



**Indicator:** All teachers meet with family members (parents or guardians) formally at least two times a year to engage in two-way communication regarding students' cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development outside the classroom. (5187)

**Explanation:** A strong relationship exists between communication between teachers and family members (parents and guardians) and children's outcomes (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). Family and home environment play a role in the development of preschool children's academic skills (Anders, et al., 2012). Multiple methods of communication with parents/guardians (hereafter referred to as "family") are important, from informal face-to-face chats or notes to formal meetings, for a teacher to have a more complete understanding of the student. By engaging with families, the teacher can elicit and incorporate family member knowledge of the student to individualize and support that student's learning. Families' input on their child's development outside the classroom is a data source that a teacher can use to triangulate with data collected inside the classroom. Moreover, it is important for families to hear about their children's development from their child's teacher. As such, two-way communication between teachers and families is critical to support student's ongoing learning.

**Questions:** Are teachers engaged in two-way communication with families around students' ongoing learning? Does every teacher meet with family members at least two times a year in a formal meeting? Does the teacher present information about students' growth in each of the developmental domains? Are families' opinions and observations respected and taken into account to support their child's development? Do teachers conduct meetings in a manner that is culturally and linguistically appropriate for the family?

Ms. Lin strives to ensure that her kindergarten students receive a comprehensive, robust experience. She believes it is important for parents to feel included and aware of their child's learning experience. Each week she sends home a newsletter detailing the learning objectives of the week (across all domains) and the activities and projects students engaged in to reach the objectives.

While a few parents ask her for more information about their individual child's learning in the areas covered in the newsletter, most parents do not provide any response or feedback. Ms. Lin is not sure if parents are extending learning around the objectives at home. Despite the newsletters, when the time for quarterly parent meetings arrives, many parents are surprised or unaware of the areas in which their child needs more support.

Additionally, during family meetings, Ms. Lin hears that for some children who are performing at lower developmental levels in school, parents report are performing quite well at home. For example, a mother of a girl who rarely spoke during the first three months of school informed Ms. Lin that her daughter is quite talkative at home and has an extensive vocabulary. Ms. Lin feels uncomfortable when she hears this since she had presumed that the child had very limited language skills and had been talking to her using very simple words.

Three different issues appear to be a challenge for Ms. Lin. She is concerned that some of the parents who receive the newsletter do not know what to do with the information. She realizes they may know all the domains and con-

tent covered in class during the week, but might not know how to best support students' development at home. She wonders how she could better support parents in engaging their children in learning experiences at home

Ms. Lin also realizes that if she knew more about what was happening at home, she could help individualize the instruction she provides to children in her classroom to reinforce and build on their home experiences. If she had gathered more information about the home environment, Ms. Lin could better involve parents in the decision and goal-setting process. Finally, she realizes that while she has wanted to actively communicate with families, she has not yet adequately created a culture where parents feel comfortable regularly communicating with her and engaging in classroom activities.

The National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group defines family engagement as:

- A shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.
- Continuous across a child's life, spanning from Early Head Start programs to college preparation high schools.
- A process carried out everywhere that children learn – at home, in pre-kindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2014).

Research shows that family engagement<sup>1</sup> and involvement provides a number of benefits for young children academically and socially, including literacy and math skills (Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013; Henderson, & Mapp, 2002). Van Voorhees et al. (2013) examined nearly 100 family involvement research studies and found that “parents from diverse backgrounds, when given direction, can increase their involvement with their children's learning at home and at school and that, when parents are more involved and more engaged, children tend to do better academically and so-

<sup>1</sup> The term family engagement is used instead of parent engagement to account for children in homes where grandparents or guardians are the primary caregivers.

cially.” Barnard (2004) studied the relationship between parental involvement in elementary school and students' high school success and found that early parental involvement in a child's education was associated with positive long-term effects. Communicating and involving parents is a key part of parent engagement. Engaging families in two-way communication is one of six principles for effective family engagement identified by the NAEYC Engaging Diverse Families project (NAEYC, n.d.).

For teachers, families' knowledge of a child's development outside the classroom, their home experiences, their community engagements, is valuable to provide a whole picture of the child and to inform instruction with that child inside the classroom. This information can help teachers understand what the student is exposed to at home and how they can best support growth in the classroom (Head Start National Center on Parent, Family & Community Engagement, 2014). Additionally, families can help the teacher understand the cultural and linguistic environment the student lives in outside the classroom (Head Start National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, 2014).

To effectively engage families teachers need create a welcoming environment for the family, and need to consider the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the families (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009). Scheduling regular in person meetings is one important mechanisms to engage in a goal-setting process.

### References and Resources

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