

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Children who are successful in school have many healthy interconnections between family, school, and community. Family partnership in the learning process strengthens learning at home and is directly linked back to positive child outcomes at school. Programs can demonstrate that they value family involvement in a variety of ways - from partnering with families and establishing child development goals to sharing anecdotes of children's learning.

Communication and strong relationships are the keys to a successful partnership. The purpose of frequent and informal interactions is to strengthen the connections between home and school. Virtual meetings are allowable if programs plan carefully to ensure plentiful opportunities for families to see their child in the classroom space and the family has equitable means for access (i.e., language of choice, technology is accessible). Staff should use an interested and unhurried manner when talking with families. Staff and families should update one another about children's recent home experiences and preschool activities through:

- Conversations during drop-off and pick-up times;
- Written notes;
- Telephone conversations; and
- Electronic communications.

Ideas for family involvement activities may include:

- Sharing special interests with children, such as fishing, photography, or sewing;
- Sharing cultural and linguistic practices and helping to ensure that the classroom is a welcoming, inclusive environment;
- Providing recyclables and helping to make play materials;
- Logging books taken/returned from a lending library;
- Creating displays of child-initiated works;
- Attending family meetings, workshops, and serving on the Family Participation Group and/or the Great Start Collaborative School Readiness Advisory Committee representing GSRP;
- Sharing resources and information on how to support and advocate for your child;
- Participate in the periodic formal data analysis meetings to analyze program quality, curriculum and child outcome data;
- Meeting with teachers to set developmental goals and discuss children's progress;
- Supporting children's learning at home; and
- Reading or contributing to a family newsletter.

Staff support family involvement at group or family meetings by:

- Providing child care;
- Arranging transportation;
- Scheduling events at times convenient for families and/or offering a virtual option for participation;

- Providing interpretation and translation in language(s) of choice.
- Orienting families to the depth and breadth of the role of families at meetings;
- Making reminder phone calls;
- Distributing agendas or other materials ahead of time;
- Supporting parent-to-parent or family-to-family communication;
- Addressing needs of non-custodial parents/families;
- Addressing language, culture, and work barriers; and
- Demonstrating that family's contributions are valued by following up appropriately.

Staff members support family partnerships in the classroom when:

- A plan that outlines the roles of classroom volunteers is included in the GSRP Family Handbook. The plan identifies the leader (e.g., teacher, parent liaison, Early Childhood Specialist (ECS)) who will provide ongoing support to volunteers and reinforce how they help advance children's learning;
- Families are invited and welcomed by staff;
- Worthy classroom experiences are offered to families, for example, assisting in the implementation of the daily routine with children versus assigning volunteer minor roles such as wiping tables or cutting out shapes. For example, volunteers might support children at a learning area during choice time or by reading aloud to children;
- Volunteer opportunities are announced to families ahead of time;
- Responsibilities are offered that match volunteer interests, skills, schedules and facilitate children's development;
- Opportunities draw on families' experiences, language and cultural practices; and
- Families are invited to participate in special events such as field trips or program evaluation efforts.

Program Requirements

Advisory Committees

Legislation requires GSRP sites to provide for active and continuous participation of families of enrolled children. A high-quality GSRP supports families as active decision makers, both developing and implementing training to instill confidence in families as active members of an advisory committee.

Each Intermediate School District (ISD) is also required to have GSRP family representation on the regional Great Start Collaborative (GSC) Parent Coalition; working with other committed families to support early childhood practices in the community. These GSRP families, in turn, act as liaisons to local family participation groups, sharing ideas and activities in person, virtually or through emailed reports. Refer to the Intermediate School District Administration of GSRP section of this manual for more information on advisory committees.

Another opportunity involves participation in a school readiness advisory committee convened as a workgroup of the GSC that provides for the involvement of classroom teachers, parents or guardians of program participants, and community,

volunteer, and social service agencies and organizations. The advisory committee annually reviews and makes recommendations regarding the GSRP components. The advisory committee also makes recommendations to the GSC regarding other community services designed to improve all children's school readiness.

Family Contacts

The purpose of home visits and family conferences are to involve families in the children's education at school and to help them provide educational experiences for the children at home. Center-Based programs require a minimum of four family contacts per year, preferably two home visits and two family conferences. When the 2+2 pattern is impossible for a particular family, other arrangements should be made to complete the four required contacts. If a family prefers the visit not take place in the home, a mutual location may be chosen such as a park, restaurant, or a parent's workplace, or the visit may be conducted virtually. During home visits and family conferences, staff:

- Seek input from families about the program and its relationship to the child's development;
- Seek input from families about how they are supporting the child's development at home;
- Partner with families in setting appropriate child development goals;
- Assist families in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way to implement child development strategies at home that fit into normal routines. For example, color naming or classification while sorting freshly laundered socks, practicing counting with meaning when children serve themselves (e.g., carrots/crackers/raisins), practicing writing and symbol identification when children sign their names on a birthday card, etc. (sending home worksheets is not appropriate);
- Work together with families to write referrals for suspected or diagnosed disabilities or other developmental needs of the child. After the visit, staff members follow up by working with the Early Childhood Specialist, district, and families to locate and access special education services needed by the child;
- Work together with families to write and follow up on referrals for needed family services. For example, staff can provide documentation for families to share with providers, staff can make an initial phone call to help arrange an appointment, staff can help families find child care or transportation so they can use community resources; and
- Document each home visit and family conference.

Home Visit General Guidelines

Home visits are planned to last at least 60 minutes, exclusive of travel time, and include both the child and child's family. Many programs determine that credentialed Associate Teachers may complete home visits. Programs should consider providing support to multilingual families during home visits. Where Lead Teachers and Associate Teachers complete individual home visits, each adult often makes home visits with the children that they consistently work with in the classroom, e.g., children in their small group/child planning group/recall group. Where staff safety is a concern, teaching teams may complete home visits in pairs.

Itineraries should be distributed to pertinent staff who should know of the home visitor's location(s). A cell phone should be carried and valuables should be locked in the trunk before arriving at the destination.

It is strongly recommended that the **initial home visit** occur at the child's home or mutually agreed upon location, after the child is enrolled, but before the child begins the classroom program. The main purpose of the initial visit is to create a foundation for the beginning of a positive partnership between home and school. It is designed to ease the transition into GSRP for the child and family. Activities might include:

- Taking photos of family and child, family pet(s), home, etc.;
- Leaving photos of staff and classroom;
- Discussing transportation to and from the program;
- Discussing child/family's interests and hobbies;
- Discussing the importance of family involvement and the various opportunities;
- Sharing program philosophy and curriculum information;
- Reviewing results of developmental screening;
- Discussing goals families have for their child for the year;
- Generating a list of possible activities/discussion topics for the next home visit; and
- Discussing the required enrollment paperwork.

Upon arrival, appropriate introductions are made, and other family members are included in conversation. The family is asked for suggestions for an appropriate area within the home to meet. Staff members partner with the family to modify the environment as necessary (e.g., distractions such as a baby crying, television, pets, etc.)

Second and subsequent visits are designed around the individual child and needs of the family. Staff should prepare by scheduling visits one week to ten days in advance, at convenient times for families, and allow for travel time between appointments. The staff member and family should agree upon beginning and ending times for the visit and discuss what to expect during the visit. The purpose of the visit should be reviewed. Throughout the visit, staff looks for opportunities to encourage families to share their perspective and ideas. The home visit should be personalized to meet the individual needs of each child and family by:

- Eliciting feedback from families regarding the child's interests, concerns, and progress, both at home and in the program;
- Sharing information about community resources;
- Completing any necessary referral forms together during the visit;
- Reinforcing positive parenting;
- Exchanging information about the curriculum and its relationship to the child's development;
- Updating each other about the child's recent experiences;
- Exchanging ideas and materials to support the child's learning and social development at home;

- Engaging the family and child to model a teaching activity (utilizing home materials whenever possible) and sharing learning goals and outcomes of the activity; and
- Allowing time throughout the visit for the family to ask questions and/or voice concerns.

To conclude, the visit is summarized with the family, information is provided about future family activities and staff availability for phone calls and questions. Completed documentation of the visit includes a narrative description of the visit, the date, language preference, and the signatures of both the visiting staff member and the family member.

Family Conferences

Family conferences should be held in the fall and spring, and when requested by families. Conferences are scheduled to meet the mutual needs of families and staff and planned to last a minimum of 45 minutes. This may result in some conferences being held outside of regular work hours.

Staff members use a family friendly report from the approved child assessment tool and discuss the progress of the child across domains, goals for continuous progress, and any additional support which may be necessary. Developmental information should be exchanged in depth and in a relaxed, positive manner. Anecdotal observations and samples of child-initiated work strengthen families' understanding of their child's development. Staff share curriculum strategies for supporting children's development and discuss with families' ways that they can support learning at home using household materials and within ordinary household routines. Staff invite observations and answer questions from families about the program. The conference concludes with ways the family can participate in the program. Staff availability for phone calls is reinforced. Completed documentation of the conference includes a narrative description of the conference, the date, and the signatures of both the staff member(s) and the family.