



Educator Practice Guide

Engaging families during the pre-K to kindergarten transition

What

Children's early school experiences shape their learning in future years. The transition from pre-kindergarten, or pre-K, to kindergarten is particularly important. This critical time builds the foundation for children's academic, behavioral and social-emotional skills, as well as families' relationships with their child's teachers for years to come.

Parent engagement in pre-K, including participating in learning activities at home and collaborating with their child's teacher, plays a significant role in their overall school readiness and success. It is essential for families and educators to work together consistently and proactively to support students as they navigate this transition.

Family-school connections are especially important in easing anxiety and supporting students during times of uncertainty, such as those caused by the pandemic.

HOW DO WE DEFINE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT?

Family engagement has many dimensions and is used interchangeably with parent engagement. It comprises the different ways parents are involved with their child's learning and academic life, as well as the ways parents communicate and collaborate with their child's teacher.

- **Home-based involvement:** Parent engagement in learning activities at home.
- **School-based involvement:** Parent participation in functions at school.
- **Home-school conferencing:** Parent-teacher communication about children's successes and challenges.
- **Structural communication:** Formal communication focused on school practices or information.
- **Relational communication:** Communications focused on interpersonal dynamics, such as trust.

So What

Parents are in a unique position to provide consistent stimulation and support for children's learning during the pre-K to kindergarten transition. Our research uncovers how family engagement changes over time, and how this looks in different types of communities.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

IN A NUTSHELL

1. The way parents support their child's early learning as they transition to kindergarten changes over time.
2. There are significant differences in parent engagement practices in rural versus urban communities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Family engagement at home is strong and increases as children progress from pre-K through kindergarten.
- Parents' engagement at school and communication with teachers increases during pre-K, but then tends to decrease through the end of kindergarten.
- Parents from urban communities tend to have higher engagement levels than families in rural communities.
- Parents living in rural communities tend to engage in home learning experiences at lower rates than parents in urban areas, and communication with teachers is less for rural than urban families.
- Rural communities may face unique challenges that contribute to the overall differences in family engagement, such as:
 - › Fewer opportunities to build family-school partnerships due to the distance between home and school, and
 - › Lack of reliable and efficient Internet to access web-based communication.

Now What



SCHOOL-BASED ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

There are many ways to boost family engagement at school during the crucial period between pre-K and kindergarten.

Try these **school-based** engagement practices:

- Make efforts to involve parents in decision-making regarding their child's learning goals.
- Create opportunities for personal contact and regular communication with parents.
 - › If local health advisories permit, encourage parents to visit school and provide opportunities for face-to-face contact and communication, such as attending conferences and volunteering in the classroom.



- › When appropriate, use socially-distant forms of communication, such as emailing and having Zoom chats with parents to keep them engaged with what’s happening at school. If home internet is a concern, use text messages to share updates or ask for their help.
- › Maintain strong home-school communication with parents whose children are participating in remote learning and may feel less connected to school. Ask for their ideas and input about what works for them to be engaged.
- Be proactive and communicate frequently with parents.
 - › Send welcoming messages, share school information and practices, offer policy guidelines on parent engagement, and exchange notes between home and school with ideas or concerns about the child’s progress at school.
- Help parents increase their knowledge of upcoming events at school.
 - › If possible, consider holding events where parents already are, such as housing complexes, churches and local businesses.
 - › Partner with local employers and other community-based organizations to involve parents in the school.
- Make sure all parents have access to support and resources from school, particularly rural families.
- Bring school home!
 - › Send home information with photos and examples in multiple languages about school happenings.
 - › Simplify ways for parents to return information and photos from home.

HOME-BASED ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

While high-quality experiences in the classroom are important, our research is finding that providing positive learning opportunities at home is key to setting a child on a positive trajectory.

Encourage parents to use these home-based engagement practices:

- Read books with their child frequently and carve out time to learn new skills at home.
 - › Teachers can offer parents suggestions on how to encourage learning at home, as well as online or local resources to support their child’s learning.
- Be available to monitor their child with homework.
 - › Teachers can make efforts to assign homework that connects home to school, make homework materials available in the language spoken at home and offer suggestions on structuring and supporting homework time, which is different than “helping.”
- Talk to their child about school and ask open-ended questions to encourage conversation.
 - › Teachers can suggest specific ways parents can talk about school with their child.



This practice guide is based on an Early Learning Network study exploring the impact of time and geographic context on family engagement through the pre-K to kindergarten transition. The research findings were published in the Early Childhood Education Journal. To learn more, the full research paper is available online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-01008-5>.