

The Importance of Family Engagement in Learning

“...The greatest untapped resource for dealing with the problems of America’s school children may in fact be parents. They are economical, have a vested interest in their children’s achievement and apparently are eager to help.”

–Source: “Learning Begins at Home: Parents as Teachers.”
Washington Post, Donna Hilts, August 9, 1981.



Patricia Edwards

Patricia Edwards is a professor of teacher education, the first African American president of the Literacy Research Association (formerly the National Reading Conference), and the 2010-2011 President of the International Reading Association. She has developed two nationally acclaimed family literacy programs: Parents as Partners in Reading and Talking Your Way to Literacy. Her research focuses on issues related to families and children. She is a coauthor of Three Cheers for Pre-K from Savvas Learning Company.

Families are their children’s first teachers and they have a powerful effect on young children’s development. Family engagement during the first years of life can support a preschool child’s readiness for school and ongoing academic and lifelong success. Research shows that when children have involved parents, the results are very positive, especially over the long term. (Henderson & Mapp, A New Wave of Evidence, 2002; Edwards, 2016; Edwards et al, 2019)

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. From the moment babies are born, they start developing literacy skills through their relationship with their parents. When parents talk, read, sing, and play with their infant or toddler, they provide the foundation of their child’s need to develop language and reading skills. It is never too early for parents to start providing the kinds of experiences that will help their child enter school ready to succeed. “School readiness” refers to the academic knowledge, independence, communication, and social skills children need to do well in school. Getting children ready for school requires parents to spend time reading, talking, and playing with their children.

Families shape the critical first few years of the child's life and influence all aspects of a child's development. Schools, through teachers, have the designated responsibility for educating the child. They also have the obligation for building partnerships with families so that the education process is optimized. When parents and teachers work together to help a child achieve his or her childhood milestones, it creates a safe environment in which to grow and learn.

Successful early childhood education depends on relationships and collaborations with children's families and communities. When families are involved in the preschool program, they may also feel more vested in what happens there and more competent in their role as parents. Through these interactions and relationships, families may learn additional strategies from the preschool teacher to promote development and learning at home. In turn, the preschool teacher may learn additional strategies

to support learning in school. Such strategies include expanding children's language, building on their cultural background and experiences, reading stories aloud, asking open-ended questions, encouraging children's efforts, identifying feelings and emotions, or responding calmly to behavior that challenges.

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Partnering with parents in early childhood education allows children to see important people in their lives working together. When children see positive interactions between parents and educators, they begin to understand the importance of building healthy relationships. Children feel safer with teachers and staff who are visibly respected and trusted by their parents, and this allows them to feel comfortable and focus on learning. Although parents may be informed of what their children are doing, they do not necessarily know why these activities are important and how they tie into their overall development. One of the goals of *Three Cheers for Pre-K* is designing lessons so that teachers and families are on the same page. More importantly, families will understand why their child's preschool teacher is asking them to be involved in curriculum-based family engagement activities.

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References

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