Introduction

*Families* are the first and most important teachers for children. Families teach children their languages, their goals, and their values. They do so mostly in nonformal ways—not by lecturing in a classroom, but by talking across the breakfast table, chatting on a bus ride, or reading a bedtime story. Families engage in nonformal education virtually all the time.

Other adults also have rich opportunities to teach children outside formal classroom settings. Youth-group leaders, after-school caregivers, and other caring adults can reach children and youths with messages that encourage both academic and personal development.

The practices described in this training are designed to help professional and volunteer workers in nonformal educational settings to use and to support their best resources—the families of children and youths—through family involvement.

What Does Family Involvement Mean?

Which of the following activities do you think represent family involvement in children’s learning:
- Making cookies for a childcare program’s bake sale?
- Attending a teacher conference for a kindergarten student?
- Selling gift-wrap for an elementary school’s fund-raiser?
- Checking homework for a third grader?
- Serving on a middle school hiring committee?
- Chaperoning a high school dance?

Actually, family involvement can be all of these activities.

Experience has shown that involvement by family members—not just parents, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other caring adults involved in the child’s life—can support children’s learning.

Today, many programs support family involvement by
- Working in partnership with community agencies
- Recruiting hard-to-reach families as well as eager participants
- Adjusting their programs to meet family priorities
- Understanding that all families have something to contribute
- Understanding that family involvement can and should take many forms.
- Recognizing that communication is a key component of family involvement
- Knowing that respect for diversity is an integral part of family involvement.
Supporting Family Involvement
Best Practices for Nonformal Educational Settings

Why Encourage Family Involvement?

Family involvement helps children do better in school, have better attitudes about school and work, and behave better in school. The best results occur when families, schools, and community organizations work together.

Children benefit most when their families serve in the following roles:
- As teachers, helping their children learn at home
- As supporters, contributing their skills and knowledge to the schools and organizations
- As advocates, ensuring that children are treated fairly
- As decision-makers, participating in problem solving at all levels

Greater levels of family involvement support are associated with:
- Higher scores on standardized tests
- Better attendance
- Better homework completion
- Higher rates of high school graduation
- Higher rates of enrollment in colleges and universities.

Family involvement has produced positive results for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial backgrounds or their parents’ levels of education.

What Motivates Families to Become Involved?

Why do family members want to become involved and to stay involved with their children’s learning?

The answer to this question is different for different family members, of course, but many people are motivated by the following factors:
- Knowing that they can make a difference in their own lives and the lives of their children
- Believing that they are participating in something successful
- Feeling respected
- Feeling that their time and efforts are acknowledged
- Receiving training and guidance
- Receiving practical support, such as childcare and transportation assistance

What Hinders Families from Becoming Involved?

Barriers to family involvement may have their roots in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational differences, language, and culture. When administrators and staff differ from children’s families in these areas, the possibilities for misunderstanding and miscommunication regarding family involvement increase.

Administrators and staff may feel that, as the professionals, they do not need or want family involvement. Some may be concerned about losing authority or influence if families become involved in the programs. Others may feel little respect for the families. Still others may think that encouraging family involvement is not their responsibility.

Some barriers are found within the families, which may lack the time, money, or emotional resources to become involved. Family members may believe that it’s the staff’s job, not the family’s job, to help the child learn. They may feel that the program does not really want them to be involved or that the staff treats them disrespectfully. Low literacy levels, transportation difficulties, and childcare issues may also present barriers.

Some families also face language or cultural barriers that prevent them from communicating effectively with staff and administrators.

Eliminating barriers on both sides is crucial to encouraging greater family involvement.
It's convenient to group family involvement into six types, shown in the table below. The table provides examples of how family members show involvement and how programs can encourage that involvement. Use the blank spaces to fill in other activities and methods for encouraging involvement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Involvement</th>
<th>How Family Members Show Involvement (Use the blank spaces below to fill in additional examples)</th>
<th>How Programs Can Encourage Involvement (Use the blank spaces below to fill in additional methods)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Volunteering        | • Serve as a chaperone on field trips  
• Work as a telephone-tree caller  
• Participate in a parent safety patrol  
• Teach a skill | • Recruit and organize volunteers  
• Identify available talents, times, and locations of volunteers  
• Match volunteers with appropriate opportunities  
• Offer training for volunteers  
• Recognize volunteer efforts |
| Parenting           | • Establish age-appropriate rules and guidelines for children  
• Talk with children about their interests, activities, and friends  
• Explain hopes and goals for their children to the children | • Offer clear parent-education information—via documents, workshops, discussion groups, videotapes, or classes—that shows respect for diversity of cultures, beliefs, values, needs, and goals |
| Communicating       | • Read a progress report  
• Attend a parent conference  
• Read a program newsletter  
• Send a note to a staff member or call about the child’s progress or problems | • Design effective program-to-home and home-to-program methods of communication  
• Provide clear information on program policies and activities that is appropriate for diverse literacy levels  
• Provide translations for written materials or interpreters for oral communications if needed  
• Send student work home for the family to review |
| Supporting learning at home | • Discuss project work with children  
• Discuss homework assignments with children  
• Help children establish a homework routine  
• Visit the library with children  
• Help children rehearse for plays or concerts | • Sponsor family fun nights that focus on math, language, or other skills  
• Provide information and ideas about how families can help children with homework and other skill-building activities  
• Provide a lending library for educational books and games |
Supporting Various Types of Family Involvement

You can use the blank space in the table to add your own notes.

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<td>Decision making</td>
<td>• Join a friends-of-the-program organization</td>
<td>• Reach out to families of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Serve on an advisory committee, council, or board</td>
<td>• Offer leadership training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborating with the community</td>
<td>• Help children link to community resources, such as art, music, and theater</td>
<td>• Give parents a list of community resources and services that support learning</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage children to participate in community service, such as helping senior citizens, recycling, and peer tutoring</td>
<td>• Develop partnerships, coalitions, or collaborations with other community resources and services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Best Practices for Programs

The activities that are effective in attracting and maintaining family involvement can be grouped into three categories:

1. Developing policies and procedures that support family involvement

   **Policies** include guiding principles that influence or determine decisions or actions. Policies are usually written and should be shared with staff and families. **Procedures** include the steps taken to implement the policies.

2. Supporting staff interactions that promote family involvement

   Successful programs actively encourage staff to initiate and maintain efforts to involve families.

3. Fostering communication

   Effective programs share information showing that family involvement is welcome and that opportunities for involvement are available.

   See the Checklist for Programs for details.

Best Practices for Staff

“Supporting staff interactions that promote family involvement” is listed above as a best practice for programs. What are these interactions by staff?

Successful interactions can be classified into five categories:

1. Meeting and greeting families when children arrive and when they leave

2. Sharing something about themselves

3. Getting to know the family

4. Showing concern for the child

5. Showing concern for the family

See the Checklist for Staff for details.
In all healthy families, in every culture, adults care about their children and want to play a role in their children’s lives. The expressions of that caring and the ideas of the appropriate roles, however, may differ greatly from one culture to the next. The most difficult challenges arise when program leaders, caregivers, and nonformal teachers come from cultures that are different from those of the children served by their program. In those cases, adult caregivers—if they wish to serve the children’s best interests—must work to understand the children’s native cultures and must demonstrate respect for those cultures.

1. **Learn about the cultures of the children in your program.**

   There are various ways to learn about cultures—reading books, articles, and Web sites about various groups, especially those written by someone within the culture; attending cultural events, such as powwows or celebrations of Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth, and Chinese New Year; and visiting markets or stores catering to members of the culture. But look beyond the surface level of the culture. Pay attention to child-rearing practices and family relationships. While it’s nice to know that a family celebrates Vietnamese New Year by eating special foods, it may be more important to understand how the Vietnamese family values respect for elders, what roles children play in the family, and who makes important family decisions. (At the same time, note that just as families and individuals in your own culture vary in what they believe and how they behave, so do families and individuals in different cultures.)

   To encourage family involvement, learn who helps care for the children and try to engage them. For example, in many Latino families, godparents and grandparents play important roles in caring for children. In some African cultures, a boy’s most important mentor may be his mother’s brother, not his father. Seek to engage all the people who care for and about the children, whether they are parents, stepparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, more distant relatives, or family friends.

2. **Get to know the family members.**

   Learning about their culture and showing your respect for it may help you to get to know family members. In so doing, you can work toward building a trust that will encourage them to become involved. Start by talking to family members as they deliver and pick up children. Ask questions, but be aware that questions you consider merely friendly could be considered invasions of privacy in some cultures. Pay attention to any signs that your questions or friendly overtures are making family members uncomfortable. If they are, stop what you’re doing and think of alternative ways to get to know the individuals and to earn their trust. Be patient—some families may have had unhappy experiences that make it difficult for them to develop trust.

3. **Make sure that programs reflect the cultures of the children who are served.**

   Reflecting their cultures serves several important purposes:

   - First, it helps the children develop positive cultural identities. Simple efforts—such as putting ethnic art on a wall, serving ethnic foods, and teaching ethnic games or songs—can have lasting effects.
   - Second, it tells family members that you acknowledge the value of their culture, which helps to build trust between the family and the program.
   - Third, it gives family members opportunities to participate in activities where they are the experts. For example, family members can suggest arts or crafts to be displayed; demonstrate how to prepare ethnic foods; show how cultural holidays are celebrated; teach crafts and describe their significance; and tell traditional stories. Success in these activities may encourage family members to participate in other activities, such as advisory committees, fund-raising, or program planning.
The following case study illustrates how one program encouraged Latino families to become more involved:

- Parents of Latino children were asked to provide a list of Spanish words used by children in their homes. Each week, the staff introduced one new Spanish word for all the children to learn.
- Family members were also asked to provide recipes of some of their children’s favorite ethnic foods, and these foods were included in meals at the program.
- A Latino grandparent told the children family stories that had been passed on from generation to generation.
- A Latino parent introduced the children to piñatas and explained how they were used in family celebrations.
- Because many Latino parents were employed during regular program hours, other family members (such as teens who got out of school early in the day and members of the extended family) were invited to share information or knowledge.
- Eventually, Latino family members participated in advisory committees and fundraisers.

This training program was developed by Maureen T. Mulroy, Ph.D., Extension Specialist, School of Family Studies, University of Connecticut, and Joan Bothell.

For more information on family involvement, families, or working with parents, see:
- www.cyfemen.org
- www.ed.gov/pubs/parents
- www.familyeducation.com
- www.kidsource.com
- www.ncb.gov/parents
- www.nea.org/parents
- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus
- www.nnc.org
- www.npni.org/initiatives
- www.parent.net/article/index
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- www.npin.org/initiatives
- www.parent.net/article/index
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- www.parentsoup.com
- www.projectappleseed.org
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