

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Children who are successful in school have many healthy interconnections between family, school, and community. Parent/family involvement 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 parent/family involvement in a variety of ways - from partnering with parents/families to establish child development goals to sharing anecdotes of children's learning.

Communication and strong relationships are the keys to successful parent/family involvement. The purpose of frequent and informal interactions is to strengthen the connections between home and school. Virtual meetings are allowable as long as programs plan carefully to ensure plentiful opportunities for parents/families to see their child in the classroom space are also occurring. Staff should use an interested and unhurried manner when talking with parents/families. Staff and parents/families should update one another about children's recent home experiences and preschool activities through:

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

Ideas for parent/family involvement activities include:

- Sharing special interests with children, such as fishing, photography, or sewing;
- Providing recyclables and helping to make play materials;
- Logging books taken/returned from a lending library;
- Creating displays of child-initiated works;
- Attending parent/family meetings, workshops, and serving on the family participation group and/or the Great Start Collaborative School Readiness Advisory Committee representing Strong Beginnings;
- Participate in the periodic formal data analysis meeting to analyze program quality 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 parent/family newsletter.

Teaching staff and/or Family Liaisons support parent/family involvement at group or parent/family meetings by:

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

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

Staff members support parent/family involvement in the classroom when:

- A plan that outlines the roles of classroom volunteers is included in the Strong Beginnings Parent Handbook. The plan identifies the leader (e.g., teacher, Family Liaison, ECS) who will provide ongoing support to volunteers and reinforce how they help advance children's learning;
- A parent's presence (mother, father, or guardian) is invited and welcomed by staff;
- Worthy classroom experiences are offered to parents/families, for example, assisting in the implementation of the daily routine with children versus assigning parents' 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 parents/families ahead of time;
- Responsibilities are offered that match volunteer's interests, skills, schedules and facilitate children's development; and
- Parents/families are invited to participate in special events such as field trips or program evaluation efforts.

Program Requirements

Family Participation Groups

Strong Beginnings sites must provide for active and continuous participation of parents/families of enrolled children. A high-quality Strong Beginnings program supports parents/families as active decision makers by developing and implementing training to instill confidence in parents/families as active members of an advisory committee.

Each Strong Beginnings site must have a Family Participation group. Parents in Strong Beginnings must be given the opportunity to meet with parents in GSRP and, optionally, other preschool programs at the Strong Beginnings site, as well as staff members to provide opportunities for the engagement of families, open communication, family advocacy and integration of family input/voice. This, or another group including parents, may also serve as the site Data Analysis Team. More information on the Family Participation Group and the Data Analysis Team purposes and requirements is included in Section 3: ISD Administration of Strong Beginnings.

Each Intermediate School District (ISD) is also required to have Strong Beginnings parent/family representation on the regional Great Start Collaborative (GSC) Parent Coalition; working with other committed parents/families to support early childhood practices in the community. These Strong Beginnings parents/families, in turn, act as liaisons to local parent facilitation groups, sharing ideas and activities in person, virtually or through emailed reports. A proportional representation of parents/families from Strong Beginnings and GSRP should be included in these activities. Refer to the Intermediate School District Administration of Strong Beginnings 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 three-and four-year-old program participants, and community, volunteer, and social service agencies and organizations. The advisory committee annually reviews and makes recommendations regarding the Strong Beginnings and 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 by Early Childhood Teaching Staff

The purpose of home visits and parent-teacher 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 by early childhood teaching staff, preferably two home visits and two parent-teacher 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 parent/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 parent/teacher conferences, staff:

- Seek input from parents/families about the program and its relationship to the child's development;
- Seek input from parents/families about how they are supporting the child's development at home;
- Partner with parents/families in setting appropriate child development goals;
- Assist parents/families to implement child development strategies for home which fit into normal family routines. For example, color naming or classification while sorting freshly laundered socks, practicing counting with meaning when children serve themselves food (e.g., carrots/crackers/raisins), talking about shapes of different foods children are eating (e.g. some cookies, crackers), etc. (sending home worksheets is not appropriate);
- Work together with parents/families and Family Liaisons/School Social Workers as appropriate 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 parents to locate and access special education services needed by the child;

- Assist as appropriate Family Liaisons in working together with parents to write and follow up on referrals for needed family services. For example, staff can provide documentation for parents to share with providers, staff can make an initial phone call to help arrange an appointment, staff can help parents/families find child care or transportation so they can use community resources (When these activities are undertaken primarily by the Family Liaison there should be appropriate communication with and support from the classroom teacher); and
- Document each home visit and parent/teacher 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 parent(s). Many programs determine that credentialed Associate Teachers may complete 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. One member of the teaching staff may be accompanied on the home visit by the Family Liaison when the circumstances make this advisable. Where staff safety is a concern, teaching teams often 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 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 Strong Beginnings for the child and family. Activities might include:

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

Upon arrival, appropriate introductions are made, and other family members are included in conversation. The parent/family is asked for suggestions for an appropriate area within the home to meet. Staff members partner with the parent(s)/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 parent/family needs. 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 parent/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. It may be useful to include the Family Liaison in some of these visits. Throughout the visit, staff looks for opportunities to encourage parents/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 parents/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 parent/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 parent/family to ask questions and/or voice concerns.

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

Parent/Teacher Conferences

Parent/teacher conferences should be held in the fall and spring, and when requested by parents/family. Conferences are scheduled to meet the mutual needs of parents/family and staff and planned to last a minimum of 45 minutes. This may result in some conferences being held outside of regular work hours. Late afternoon and evening conferences often enable parents who work to attend more easily.

Staff members use a parent/family 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 parents'/families' understanding of their child's development. Staff share curriculum strategies for supporting children's development and discuss with parents/families ways that they can support learning at home using household materials and within ordinary household routines. Staff invite observations and answer questions from parents/families about the program. The conference concludes with ways the family can participate in the program. Staff availability for phone calls is reinforced.

While it is not possible for the Family Liaison to participate in every parent/teacher conference, they may stop in briefly to greet the parent/family or stay longer when they have worked jointly with the teaching team with a family.