



Expanded Learning Opportunities: **Parent/Family Engagement**

EC488

**PARTICIPANT
GUIDE**

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Lesson Goal

Children and youth in out-of-school settings reach their full potential as a result of positive youth/adult interactions, purposeful learning experiences, and safe environments.

Nebraska School-Age and Youth Development Core Competencies

Core Knowledge Area: Relationships

- **1.12** Maintains an open and cooperative relationship with each family and is responsive to the family's concerns and interests.
- **2.13** Values families as active decision makers and builds on families' strengths.

Core Knowledge Area: Growth and Development

- **1.13** Creates positive relationships with the families of youth.
- **2.13** Engages families as partners in the care and education of youth.

Learner Objectives

By completing this lesson, you will:

- recognize the benefits and barriers of parent/family engagement.
- identify engagement strategies.

- develop and implement an action plan for parent/family engagement.

>> **Introduction**

Successful and well-designed out-of-school programs have a strong foundation of parental support and family engagement. Families are key partners in education and contribute to the success of children's learning experiences. Implementing parent/family engagement strategies into out-of-school programs will benefit the program, youth workers, parents, and most important, the youth participants.

>> **The Power of Engagement**

Parent/family engagement is associated with improved program outcomes, greater involvement in school events, social and academic growth in youth, an increase in family assistance with children's homework, and improved relationships between parents and children (Harris & Wimer, 2004; Intercultural Center for Research in Education & National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005; Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck & Coffey, 2006). Parents also benefit from supporting their children's learning through engagement. According to Hill and Taylor (2004), parents who are engaged increase their skill set and knowledge base, which makes them better equipped to help their children.



> > **Barriers to Engagement**

Lack of time may be a real barrier for parent/family engagement. Often, parents enroll children in out-of-school programs because of their schedules and work commitments. Limited engagement also may be attributed to transportation issues, caring for other children or adults, and involvement with other activities.

Out-of-school program workers should consider whether the program environment is welcoming to parents and if parents are comfortable and familiar with other parents. How do cultural or language barriers hinder parent and family engagement? How does staff training assist youth workers in engaging parents and families? Additional barriers may be related to out-of-school program budgets and financial constraints, which can limit support for parent/family engagement programs.

> > **A Framework for Involvement**

Author Joyce L. Epstein (2001) describes a useful parent involvement framework. The framework components include: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Epstein suggests:

- assisting families with strategies for guiding youth and ways parents can support their children's learning at home.
- establishing an easy to use, two-way communication system so youth workers can share information, and parents can connect, share, and ask questions.
- involving parents as volunteers in the program.
- incorporating meaningful learning activities at home for parents and children.
- including parents in the decision-making process.
- having parents serve as advocates for the program, collaborating and establishing partnerships with businesses/agencies that will strengthen the educational efforts of the program.

> > **Strategies for Engagement**

Consider the following promising practices to increase and promote parent/family engagement in out-of-school programs:

Action Plan Make parent/family engagement a priority. Create a checklist, policies, or a sustainable action plan that shows a commitment to parent/family engagement. Programs that are intentional in developing engagement

strategies will likely be more successful at engaging families.

Welcoming Environment A friendly smile, a positive attitude, and greeting parents at the door by name will help them feel welcome, comfortable, and boost parent engagement. Ask parents how their day is going. Create a welcome packet, organize a parent/family orientation or open house, and provide opportunities (such as a family night) for parents and staff to socialize with each other and build strong relationships.

Communication Positive, frequent, and open communication between youth workers and families is important. Visit with parents during pickup times, sharing positive news about their child and the program. Use newsletters, calendars, and emails. Post program information and videos/photos (with permission) through social media and websites to keep parents connected and engaged. If possible, use interpreter services and offer materials in other languages to reduce language barriers that may limit communication and engagement.

Family Support Engage parents in out-of-school programs by listening to their needs and concerns, and by providing special opportunities for their families. Offer parent-oriented educational experiences that address the needs and interests of families (how to help children with homework, parenting, job skills training, technology skills, college preparation, or English as a second language). Host/invite community agencies that provide special services for families. By helping to meet families' needs, parents will be engaged and appreciative of the out-of-school program.

Volunteer Opportunities Post volunteer opportunities and provide many invitations that welcome parents to be volunteers. Volunteering doesn't have to require a parent to be on-site. Parents may be interested in contributing to the newsletter, creating videos, or sharing program success stories with community groups. Experienced parents may also serve as mentors to new families. Find out the skills and strengths of parents and invite them to share. Most important, make volunteering fun so parents are excited to volunteer again!

Learning Opportunities at Home Involve parents in learning activities at home with their children to increase engagement in their child's education and pique their interest in the program. Offer simple, short, no-cost activities or experiences that will tie in with their current learning activities in the out-of-school program. Create a monthly calendar of at-home activities or provide a

healthy recipe of the month to try at home. Did youth participants enjoy a specific game/activity? Have youth teach family members the activity at home.

Decision-Making Roles/Advocacy Create opportunities for parents to serve as active decision makers and partners in the program. Establish a parent advisory committee to give input for the program direction, to make decisions, and to increase ownership and leadership in the program. Provide a parent suggestion box or host parent forums to collect feedback. Parents can serve as ambassadors for the program, helping with recruitment and sustaining participants. They can serve as advocates for their own children, as well as others, and help build community connections that will expand learning opportunities.

Professional Development Professional development opportunities for youth workers that are aimed at parent and family engagement are often overlooked. The capacity of staff to work with families can develop and grow through training and will ultimately benefit the program. Identify a staff member with great parent engagement skills to serve as a mentor for other youth workers. Create a daily checklist for youth workers to keep parent engagement a top priority. When hiring, be purposeful in employing youth workers with skills and abilities in family relationship building.

Parent Recognition Don't forget to recognize, praise, and thank parents for their involvement and engagement in the program. Recognition is important and may encourage more volunteer participation. Highlight parents in newsletters, post photos of parents who are volunteering, and host parent appreciation nights, involving youth in planning a special celebration.

Conclusion

When families are active partners in out-of-school educational time, learning opportunities for youth are expanded and youth outcomes are positively affected. Engagement is a process that takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. A great way to get started is to observe your out-of-school program and seek parent and youth worker input and ideas to identify new engagement strategies.

Resources

Build the Out-of-School Time Network. *Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Programs Toolkit: Tools to Strengthen After School and Youth Programs by Increasing Family Involvement*. Boston, MA.: BOSTnet.

Epstein, J. (2001). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships. Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

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Kakli, Z., Kreider, H., Little, P., Buck, T., & Coffey, M. (2006). *Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After-School*. Harvard Family Research Project and Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet).

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