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Accessible Family Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

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What strategies enable families to be full and active participants in their young children's educations? This practical framework can be implemented in classrooms serving today's diverse families.

Johnetta W. Morrison,
Pamela Storey, and
Chenyi Zhang

Denise Hampton works an 8 to 5 job that leaves almost no time to spend in her daughter's early childhood classroom. The teacher, Ms. Pam, sends home a weekly newsletter describing the group's accomplishments. Ms. Pam also occasionally distributes information about the class via e-mail. She feels she is doing a better than average job in communicating with families about their children's education.

Denise appreciates this information, but would like to genuinely participate in her child's learning, so she expresses her wishes to Ms. Pam. Their discussion alerts Ms. Pam to the fact that she could provide a range of opportunities for working families to become more fully engaged in their children's learning experiences.

Family involvement in early childhood classrooms benefits children, school staff, and families (Bradley & Kibera, 2006; Epstein, 2001). The development of a strong relationship between early childhood programs and families is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

The work of Epstein (2001), Swap (1993), and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004) serve as a foundation for the description of family involvement in early education upon which this article is based. Family involvement encompasses the participation of the parent (or any family member or fictive kin) in the child's education. This participation occurs in and outside the school, including two-way communication that involves child learning. The activities family members are involved in

- support the child's learning process (at home, in the classroom, and within the community),
- exchange information about the child's learning process (child's progress, early childhood curriculum,

developmental and cultural activities in the community),

- offer opportunities to participate in school decision-making leadership regarding the child's education, and
- enable families to support children as learners in their homes.

In developing a plan for partnering with families, there is no one blueprint or single set of practices that define a family-school partnership (Decker, Decker, & Brown (2007).

Benefits and Challenges of Family Involvement

Several researchers pinpoint a positive correlation between family involvement in their children's education and children's achievement (see Epstein, 2001; Fan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Redding, 2006). Positive family involvement leads to better

- social,
- behavioral, and
- academic outcomes

for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds (Ball, 2006; Marcon 1999).

Family participation in their children's educations can be critical because it nurtures cognitive and emotional resilience, especially in the face of life stressors such as poverty and neighborhoods with few resources (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Low-income families' ongoing participation in preschool and kindergarten activities has been associated with children's higher reading achievement, lower rates of grade retention,

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and fewer years in special education when children were in eighth grade (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Families who are involved in their children's early learning classrooms have a better understanding of their children's education (DiNatale, 2002). Families and teachers who regularly learn about one another's interests and cultures can develop a richer and more varied early childhood curriculum.

When teachers establish a liaison with children's families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers (Tozer, Senese, & Violas (2006). The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). Family participation is certainly an excellent way to improve the quality of early childhood programs.

> **Family participation improves early childhood program quality.**

A number of factors affect families' abilities to be actively involved in their children's education. In the past, parents were encouraged to be little more than passive participants in children's educations (Ranson, Martin, & Vincent, 2004). This is no longer true in high-quality programs.

Awareness of cultural differences and expectations can also improve levels of participation. Asian and Latino families, for example, may feel excluded from participating in schools because some professionals may have been trained to believe that they knew what was best for children (Tozer, et al., 2006).

Positive family involvement leads to better social, behavioral, and academic outcomes for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds. Family involvement in their children's education and children's achievement are closely linked.

Photo courtesy of the authors

Respect for family traditions and cultures is essential to assure that they feel welcome and honored by all program staff.

Time also impinges on families' abilities to be involved (Becker & Epstein, 1982). The typical 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday does not easily give some family members much flexible time to participate in classrooms.

Fortunately, family involvement in education is much broader than being present during the school day. Teachers and schools can encourage and support family participation with a variety of strategies such as those recommended here.

Framework for Accessible Family Involvement

One comprehensive perspective on family involvement evolved from a review of studies from preschool through high school that included educators and families (Epstein, 2001). Epstein's framework includes six types of involvement:

1. *Parenting*—home environments that support achievement

2. *Communicating*—two-way information sharing between school and home

3. *Volunteering*—helping with planned activities in and outside the classroom

4. *Learning at home*—parents assisting children in the learning process at home

5. *Decision making*—parent involvement in school decisions

6. *Collaborating with the community*—use of local services and resources to help children learn

The early childhood family involvement model presented here has at its heart Epstein's research-based work, grouped into four components:

- Staff and Family Communication *[Epstein types 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5]*

- Family-Child Collaborations [Epstein type 4]
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building [Epstein types 2, 6]
- Community Connections [Epstein type 6]

Effective teachers will use features from all four components of this model, selecting strategies that enable family members and any other person interested in supporting the child to decide how they wish to be involved.

Components of Accessible Family Involvement

- Staff and Family Communication
- Family-Child Collaborations
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building
- Community Connections

Staff and Family Communication

Teachers can implement a number of initiatives such as the following to support

- school and family communication exchanges,
- family decision making roles,
- meaningful volunteer opportunities, and a
- positive parenting process.

Family center. If space is available, create a homey space with comfortable furniture that invites families to talk informally with each other and their children's teachers. Place a Family Notebook in a convenient spot where families can write comments and questions for teachers. Set up a computer with Internet access for families to use. Offer take-home

activities such as bags with children's books and games to explore together, articles on child development and parenting issues, and other information of interest to families.

Family bulletin board. In a visible area in the Family Center, classroom, or hallway, post daily information about children, their learning experiences, and school events. The board might include volunteer request sign-up lists for activities such as playground cleanup day and extended family visits. Ask for recommendations about what families would most like to see and encourage them to contribute resources as well.

Family-teacher conferences. Flexibility is essential when scheduling conferences with families. Factors to keep in mind include transportation needs, child care arrangements, availability of interpreters (Cellitti, 2010), and scheduling convenient times.

At the beginning of the school year, families can be encouraged to share information with teachers about their children, such as food allergies, family traditions, and their expectations for children's learning. A packet of information for families is generally given upon enrollment in the program, so questions can be discussed early.

Teachers are encouraged to hold at least two more family conferences each year, plus being available at any time to communicate with families

Photo courtesy of the authors

When teachers establish a liaison with children's families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers. The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers.

in person, by phone, or through e-mail. Face-to-face conferences, conducted in the family's home language, are by far the most effective. Teachers can share children's portfolios, ask for family insights about children's experiences, and encourage families to become more familiar with and involved in classroom learning opportunities.

Newsletters. Either on paper, DVDs, or electronically, provide weekly information about children's learning, community resources, and school events such as parent advisory meetings (Sanchez, Walsh, & Rose, 2011). Offer newsletters in multiple languages as needed. Find creative ways to involve families in writing, photography, and producing the newsletters.

> ## Communicate detailed information on a school Web site.

Web site. A school Web site is ideal to communicate detailed information about the classroom and school. Upload photos of children's learning experiences (obtain releases first) to more fully share daily events with families. Offer parenting/child development informational videos and other resources. Provide links to community resources and events. Families may be eager to assist with photography, sharing event information, and even designing and updating the site.

Program events. Early childhood programs often encourage family members to take an active role in classroom activities such as breakfasts with featured guests, field trip planning and travel, community-worker visits, and traditional holiday celebrations. Ask families for ideas about events that appeal to them, and encourage them to take leadership roles in their planning and implementation.

Time and Technology Issues

When teachers offer a variety of ways for families to actively communicate with them, including electronically, family time constraints on participation become less of a factor. Communicating electronically on blogs and social networking sites must be done in a professional manner and confidentiality is essential (Harte, 2011).

A limited-access class Web site is suggested because user-friendly layouts make it easier for family members to browse and search for information. The site must be password secured to assure there is no public access to it. Even so, specific information about students, their families, and/or teachers is not appropriate on a class Web site.

Whenever possible for meetings, conferences, and school events, arrange for child care to help assure that families who wish to participate may do so.

Family-Child Collaborations

Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to encourage families to nurture their children's academic growth and value learning. Children benefit from their family's emotional and social development support. Families believe their efforts help their children and that they are expected to do so by the educational system (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., (2001).

These are some at-home learning experiences from which families and their children can benefit. Be sure to share information about these activities, and their importance, in the family's first language. Ask families for ideas about other ways they enjoy learning together.

- *Family learning opportunities* that build on classroom learning experiences such as observing nature together, children interviewing family members, or joint art explorations

- Hands-on *take-home kits* selected by the child to complete with a family member at home. Activities elaborate on the curriculum

- Early reading, math, writing, and other *academic explorations* that children do with family members

- Assignments in which *children present information* researched with their families to their classmates

Teacher-Family Relationship Building

Communication is at the heart of the third component of this family involvement framework as well. Solid collaborative relationships are built during these and other direct interactions among families and teachers.

- Home visits
- Parent-teacher conferences
- E-mail list serve from teacher to families
- Daily updates for families at drop-off and pick-up times

Regular opportunities for direct communication with family members are essential for accurate and timely exchanges of information. Licensed and certified interpreters are preferred when working with families who speak languages other than English (Cellitti, 2010). Interpreters are essential, particularly when

Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to encourage families to nurture their children's academic growth and value learning. Children benefit from their family's emotional and social support. Families believe their efforts help their children and that they are expected to do so by educators.

Liz Nichols

dealing with sensitive issues. Be sure to consider factors such as the level of information to be presented, the interpreter's relationship to the family, and cultural issues.

Families' perceptions of the school staff, and any barriers they experience in trying to establish contact with their children's schools, can influence families' decisions to get involved in their children's school experience (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Faculty and administrative commitment—and a welcoming school climate—are imperative to a successful family involvement process (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

Community Connections

Links to community resources and activities that enhance children's learning are readily available to families in high-quality early childhood programs. Disseminate the information in various formats to assure that all families have access, and can add to it.

Community involvement by children and their families can strengthen children's learning, while positively influencing the family and the school. Teachers who tie community-based participation into the curriculum extend children's learning far beyond the classroom. These are some types of community activities that may appeal to families as volunteers and/or participants:

- Education and information fairs
- Health and fitness resources
- Sports events that appeal to or engage young children
- Cultural events such as children's concerts and plays
- Public library services
- Community center events
- Organizations that provide activities and services for children and their families

Summary

The family involvement strategies that Ms. Pam implemented resulted in a more comprehensive effort to increase access of families to her classroom. Families, teachers, and children can expect to experience different positive results from each type of involvement (Epstein, 2001).

Early childhood teachers are urged to implement strategies from all four components of this framework during the course of the school year. Selecting more than half of the suggested strategies from each of the four components would likely ensure a stronger partnership between teachers and families. Implementing all identified strategies is far more likely to lead to genuine family involvement.

Family participation in children's early care and education enhances children's cognitive, social, and emotional development while augmenting teacher/family relationships that reinforce mutual beliefs and practices. Family involvement can be a positive experience for everyone involved.

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Executive Summary

Children begin learning at home long before they ever reach the classroom, so parents play a critical role in supporting early childhood learning and school readiness.

But low-income families often face many barriers to providing high-quality early educational opportunities for their children. As a result, there is a wide achievement gap between children from low-income families and those from high-income families. This gap starts early. Kindergarten teachers report fewer than half of children from low-income homes are "ready to succeed in school."

Supporting parents' efforts to help their children develop during the preschool years improves child school readiness, reduces child behavior problems, enhances child social skills, and promotes academic success. Effective parent engagement programs can help close the gap in school readiness associated with family income.

Many preschools do include efforts to support parent engagement but many lower income families do not participate. Rigorous intervention studies with low-income parents suggest that intensive, strategic efforts are needed to ensure preschool children are ready for school.

Many effective parent support programs focus on the earliest years of life (ages 0-3). To address children's school readiness needs, however, parent engagement efforts need to intensify during the preschool years. The following approaches, based on randomized-controlled trials, provide the strongest evidence that focused parent engagement programs during the preschool years can improve child outcomes.

Programs that promote positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships. During multiple sessions, parents are taught how to focus attention on their children, set clear expectations, use praise to reinforce positive behavior, and effectively set limits to reduce parent-child conflict and negative parenting practices.

One half of children from low-income homes are not "ready to succeed in school," according to kindergarten teachers. Effective parent engagement programs help address this need.

Programs that promote home learning activities and effective teaching strategies. These programs are typically delivered individually during home visits, or through a series of school-based parent group meetings. Parents are given learning materials and shown how to use them to help their children enjoy learning.

Programs that strengthen parent-teacher partnerships. By facilitating communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, these programs boost child academic and social-emotional skill development.

Programs that emphasize child physical health. These programs are designed to increase parent knowledge about nutrition and/or physical activity, build parenting skills (particularly parenting strategies around healthy eating and exercising), and restructure the home environment to facilitate healthy and active lifestyles.

With 32 million children in the United States living in poverty or low-income homes, it's imperative that we come together and build on what works to promote parent engagement, reduce the income-based achievement gap, and give all children the opportunity for school readiness.

Introduction

Fifty years of research in early childhood development highlight the central influence that parenting attitudes and behaviors have on children's development.[1] During the preschool years (ages 3-5), the ways that parents interact with their children and the relationships they form with their children's caregivers and teachers play an important role in supporting a child's social-emotional, cognitive, and physical readiness for school.[2,3]

Social-emotional, cognitive, and physical readiness for school in turn sets the stage for school success. When children are ready for kindergarten with strong language, thinking, and self-management skills, as well as good health, they are likely to have success in elementary and middle school. The ability to follow instructions and routines, pay attention, get along with others, and manage strong feelings in kindergarten is especially important for positive school adjustment, high school graduation, and long-term employment.[4,5] Indeed, teachers have long identified children's social skills and behavioral adjustment as a key marker of children's readiness for the demands of kindergarten.
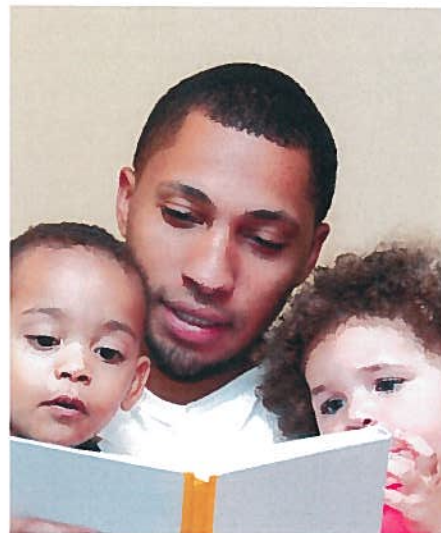
For these reasons, schools, communities, and families can benefit from implementing programs and practices that support parent engagement and parenting practices and that help parents support their children's school readiness. This research brief describes current approaches and highlights findings from recent studies with preschool children (ages 3-5) that document both the promise and challenge of effectively engaging families and children at risk for poor school readiness. We focus in particular on effective parent engagement models that improve school readiness outcomes in well-controlled studies. Systematic approaches and next generation research are recommended to improve the impact of parent engagement programs in order to reduce disparities in school readiness associated with family socioeconomic status.

Key Findings

Parent Engagement During the Preschool Years is Key to Children's Success

During the toddler and preschool years, important changes occur in children's capacity to communicate and learn about the world. Language and thinking skills blossom, and children become increasingly social, building new friendships and sustaining play and learning activities. These advances reflect rapid maturation in the frontal part of the brain that strengthens children's ability to

control their attention, manage their feelings, share ideas and solve problems with others. High-quality preschool programs catalyze this developmental potential, promoting long-term benefits including higher rates of high school graduation and increased earnings, along with lower levels of unemployment and crime.[6,7] Engaging parents as key partners in children's development during the preschool years is particularly important because of the positive impact that parenting practices have on child school readiness, reducing child behavior problems, enhancing child social skills, and promoting academic success.[2] In addition, when preschools engage parents effectively and coordinate the efforts of teachers and parents in partnership, it sets the stage for positive parent engagement in subsequent school years.

Parent Engagement Efforts are Especially Critical for Children Growing Up in Low-income Families

Children growing up in poverty or low-income homes and communities are disadvantaged in their early learning, showing a slower pace of language, social-emotional, and thinking skills. Despite high levels of emotional investment in their children, parents living in poverty lack resources and supports and face disproportionate burdens that impair positive parenting practices and limit parental involvement in children's schooling. These include overcrowded and unsafe living conditions, low levels of parental education, frequent single-parenting, and elevated parental health and mental health disabilities.[8,9] Compounding these difficulties, preschools in low-income communities often lack sufficient resources and are low-quality.[6] Using data from a national study (the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort), the Brookings Institute found that 75 percent of children from families with moderate to high incomes were prepared to enter kindergarten, compared to 48 percent of children from families living in poverty.[10] Currently, more than 15 million children in the United States (21 percent of U.S. children) live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, and another 23 percent live in low-income families, making the reduction of these educational disparities a national priority.[11]

Positive parent involvement and support for learning can improve disadvantaged children's school readiness and start to close this gap in school success. For example, one study with parents of children attending Head Start found that home-based parenting practices, including parent-child reading and learning activities, predicted substantial growth during preschool in areas of attention and language skills, and reduction in problem behaviors.[12] Furthermore, a study with parents in an urban school district showed that when parents got involved at school (e.g., participating in school activities, volunteering in the classroom, or attending parent-teacher conferences), their prekindergarten children showed accelerated

What is Parent Engagement?

Parent engagement involves parents, caregivers, and family members working with schools to improve child learning, development, and health. It reflects both the efforts adults make to promote their children's social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development, and the efforts initiated by schools, child-care programs, and communities designed to foster partnerships to support family wellness and children's well-being. Children grow up in a wide variety of family settings, with parents, extended family members, or other adults caring for them. For simplicity and to reflect the research cited, this brief will use the word parent to refer to any adult caring for a child.

What is School Readiness?

School readiness refers to the acquisition of the competencies, attitudes, and behaviors that promote school success at kindergarten entry. Physical health and basic academic knowledge (knowing letters and numbers) promote early learning. In addition, social-emotional skills are essential to school readiness and sustained school success, including the capacity to manage emotions, focus attention, constructively approach learning tasks, and establish positive relationships with peers and teachers.

growth in social and academic skills, suggesting another important component of parent engagement.[2] When parents increase their involvement over time, children show concomitant increases in achievement, with the effects strongest for children in low-income families.[13] Finally, the quality of communication and collaboration between teachers and parents also is an important predictor of child school readiness.[2]
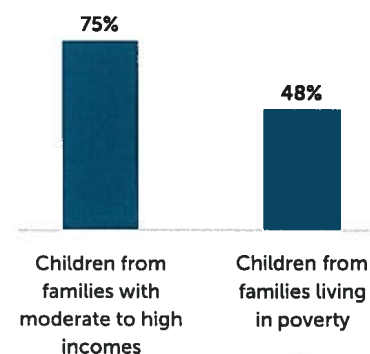
Early Education Programs Set Parent Engagement Goals but Challenges Remain

Based on this research, efforts to promote parent engagement are a key feature in programs that have promoted long-term gains in child outcomes. Efforts to engage parents are required for accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)[14,15,16] and are included in the 2016 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).[17] Because of these policies, many preschools include active efforts to support parent engagement. Reviewing current practices, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that 93 percent of state-funded preschool programs reported one or more types of family engagement activities. These included opportunities for parents to become involved in activities at school (85%), parent conferences or home visits to support parent-teacher communication (79%), and parenting support or training programs (51%).[18]

However, when schools create opportunities for parent involvement, family background characteristics, including parental education, family income, home language, parental feelings of efficacy, and social support play a strong role in determining rates of participation, with more advantaged families showing higher participation rates.[19,20,21] If preschool-based efforts do not attract disadvantaged families and if they do not successfully increase the parent attitudes and behaviors that directly affect child development, they will not improve child school readiness or reduce socio-economic disparities in school readiness and success.[17] We have learned much about the types of effort needed to effectively engage vulnerable families in their children's schooling from recent studies that have successfully improved child school readiness.

Parent Engagement Programs Can Promote Positive School Outcomes for Children

A careful look at rigorous intervention studies with socio-economically disadvantaged parents suggests that intensive and strategic efforts are needed to promote sustained positive changes in the school readiness of preschool children. The following sections provide an overview of evidence-based approaches tested using randomized-controlled trials that provide the strongest evidence that parent engagement programs can improve child outcomes. Most of these programs use home-visit or parent group interventions to promote parenting practices associated with child social-

Readiness for School

% of children prepared to enter kindergarten

75%

48%

Children from families with moderate to high incomes

Children from families living in poverty

Currently, more than 15 million children in the United States (21 percent of U.S. children) live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level.

emotional or academic readiness. Others target child physical well-being to reduce child obesity, or alternatively, have focused on promoting preschool teacher-parent partnerships to support child learning.

Programs that promote positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships. One type of program focuses on improving parenting practices and parent-child relationship quality to reduce child problem behaviors (e.g., noncompliance and aggression) and improve child social competence. Typically, these 10-14 session programs target specific parenting skills, and are delivered either via school- or community-based groups or during individual face-to-face sessions. For example, parents are taught how to focus positive attention on their children, set clear expectations, use praise to reinforce positive behavior, and effectively set limits. The goal is to reduce parent-child conflict and negative parenting practices and to increase positive parent-child interactions. Examples of these programs include the Incredible Years Parent Training Program,[22] Chicago Parent Program,[23] Dare to be You,[24] 12-Ways/Safe-Care Planned Activities Training,[25] and Parent Corps,[26] among others. Each program has been studied with rigorous methods, and shown benefits for both parents and children: Positive parenting behaviors increase, harsh punishment decreases, and the quality of parent-child relationships improve. Particularly when paired with similar teacher training programs, child behavioral improvements are evident at school and home, including reduced behavior problems at school and improved relationships with teachers and with peers.

Programs that promote home learning activities and effective teaching strategies. A second type of effective parent program for preschool children focuses on promoting child learning readiness. These programs are typically delivered individually during home visits, or through a series of school-based parent group meetings. Parents are given learning materials and shown how to use them to help their children enjoy learning. These programs enhance child readiness by (1) enriching the learning materials available at home, and (2) by improving the quality of parent-child interactions in ways that will foster thinking skills, learning motivation, and in some cases, self-regulation and social competence. A few programs use parent workshops (1-2 sessions) to introduce specific teaching strategies such as interactive reading. These programs show that, after brief presentations, parents can learn to use specific teaching strategies, but benefits for children are often only short-term. In contrast, significant and lasting benefits are emerging for programs that include more coaching for parents (ranging from 8-40 sessions).

Several programs (Family Mathematics Curriculum,[27] Getting Ready for School,[28] Companion Curriculum[29]) offer parents and children multi-session workshops (8-12 sessions) taught by preschool teachers. Teachers demonstrate learning activities, and provide parents with materials to use at home with
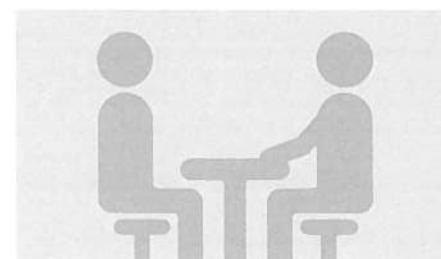
Three Ways to Improve School Readiness

Reading at home

Supporting school activities

Participating in parent-teacher conferences

their children. These programs documented gains in child academic skills in the specific areas that were targeted. Other programs used home visitors to introduce learning activities and talk with parents about the best ways to use them with their children (Let's Play in Tandem[30] HIPPY,[31] and REDI-P[32]). All three programs documented improvements in child cognitive skills and improved behavior or social competence. An important key to success in these home programs was the provision of developmentally sequenced learning games and activities for children, along with support for parents in effective use.

Programs that strengthen parent-teacher partnerships. A third approach to parent engagement during preschool focuses on strengthening teacher-parent partnerships. Two programs provide examples of this approach (Getting Ready Program,[33] Companion Curriculum[29]). Both provide teachers with training in how to build strong relationships with parents. The Getting Ready Program supports teachers in making regular home visits and hosting collaborative planning conferences with parents; it has produced gains in child language use and pre-reading skills, as well as positive learning behavior in the classroom. The Companion Curriculum features Family Corners in preschool classrooms to welcome parent visitors. By facilitating communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, these programs boost child academic and social-emotional skill development. However, simply having parents spend time or volunteer at their children's schools has not emerged as a strategy that boosts child outcomes.

Programs that emphasize child physical health. Recognizing the critical importance of child physical well-being and motor development for early learning,[34] other parent engagement programs focus on promoting preschool children's healthy physical development. These programs are designed to increase parent knowledge about nutrition and/ or physical activity, build parenting skills (particularly parenting strategies around healthy eating and exercising), and restructure the home environment to facilitate healthy and active lifestyles. For example, one program (Buffalo Healthy Tots) includes 10 group sessions about diet and physical activity with an emphasis on parenting and behavioral strategies. Parents also keep food and physical activity diaries and meet individually with a coach before or after group sessions to develop and review goals. A recent trial indicated that this approach reduced parent and child body mass index (BMI).[35] Other group-based parent programs focusing on nutrition and physical activity (e.g., Salud con la Familia, Pediatric Overweight Prevention through Parent Training Program), typically 7-12 sessions in length, also have shown positive impacts on child BMI.[36,37,38] Another program (Healthy Habits, Happy Homes) also reduced child BMI and weekend television time by providing parents with four home visits emphasizing motivational coaching by health educators, along with educational materials, phone calls, and weekly text messages.[39] In contrast, very brief counseling for parents delivered in the primary care setting does not appear to produce similar impacts on children's BMI.[40,41]

When positive parenting behaviors increase, harsh punishment decreases, and the quality of parent-child relationships improve.

Future Research Needs

The existing research demonstrates that parent engagement programs can be an effective way to improve school outcomes for children, and may play an important role in reducing the school readiness gap that exists for children from economically-disadvantaged families. However, a number of important research questions relevant for policy and practice remain.

First, effective parent programs for preschoolers with impact on child outcomes have tended to focus on a single domain—improving child social-emotional skills, academic readiness, or physical health. Little is known about whether boosting outcomes in one area (for example, improving social-emotional functioning alone) might also enhance learning outcomes and vice versa, but evidence for cross-domain synergy is emerging.[42] A key question is whether program effects are domain-specific and, if so, how they might be combined to produce benefits for children across multiple areas of well-being, without losing their strategic focus (and hence impact).

Second, it is important to better understand how the length of a parent engagement program and the delivery format (e.g., group sessions, home visits) impact parent participation and program impact. In general, very short programs (1-2 sessions) appear to offer limited benefits, but moderately long programs (10-16 sessions) may be as effective as very long programs. If the impact of these program characteristics were better understood, it would help guide the design of optimally cost-effective programs. In addition, a better understanding of the key mechanisms of action that account for program effects could help refine intervention design and implementation.

The parent programs with strong effects on child outcomes are generally longer and more intensive than standard preschool practice, raising issues regarding how effective practices might be paid for and sustained. Future research should clarify the key factors or critical program elements that produce benefits for children to determine whether programs could be streamlined without a loss of impact. A related question for the future is the degree to which technology-assisted intervention components or delivery systems might increase the accessibility of parent engagement programs and decrease their costs. For example, one recent intervention used regular text messages (three per week during the school year) to remind parents to engage in different home activities that could help their children learn to read, promoting improved child letter-sound knowledge.[43]

Finally, issues regarding how to motivate and support stressed parents to improve participation rates in parent engagement programs require greater attention. Understanding the extent to which program modifications are needed to effectively support children with different school readiness needs, and the degree of modification needed to adapt to different family or cultural

A number of important research questions relevant for policy and practice remain regarding how parent engagment programs can improve school outcomes for children.

contexts, is also important. Recent research suggests that family background and culture can influence engagement practices and preferences, suggesting that more inclusive and culturally-responsive programming could increase engagement in teacher-parent partnerships.[44]

Conclusion and Implications

Parents play the lead role in supporting their children's early development and school readiness. When parents are able to provide nurturing care and strategic support for learning, they foster child brain development in ways that increase capacity for learning—building early attention, memory, and problem-solving skills. The quality of early parental care also shapes the development of child skills for making friends, getting along with others, and managing emotions and behavior. Because these core school readiness skills grow rapidly during the preschool years, it is a developmental period when parent engagement can have a particularly strong impact on child school readiness and future school success. In addition, positive parent-teacher partnerships established when children are just beginning school set the stage for on-going parent engagement and home learning support in the school years that follow.

Schools, child-care programs, and communities can support parent practices and enhance child outcomes by providing parents with support and guidance in the use of home learning materials and support warm and responsive parenting, while also providing opportunities for parents to get involved at school, using conferences and/or home visits to support parent-teacher communication and collaboration.

Yet, a gap still exists, as stress and socio-economic disadvantage often undermine parent engagement by decreasing access to capacity-building resources and burdening parents with other pressing priorities. Evidence from rigorous research studies suggests that the parent engagement programs that support the most vulnerable families and effectively reduce gaps in child school readiness associated with socio-economic disadvantage must be intensive and strategic, considerably longer and more involved than the kinds of parent engagement practices that are widespread in preschools now.

A national commitment to the provision of systematic supports for parent engagement in early childhood has the potential to promote optimal development for all children. Building upon the growing research base of "what works," additional program development and research is needed to identify strategic and cost-effective parent engagement strategies with sufficient intensity to close the school readiness gap and with the potential to go to scale in cost-effective ways.

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