

Indicator: The school provides parents/guardians with practical guidance to maintain regular and supportive verbal interactions with their children. (5185)

Language development begins at birth and centers on the child's interactions with his or her parents. Several parent/child interactions are important in preparing the child to learn in school: talking to the infant, listening attentively to the child, reading to children and listening to them read, talking about what the parent and the child are reading, storytelling, daily conversation and letter writing. It is difficult to separate verbal interactions from the emotional and affective bonds that accompany them. For that reason, the parents' expressions of affection are included with verbal activities as essential to the parent/child relationship. Also important is a constant demonstration by parents that learning is a natural part of life—joyful in its own right, part of the family experience, and especially exhilarating when encountered through discovery at such places as museums, zoos, and historical sites. (Redding, 2000, p. 9)

Researcher William Jaynes' meta-analyses have shown that the most highly correlated components of parental involvement are also subtle—high expectations, loving and effective communication, and a parental style that is both supportive and provides structure (see Jaynes, 2011a, 2011b). Research has also shown that low-income families tend to speak with, encourage, and read to their children less frequently than those in wealthier families (Hart & Risley, 1995; Walberg, 2011). Teachers can, in respectful and creative ways, encourage parents to communicate and support their children. Teachers can also model high expectations and supportive interactions with students.

Email is becoming more and more widely available to parents and is a valuable tool for home–school communications. Teachers must be sensitive to the reality that not all parents have access (or consistent access) to email and other web-based communications. However, when available, many parents seem to prefer it as a method of communication (see, e.g., Blaik Hourani, Stringer, & Baker, 2012). “Two-way communication involves the importance of listening as well as informing” (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26); email provides one means of inviting two-way communication at a time convenient to each party. Open-ended questions inviting responses may initiate productive conversation (e.g., “What do you think is going well in terms of your child's learning?” see Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007, p. 89).

Ramirez states, “Most communication between the teacher and the parents revolves around disciplinary actions or student grades,” but by establishing positive conversation with families, “both the parent and the student will become allies” (2002, p. 56). Parents appreciate knowing how their children are doing, what the school is doing, what the school expects of parents, and how parents may contribute to the operation and improvement of the school (ADI, 2010). Family members will benefit from receiving “practical, jargon-free guidance on ways to maintain supportive verbal interaction with their children, establish a quiet place for study at home, encourage good reading and study habits, and model and support respectful and responsible behaviors” (CII, 2011, p. 185).

Graham-Clay (2005) reminds teachers that a primary goal of effective written communication (including electronic writing) is to “organize concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it” (p. 119). Guidance should be carefully worded; offering a workshop or tip sheet on “parenting” may insult families (e.g., “They think we're not doing a good job! I don't want someone telling my how to raise *my* kids;” Henderson et al., 2007, p. 83). Instead, offer suggestions for maximizing learning outside of school, and invite the families to suggest specific topics of interest.

Teachers should recognize that parents of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels do value education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but many face barriers such as language differences, a lack of familiarity or prior negative experiences with the U.S. educational system, a desire to not interfere with how teachers do their jobs, and outside stressors (Vera et al., 2012). A unifying thread in many success stories is “the philosophy of working *in collaboration* with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do” (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). Teacher training can bring awareness of the deficit view many hold toward parents of poverty, language difference, or low education by showing how to recognize and build on families' strengths and funds of knowledge (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Moll & González, 2004). “When school staff have a better understanding of their students' home cultures, families' parenting practices, home contexts, home crises, or significant family and community events, they can develop processes and strategies to bridge school-based and home-based activities and increase support for student learning” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 14).

Learning about families' funds of knowledge can provide culturally relevant prompts to encourage verbal interaction between parents and students. In a randomized experimental study, Kraft and Dougherty (in press) found that frequent teacher phone calls and text/written messages with families

increased students' engagement. Interactive homework is another option, in which students are asked to engage with a family member on a topic relevant to their curriculum. Redding (2006) gives a specific example, Reading School–Home Links (available free from the U.S. Dept. of Education in English and Spanish, 1999) which provide interactive reading activities aligned to standards for grades K–3. Also, Van Voorhis (2003, 2011a, 2011b) has done several studies based on TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork, an interactive homework tool developed by Epstein, Van Voorhis, and colleagues). Email with families regarding these assignments can be useful in encouraging participation. Family math or reading nights hosted at the school can also be extended by email follow-ups suggesting fun learning activities that can be done with low- or no-cost materials at home.

School websites can provide easy access to electronic student progress reporting systems through a link on the school's main webpage. Many systems provide parents with an option to receive automatic emails with updates. Even when a school does not have an electronic student progress reporting system, school websites can be a valuable source of information for parents and offer a convenient and efficient way of keeping communication flowing between parents and the school (ADI, 2011).

Busy families can fall out of the habit of daily conversation. Asking parents to spend at least one minute each day in private conversation with each child, primarily listening to the child tell about his or her day without distraction from other family members or television, will demonstrate how rare and precious such moments can be. Sharing these experiences with other parents, in small-group settings, amplifies their impact. (Redding, 2000, p. 10)

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