

# Partnering with Families for Early Language and Literacy Development: Research-based Strategies for Early Childhood Teachers

This document was created for teachers, pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, looking to improve their strategies for partnering with families for children’s language and literacy development. Teachers know that trusting relationships between the home and school make a difference for student learning. Strong family and teacher partnerships include open communication, respect for differences, commitment, trust, and equal power (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Turnbull, Rutherford Turnbull, & Kyzar, 2009). Research demonstrates that family support for language and literacy activities at school and at home is positively related to children’s outcomes, including reading acquisition, language, vocabulary learning, conceptual development, and literacy achievement (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Rowe & Fain, 2013; Senechal, 2006). The following strategies drawn from the research literature offer opportunities for teachers to build stronger partnerships with families to support children’s language and literacy development.

## 1. Provide families with information on shared reading and literacy practices.

All families care about their children and want to support their learning. How to support a child’s learning, particularly language and literacy, is something many families want to know more about. They have questions about how to help their children learn to read, or want to know what is appropriate for children of different ages and grade levels (MDRC, 2013). At the early grades, family life is the best place to connect what children hear and read to the real world. To support families in making this connection, teachers can provide parents with guidance on how to help children at home with language and literacy skills. Teachers can encourage the most effective shared reading practice – families talking with children about what they are reading (Rowe & Fain, 2013; Senechal, 2006). Research indicates shared reading in which adults guide children toward becoming storytellers is helpful for children as they develop their language skills. Families can ask children Who/What/When/Where/Why questions, ask children to make connections to their own experiences, and ask children to recall and retell the story (MDRC, 2013). Another way families can participate in shared reading is talking about the letters and

words on the page of a storybook, cereal box, sign or game, which is linked to advances in children's literacy skills in several areas of print and word awareness (Justice & Ezell, 2000; Justice & Ezell, 2002; Justice & Kaderavek, 2002). This type of "teaching" connects language and literacy to the real world of each family and child. Verbal print referencing can be in the form of questions (e.g. "Is this letter A?" or "Where should I begin to read?") or comments (e.g. "This letter is A" or "I'm going to start reading here"). Nonverbal print referencing involves pointing to print and tracking print while reading. Teachers can easily help parents learn these shared reading skills. One study provided only 15 minutes of demonstration for families and found positive results (Justice & Ezell, 2000). It is not important that parents master these skills perfectly, but rather that they are communicating with their children about reading! Another tool parents can use to promote literacy development is interactive technology, such as educational apps (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Teachers can help guide parents toward apps that teach literacy skills, such as Sesame Workshop and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and steer them away from apps that have no evidence to support their use. However, parents should be aware that although these apps can be helpful, the best way to help children develop is to interact with them during literacy activities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016).

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Demonstrate shared reading activities that can be done at home, and allow parents to practice with their children.
- Send home video links showing shared reading.
- Share ideas with families for how reading and writing could be connected to the real, everyday activities of families such as driving in the car, shopping, cooking, and watching television.
- Be positive and encouraging about parents incorporating conversation, reading and writing with their children in any way during their busy days.

## **2. Encourage families to have fun with language and literacy.**

Children need to find literacy activities fun and engaging. Children's desire or motivation to read impacts the amount and breadth of reading they do and their reading outcomes (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Wigfield, 1997; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). It is important for parents and teachers to have fun with children when practicing language and literacy skills, because when children are forced to read they may enjoy reading less (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). For this reason, teachers should avoid using forced reading assignments, including reading logs (Reischer, 2016), and should instead encourage motivation to read by selecting engaging books and promoting children's role in shared reading. Young readers may find books engaging that have large, bold print, few words per page, and redundant print. The illustrations should be large and appealing, and print embedded in illustrations helps draw children's attention to it (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002). Children and their parents should also share equal roles in reading (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002). Techniques that could increase collaboration include: (1) Pausing for the child's comments between pages; (2) Letting the child pick the reading location; (3) Increasing the child's opportunities to physically interact with the book, such as by holding it

or turning the pages; (4) Matching reading to the child's abilities and interests, and modifying the story or discussion to make it more enjoyable; and (5) asking the child to read the book to you, even if the child is making up a story rather than actually reading.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Always emphasize with families that you want their children and the parents to enjoy reading.
- Do not assign reading logs. Instead, students and families can use journals to write or draw about the story.
- Help children and parents to read books together that are related to the children's and family's interests, have high quality illustrations, and have engaging stories.

### **3. Create roles for parents in the school that support literacy.**

Several studies have shown that parents volunteering at schools is related to students' reading scores, decoding skills, and writing skills (MDRC, 2013). This is especially true when the activities are directly related to learning. For example, instead of just having a "Donuts for Dads" event in the cafeteria, teachers could invite father figures to the classroom for donuts and engage them in literacy activities with their children. When parents feel involved, they may be happy to help in the classroom and share books and other resources (McIntyre, Kyle, Moore, Sweazy, & Greer, 2001). In one study, reaching out to parents with opportunities to engage was associated with kindergarten students' reading gains, measured by basic reading skills (print familiarity, letter recognition, beginning and ending sounds, rhyming sounds, and word recognition), receptive vocabulary, and reading comprehension skills (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). To increase family involvement in language and literacy activities at school, teachers should be welcoming, offer a variety of involvement opportunities, and advertise them clearly, attractively, and effectively (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, & Sandler, 2005).

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Invite families to Writing Workshops, Family Literacy Nights, and Read Aloud events.
- Give multiple invitations to families, and do not take it personally if families cannot make it to an event. Being persistent increases the likelihood that they will feel comfortable sharing information about their children (Gorski, 2013).
- Be welcoming and engaging at school events.
- Ask families to recommend texts that relate to their families (Allen, 2007; 2010).

### **4. Learn from families about children's culture, skills and interests, and use that information to create literacy lessons and assignments.**

Understanding and valuing the families of children provides teachers with the ability to connect classroom instruction to children's cultural knowledge (e.g. farming, crafting, cooking, car mechanics, construction, business, etc.) in order for them to develop their literacy skills (McIntyre et al., 2001). Teachers should take the role of learner to get to know their students and

families (Lopez, 2006). Families' Funds of Knowledge, or their cultural and familial knowledge and skills, can be utilized by teachers to create appropriate and engaging literacy lessons for their students. Teachers will know their students as individuals, and can create lessons that engage students' prior knowledge to connect it to the literacy curriculum (Lopez, 2006; McIntyre et al., 2001). Furthermore, teachers can learn from families about students' needs, how they learn best, and their interests and hobbies (McIntyre et al., 2001). They can learn families' schedules, so they know how much time a family has to read or help with other literacy activities, and how much help each child will receive.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Have "Get to Know You" conferences during the 1<sup>st</sup> month of school. Families are treated as the experts. Teachers ask "Tell me about your child as a reader" and "Tell me about your child as a writer."
- Request that families share information about their Funds of Knowledge using a handout to fill in about the family's and child's interests, skills, and home routines before the school year begins.
- Go on home visits to learn from students and families. Again, teachers can ask "Tell me about your child as..." Accommodate families by meeting at a convenient time and place. Prioritize visits with families that historically have not had a strong connection to the school.
- Use study groups of parents and teachers to discuss understandings of households and classrooms, and develop classroom language and literacy practices that involve connections between the home and the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).
- Provide literacy activities to families that fit families schedules (McIntyre et al., 2002).
- Avoid texts and other materials with biased depictions of cultures, and identify/discuss bias openly with families if those texts must be used (Gorski, 2013).
- Use a survey to ask families for texts that relate to or inspire their identities (Allen, 2010).
- Assign poetry projects based on the students' communities and families, so that they ask their families for information and help (Allen, 2010).

Seek training on how diverse learning methods can be incorporated into language and literacy lessons (e.g., Universal Design for Learning strategies).

#### **5. Provide families with books and other literacy resources.**

Students' access to books in school and at libraries predicts their reading scores (Rowe & Fain, 2013). In one study, when families were provided with books, many read and talked with their children about the stories. They also used journals to respond to the stories together (Rowe & Fain, 2013). Teachers can use what they have learned from families to know what resources parents need. They can also send home books based on each child's interests and skills.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Send home books to support family book reading. It is important to send home a variety and to base book selection on children's interests and culture (Eppley, 2016).
- Use family journals where the child and family write or create art about the book. They can also let the teacher know if they liked the book so that the teacher can pick the most appropriate texts to send home (McIntyre et al., 2010). Teachers can respond to journal entries to engage in two-way communication.
- Help families access books in the school and community through the library or other organizations. Bring books and literacy events to parks, laundromats, and grocery stores. Provide books in the home language of families (Rowe & Fain, 2013).

#### **6. Assist families in understanding their children's language and literacy progress.**

Communication between families and teachers has been found to be positively associated with student achievement (Gorski, 2013; MDRC, 2013). When teachers reach out to families with information, families are more likely to contribute to their child's education (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; MDRC, 2013) and students are more likely to be engaged in learning (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Teachers should share information on children's language and literacy skills relative to the grade-level standards and classroom goals (Johns Hopkins University, 2015). This gives families a point of reference, so that they can work with teachers to set goals for their children's language and literacy development.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Use phone calls, text messages, written messages, and/or emails to provide families with information on their children's language and literacy progress (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Kraft & Rogers, 2015), including how they compare to grade-level standards and classroom goals, what they do well, and what they could improve.
- Share information with families early in the year and regularly throughout the year.
- Give families specific, understandable (jargon free) messages about how their child is progressing, what their child is working on, and how they can support the child at home.
- Tailor communication to the family's needs. Consider a home visit or weekly phone calls for whom this personal contact would help to build a lasting positive relationship, and would help you understand the family's interests and culture.
- Be very careful to avoid jargon and technical wording that may not effectively communicate to families how they can help their child. Keep all communication friendly and accessible to all families.

#### **7. Provide special supports for non-native English speaking families.**

Being responsive to the cultural experiences of families is important when collaborating with all families, and particularly with families of English Learners. For newly immigrated families, it is important for teachers to assist families in understanding how their children are learning to read if it is taught differently from their countries of origin (Allen, 2010). Teachers should be inviting

and provide families with opportunities in person, video, or print to observe reading instruction. Schools should include bilingual/multilingual staff in family involvement programs when possible, because it has been shown to increase the involvement of parents who do not speak English (Richards-Tutor, Aceves, & Reese, 2016). Teachers can also encourage families to use their first language at home, and to read in their home language (Richards-Tutor et al., 2016). When families use the language with which they are most comfortable, they are more likely to have conversations that support learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). One study demonstrated that providing dual-language books to students allowed families to read with their children and to talk about their languages (Rowe & Fain, 2013). In that study, families of second language learners were as likely to read and talk with their children about the stories as were families whose first language was English.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:**

- Explain reading practices and invite parents to observe reading instruction by another parent or teacher in person or by providing informal videos.
- Send home books that are translated to create dual language books (Rowe & Fain, 2013).
- Include bilingual staff or use translators in family involvement activities.
- Provide a transcriber for non-writers at family events involving writing (Allen, 2007).
- Learn about the home language and culture of each family in your classroom. Encourage the child's language and literacy development in their home language and in the language of the school.
- Consider visiting a family at home to learn more about their family and to demonstrate a welcoming relationship with the school.

#### **8. Have high, positive expectations of families' desires and abilities to contribute to their children's language and literacy development, and view differences as assets.**

Family members across all incomes, educational backgrounds, and races/ethnicities are interested in and able to engage in learning at home with their children (MDRC, 2013). When families are involved, they are happy to be adding to their child's education and can provide teachers with information about their children (McIntyre et al., 2001). Teachers should create a system or process for how they will have two-way communication with families – both listening to and informing each other. Teachers should treat families respectfully and as the experts about their children (Gorski, 2013). They should view diversity and cultural differences as assets rather than deficiencies (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). Children's learning of their home language does not hinder their abilities to learn a second language at school. Furthermore, teachers should teach with a view of resilience rather than deficit. One study showed that teachers who rejected a deficit view were happier with their jobs and more responsive to the needs of their students whose families were in poverty (Gorski, 2013).

## OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS CAN USE:

- Communicate to parents that their involvement in children's language and literacy development is expected and wanted (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).
- Establish two-way communication from the first family event. Restructure Back to School Nights, Conferences, or Open Houses so that listening to families is a priority.

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