that children with families that are more engaged in their education (at home or through two-way communication with the school) were more likely to have close relationships with their teachers and relationships that are less likely to be defined by conflict. In essence, children with families that are engaged in two-way communication with the school, feel welcomed by the school, and feel confident in supporting their child's learning at home are more likely to have more positive relationships with their teachers.<sup>48</sup>

More research into the exact relationship between family engagement and teacher-child relationships is needed. However, one theory is that when families feel more connected to a school and confident in their role in supporting their child at home, their positive outlook toward the school is noticed by the child, who then begins to share positive feelings toward their school.<sup>103</sup> This is one way that a trusting relationship between home and school is formed.<sup>29</sup> With trust between home and school built through positive teacher-child relationships, students are more likely to succeed.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS:

- Consider [school-wide professional development](#)<sup>30</sup> that provides school staff with strategies for building positive relationships with students and their families. Share with families what you are doing to promote positive teacher-child relationships.
- Provide staff with ideas [for getting to know students and families](#)<sup>68</sup> more personally.
- Consider implementing restorative practices in your school, such as [restorative circles](#)<sup>96</sup>, which encourage positive communication between students and staff, even in times of conflict.
- Promote the use of [social contracts](#)<sup>88</sup> in classrooms, which provide community-generated principles, rules, and consequences.
- Audit staff/supports in place to support student mental health and positive relationships with students.
- Build relationships with families based on [trust](#)<sup>72</sup> and [two-way communication](#),<sup>99</sup> as this has been shown to increase students' relationships with teachers.<sup>103</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES:

- Ask your child about positive relationships they are making with teachers, school counselors, and administrators.<sup>103</sup>
- Help your child know how to interact with teachers when frustrated. Try to build positive relationships with teachers and avoid openly criticizing your children's school or teachers, as this can impact their relationships and their learning.<sup>44, 45</sup> Children notice how their family interacts with the school and these perceptions contribute to their academic and social self-efficacy, motivation for learning, and self-regulation.<sup>40</sup>
- Advocate for school-wide practices that support positive teacher-student relationships, including restorative practices.
- Consider adopting [restorative practices at home](#)<sup>92</sup> such as agreements for how you will show respect for one another on a daily basis.



## Strategy #3

### Ensure that home and school routines and rituals support students' stability and sense of identity.

Schools and families can work together to establish routines and rituals that provide children with stability and a sense that they are part of a cohesive, supportive community. Routines are practices that create structure and stability, whereas rituals go a step further to build culture and community because of the special meaning placed on the activity.<sup>83, 89</sup> Routines occur consistently on a day-to-day basis. Rituals tend to occur less frequently, though they carry a greater sense of meaning and tradition. Both routines and rituals have been shown to serve as a protective factor for children, buffering against the impacts of trauma and promoting overall well-being and family health.<sup>19, 46, 63</sup>

While there is a clear and obvious relationship between large-scale stressors (i.e., divorce, death, job loss, etc.) and their impact on children's psychological functioning, research has *also* demonstrated that children who are repeatedly exposed to minor, frequent stressors, such as those that come from daily hassles, are more likely to develop psychological symptoms that lead to internalizing and externalizing behaviors.<sup>8, 42</sup> Some examples of daily stressors for children and adolescents include witnessing arguments among family members, arguments with siblings and peers, and having difficulties with homework and schoolwork.<sup>43</sup>

Fortunately, research points to routines and rituals in day-to-day life, both at home and in school, as protective factors against these stressors. Specifically, children who experience a high frequency of daily stressors, but more daily routines, report better psychological functioning than those who experience a high frequency of daily stressors with fewer daily routines.<sup>8</sup> Rituals help with a sense of belonging (which is the focus of our fourth strategy in this research brief) and personal identity development.<sup>26</sup>

Collaboration between schools, families, and community partners in support of routines and rituals should recognize and reflect the diverse cultural traditions of families and school staff. Schools can prioritize a strengths-based home-to-school approach for understanding and incorporating families' routines and rituals into the school setting.<sup>55</sup> This approach sees families as equal partners, sharing their valuable expertise, cultural traditions, and family routines with schools and other families to enhance sense of community and increase student success. This approach provides opportunities for the school community to come alongside students and families to build culturally responsive routines and participate in existing traditions and rituals while also generating new ones within the school.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS:

- Encourage school-wide and classroom-wide routines and procedures, such as those encouraged by a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports ([PBIS](#)) framework,<sup>66</sup> that help to establish a sense of security and routine for students. Ensure behavior interventions are implemented in a fair, unbiased, and culturally relevant way so that all students benefit. Educators should take [Implicit Association Tests](#) to better understand their biases and work to minimize their effects.
- Use [The Ohio State University's PBIS Family Engagement Rubrics](#)<sup>67</sup> as a school building team to assess how families could be engaged more deeply in establishing and supporting positive behavior routines. Also, consider sharing information from [PBIS Brochures or PowerPoint Presentations with families](#).<sup>70</sup>
- Support traditions celebrated by students and families in your community, including spiritual/religious traditions, family traditions, and holiday traditions. Share with families about the connection between routines, rituals, and mental well-being.
- Consider forming new rituals, routines, and traditions [in your school](#)<sup>82</sup> that promote a sense of belonging and well-being.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES:

- Establish [household routines](#)<sup>5</sup> that promote a sense of structure, responsibility, and fun. This can be anything from “Taco Tuesday” to having your kids do a silly dance or sing a song while they wash their hands when they get home from school. Routines may differ for [elementary](#)<sup>74</sup>, [middle](#)<sup>24</sup>, and [high school](#)<sup>35</sup> students.
- Look for opportunities to promote or celebrate *school* rituals and traditions with your children.
- Share the special traditions and rituals that are important to your family or community with the school. Encourage the school to support the sharing of these valuable traditions.

## Strategy #4

### Cultivate a sense of belonging for students and families within the school community.

The extent to which children experience a strong sense of belonging in their school community has been identified as a protective factor for children, with significant and far-reaching benefits, serving as a buffer against trauma. This is especially true for adolescents, an age group with specific developmental needs and challenges that seem particularly sensitive to this sense of identification with their school.<sup>1</sup> School belonging has been popularly defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment".<sup>32</sup> Overall, definitions of school belonging share three main components: an emphasis on relationships or experiences within school, a specific focus on relationships between children and their teachers, and children's overarching feelings toward school.<sup>1</sup>

Academically, the outcomes of a strong sense of school belonging include higher levels of academic adjustment, stronger academic motivation, decreased absenteeism, higher school completion, less school misconduct, and more positive attitudes towards learning.<sup>1, 65, 76</sup> The social and psychological outcomes associated with high levels of school belonging are equally important. It is positively associated with happiness, adjustment, and self-esteem and negatively associated with fighting, bullying, emotional distress, and risky behaviors, including substance use. With all the research supporting positive academic, social, and psychological outcomes associated with school belonging, the question to consider is, how can a school partner with families to ensure that ALL students feel like they belong?

Research has demonstrated that teacher and familial support are two factors that are most strongly linked to an individual's sense of school belonging—even more than peer support.<sup>1</sup> If children feel that their teachers care and are there to help them with problems they are experiencing, they are more likely to have a sense of school belonging. Interestingly, research also demonstrates that a similar sense of support from their families contributes to a child's school belonging. Factors such as the family relationship quality,<sup>9, 37, 60, 86, 91, 102</sup> family support for learning,<sup>3, 78</sup> social support from families,<sup>98</sup> and familial communication<sup>7, 101</sup> have all been demonstrated to contribute to school belonging.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS:

- Whenever possible, open up two-way communication channels with families, taking the time to solicit their perspective and expertise on their child while also sharing relevant, research-based strategies and support for ways they can support their child at their current developmental level.<sup>48, 60</sup>
- Regularly and proactively share with families how their child appears to be doing socially and emotionally, taking note of any abnormal behaviors or changes in mood.
- Consider implementing a school-based intervention/program that promotes school belonging and build family engagement into the programming. Some examples include: [Caring School Community](#),<sup>20</sup> [I Can Problem Solve](#),<sup>13</sup> [Lions Quest](#),<sup>49</sup> and [Raising Healthy Children](#).<sup>14</sup>
- Support students through scaffolded learning and praise for their behavior and academic work.
- Promote engagement in extracurricular activities to all children and families, as this has been shown to increase students' sense of school belonging.<sup>87</sup>
- Provide opportunities for students and their families to provide feedback on the quality and inclusivity of the school environment, and as you review the feedback, pay close attention to the perceptions and experiences of historically marginalized groups of students and families.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES:

- Continue to engage in your child's education at home through conversation and observation of what they are learning and achieving. This plays an important role in their sense of school belonging and academic achievement.<sup>86</sup> Support can look like taking the time to ask about schoolwork, relationships with peers, and relationships with teachers.
- Advocate for your school community to emphasize the development of positive teacher-child relationships.<sup>7, 98</sup> This can be done by advocating for schools to promote a [whole-child](#)<sup>69</sup> approach to education and restorative practices.
- Encourage your child's participation in extracurricular activities, which is tied to a stronger sense of school belonging.<sup>87</sup>

## Strategy #5

### Promote problem solving and self-regulation skills at home and school.

Problem solving and self-regulation skills, sometimes called executive functions, include the ability to focus, make plans, work toward goals, regulate behaviors and emotions, adapt to challenges, and solve problems.<sup>4, 11</sup> These skills are essential for children and young adults, allowing them to adapt to and overcome challenges throughout life.<sup>53</sup> However, one factor that has been shown to negatively impact problem solving and self-regulation is Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),<sup>61, 75</sup> which can occur in school, at home, or out in the community. ACE's negative impact on problem solving and self-regulation has been shown to affect children's long-term academic achievement and mental health. Fortunately, these skills can be reinforced, developed, and enhanced over time through practice and partnership between schools and families.<sup>16</sup>

Some high-impact methods to develop problem solving and self-regulation include games and physical activities, music and the arts, and goal-setting.<sup>16</sup> The specific activities that should be focused on will change depending on the age and developmental level of the child. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University<sup>16</sup> generated several activity guides to support problem solving and self-regulation from infancy to adolescence. These guides can be used by schools and families. Schools can integrate these through activities and events planned for families, existing educational practices including [homework](#),<sup>15</sup> and strategies shared with families for use at home. They can also ask families about what strategies they are already using at home.

Two other key areas that have been associated with problem solving and self-regulation include healthy sleep patterns<sup>94</sup> and mindfulness activities.<sup>85</sup> These two areas present additional opportunities for collaboration between school and home. Schools can implement mindfulness practices throughout the school day and share with families how to build them into their family life. Additionally, schools can emphasize to students and families the importance of sleep, the range of sleep needs across human development, and how healthy sleep patterns can lead to improved academic achievement and mental and emotional well-being.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SCHOOLS:

- Review the [guides](#)<sup>16</sup> developed by The Center on the Developing Child, which provide developmentally-appropriate activities to enhance problem solving and self-regulation (executive functions). Also, review the [suggestions](#)<sup>57</sup> for promoting these skills from Mind in the Making and associated [resources](#).<sup>56</sup>
- Consider implementing a mindfulness practice in your school and collaborate with families to encourage mindfulness practices at home.<sup>85</sup> You can utilize strategies from [Mindful Schools](#)<sup>58</sup> such as mindful breathing.
- Talk with students and families about the importance of [establishing healthy sleep patterns](#).<sup>17, 94</sup>
- Consider the impact that the school's start time is having on children's ability to receive sufficient sleep.<sup>97</sup> Studies have shown that later start times are associated with more sleep and fewer mental health- and substance use-related issues.
- Use text messaging or other similar convenient and brief forms of communication to share developmentally appropriate ideas with families<sup>2</sup> about supporting their child's problem solving and self-regulation.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES:

- Review the [Skill-Building Opportunities](#)<sup>56</sup> from Mind in the Making, which provide support to parents/caregivers according to specific childhood concerns and promote problem solving and self-regulation.
- Model and encourage [healthy sleeping habits](#)<sup>17</sup>, such as setting a regular bedtime and dimming the lights in the evening.<sup>94</sup> Consider implementing a family-wide media curfew, which will promote healthier sleep habits.<sup>18</sup>
- Use mindfulness practices at home.<sup>85</sup> Check out resources from the [Mindfulness for Kids](#)<sup>59</sup> section from Mindful.org for specific strategies, resources, and support.
- Ask teachers and other school staff if they currently infuse problem solving and self-regulation skills in their classrooms. For example, do they use mindfulness activities?

## Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify currently aligned practices and opportunities for improvement.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Glows</b> What can we celebrate about our current work?	<b>Grows</b> What are our next steps?
1. Encourage supportive relationships at home.		
2. Engage families in nurturing teacher-student relationships.		
3. Ensure that home and school routines and rituals support students' stability and sense of identity.		
4. Cultivate a sense of belonging for students and families within the school community.		
5. Promote problem solving and self-regulation skills at home and school.		

## Resource List

### Strategy 1: Encourage Supportive Relationships at Home

- [The “LAFF” Don’t “CRY” Strategy- Active Listening](#)
- [Collaborative Communication Bookmarks](#)
- [Self-Esteem Information for Families | Spanish](#)
- [Self-Efficacy Information for Families](#)
- [School-Based Parent Networks](#)
- [Active Listening Strategies | Spanish](#)
- [Supportive Communication with Children](#)

### Strategy 2: Engage Families in Nurturing Teacher-Student Relationships

- [Trauma-Informed Professional Development Example](#)
- [Example of How to Get to Know Families More Personally](#)
- [Restorative Circles](#)
- [Social Contracts](#)
- [Schools Building Trust with Families](#)
- [Two-Way Communication and Family Engagement](#)
- [Mental Wellness Tools from On Our Sleeves](#)
- [Restorative Practices at Home](#)

### Strategy 3: Ensure that Home and School Routines and Rituals Support Students’ Stability and Sense of Identity

- [Ohio Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#)
- [Implicit Association Tests](#)
- [Ohio PBIS Family Engagement Rubrics](#)
- [Information for Families about PBIS](#)
- [Routines and Rituals in Schools](#)
- [Household Routines](#)
- [Elementary School Home Routines](#)
- [Middle School Home Routines](#)
- [High School Home Routines](#)

### Strategy 4: Cultivate a Sense of Belonging for Students and Families within the School Community

- [Caring School Community Program](#)
- [I Can Problem Solve Program](#)
- [Lions Quest Program](#)
- [Raising Healthy Children Program](#)
- [Family Engagement Toolkit for Ohio’s Whole Child Framework](#)



## **Strategy 5: Promote Problem-Solving and Self-Regulation Skills at Home and School**

- [TIPS: Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork](#)
- [Harvard's Guide for Enhancing Executive Function Skills](#)
- [Mind in the Making: 7 Essential Life Skills](#)
- [Mind in the Making: Skill-Building Tips](#)
- [Mindful Schools](#)
- [CDC Guide on Sleep](#)
- [Mindfulness Guide for Families](#)

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