

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Engaging Families in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade:
Building a Strong Foundation for the New York State
Learning Standards



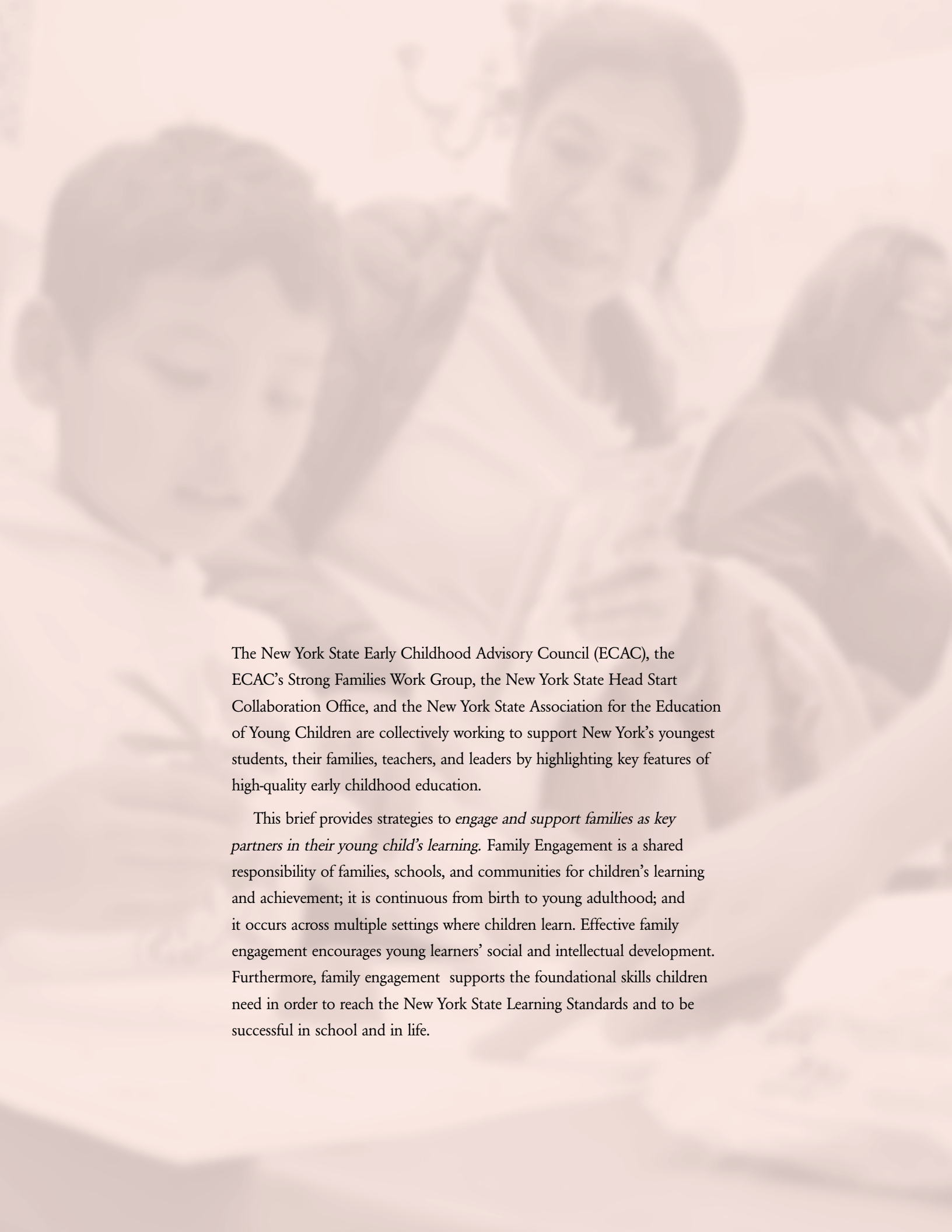
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Family
Engagement



The New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), the ECAC's Strong Families Work Group, the New York State Head Start Collaboration Office, and the New York State Association for the Education of Young Children are collectively working to support New York's youngest students, their families, teachers, and leaders by highlighting key features of high-quality early childhood education.

This brief provides strategies to *engage and support families as key partners in their young child's learning*. Family Engagement is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities for children's learning and achievement; it is continuous from birth to young adulthood; and it occurs across multiple settings where children learn. Effective family engagement encourages young learners' social and intellectual development. Furthermore, family engagement supports the foundational skills children need in order to reach the New York State Learning Standards and to be successful in school and in life.



Family Engagement in a Welcoming School Helps Young Children Learn

A family's influence on a child's growth and development is paramount. Indeed, "from the beginning, parents and other caregivers nurture the capacities children will need to be ready for school."¹ As such, great teaching happens when families and teachers contribute to enriching children's early learning and development. Great teaching builds on children's experiences at home and in their communities; it is grounded in each and every child's culture.

Schools' support of families is crucial in light of substantial evidence linking family involvement and well-being with children's development. Beginning in infancy and continuing throughout the elementary school years, children have better intellectual and social outcomes when their parents and family members encourage their development in responsive and playful ways. For example, studies show children's school readiness skills tend to be stronger when their parents participate in their child's early childhood program activities.² At the elementary school level, family engagement continues to be associated with higher cognitive and social skill development. Further, a hallmark of overall school success is a high degree of parent and community involvement.³ In other words, children and schools do better when families and schools work together to support young children's learning. This partnership only exists if families feel welcome in school and when leaders are committed to creating a nurturing school community.

Research indicates that schools with successful family engagement pursue several key strategies.⁴

1. Develop Family Partnerships to Support Children's Well-being:

Teachers and families share a commitment to supporting children's development in all domains, including approaches to learning, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, and physical well-being. In schools with a robust commitment to family engagement, communication is multi-faceted. It extends well beyond semi-annual parent-teacher conferences and includes ongoing two-way communication about children's strengths, opportunities for growth, and goals. In addition to face-to-face communications, teachers may

send home written notes and also use emails and private photo sharing venues to engage in an ongoing dialogue about the children’s learning. Teachers can assist parents by providing suggestions on ways to share information with them and other school personnel. Robust communication is coupled with resources and strategies that families and teachers use to help children reach their goals.

2. Create a Welcoming Environment for Every Family:

Leaders and teachers, as well as, administrative, security, and custodial staff can work together to create a warm and welcoming environment that begins with a families’ first point of contact with the school. For example, the registration process, a teacher’s introductory letter and/or email, or a first bus ride are all opportunities to build trusting relationships with each family. Additionally, schools that create opportunities, such as peer learning groups and social events for families to develop positive relationships with one another, help to engage families.

3. Offer Family and Community Support:

Program leaders and teachers leverage school and community resources and policies to facilitate strong family engagement and help families reach their goals for their children’s well-being. They also adopt school-community partnerships to help families’ access health and social services.

4. Implement Comprehensive Transition Plans:

The transition from an early childhood program or home into school is a pivotal moment for building positive relationships with families that can extend throughout their child’s academic career. Early childhood and elementary school leaders and teachers share the responsibility for developing and implementing comprehensive transition plans to support children and families as they begin prekindergarten and kindergarten programs (see text box).

New York’s Diverse Families

Families in New York are diverse. They are made up of parents, guardians, stepparents, grandparents, siblings, and others living in the household. Families come from a rich variety of cultural and language backgrounds, values, and traditions. From their experiences, families bring a unique perspective to their child’s education. Because families come in all shapes and sizes, schools need to take great care to ensure family engagement is inclusive. For example, instead of hosting a Father’s or Mother’s Day celebration, which can be hurtful or exclusive to children with one parent or same sex parents, schools can have a “bring an important adult to school day.” Schools can also plan the event at a location and time so that all children and their special adult can participate.



Effective family involvement evolves as children begin prekindergarten and then move through elementary school.

- **In prekindergarten**, teachers and leaders engage families to set a positive tone and respect for families' ongoing commitment to their children's learning. Family and community engagement includes specific attention to connecting family members to available services in the community that can support them as their child's first and most influential teachers. At the prekindergarten level, family engagement also includes careful attention to helping children and family members navigate transitions into kindergarten and, when indicated, special education services and therapies.
- **Kindergarten** is the first public school experience for many young children and their families. Careful attention must be paid to kindergarten registration and enrollment practices to ensure families are informed and welcomed into the school community. Daily separation and reunion with a parent or caregiver should be valued and supported.
- **In 1st to 3rd grade**, as children move into the early elementary school grades, opportunities for teachers to connect with their young students' families may become less frequent, making it even more important that teachers create ways to form partnerships with students' families.

Transition to Kindergarten & Early Elementary Grades: Building Connections for Success

Family engagement is particularly significant when it comes to supporting children's transitions. From the early years through 3rd grade, children will experience multiple changes in their caregivers, teachers, and learning environments. Each change represents an important opportunity for family/school collaboration to ensure that children thrive when they experience significant transitions. Indeed, "each day families have a significant transition to make as they entrust their children into a care and educational setting outside their control."⁵

From birth until kindergarten entry, most children experience transitions as they move from the care of their parents and other family members into a group care setting (including child care in a community center, child care in someone's home, or a prekindergarten class). Because infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children crave continuity in caregivers, family members and teachers can work together to develop open communication so they have a shared understanding of each child's abilities, languages and experiences. Establishing procedures for teachers and families to connect about the things that impact a child's day, from the big life events such as a move or new sibling

to the simple events such as a rough night with little sleep, can vastly improve transitions and the way that teachers and families care for and educate young children.

The transition to kindergarten represents a significant change for many young children as they start "big kid school." At home and in early care and learning settings, children have been getting ready for kindergarten in overt and also in subtle ways. For example, when children watch their older siblings and neighbors take the bus or walk to school, they are gaining insights about what will happen in elementary school. Welcoming each child and understanding their prior experience can best be achieved with strong and supportive relationships with a child's family members. School leaders who encourage teachers to interact individually with families give that teacher and each family a leg up as the children and adults adjust to a new school environment. This meaningful interaction can be done through promoting home visits, phone calls, and even virtual communications (e.g., using Skype or secure YouTube channels). Communicating in the language families' prefer or providing interpretation/translation services can pay a variety of dividends well into the

multilingual child's academic experience. Transition plans that address special needs of children with disabilities and of children who are receiving English Language Learner (ELL) services take into consideration that these families are dealing with the same challenges that any other family does, as well as overseeing the additional needs of their children. For example, families whose children received services from birth until the age of three as part of the New York State Department of Health's Early Intervention Program transition from one system to another when entering the school system overseen by the New York State Department of Education.

Transitions in the early elementary school grades rarely get the same degree of attention as kindergarten transitions. They are, however, just as important in the eyes of a child. As children move from summer into the next school year, they may have anxiety about their new teacher, whether they will have friends in their new class, their language skills, and what they will be expected to do academically. A welcoming school and classroom environment is important to the children and families who are undergoing these elementary grades transitions and depends on good communication and family support. Inviting families to participate in classroom activities early in the year can help set a positive tone and cultivate a strong and supportive classroom community. Furthermore, the practice of

sending families personalized communication about how their child is doing and his or her strengths within the first few weeks of school can help develop a mutual commitment to student learning. This practice can also build a positive rapport between teachers and families that lays the foundation for a great school year of learning.

Early childhood program and school leaders can implement many important policies and practices that support continuity for young learners. Joint professional development for teachers in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and the early elementary school grades helps ensure shared instructional approaches and consistent learning goals. It also builds positive relationships among teachers, who will be guiding children's academic journeys. The development of aligned curricula and assessments ensures that learning builds as children move from one grade level to the next. The establishment of local kindergarten transition teams or a local transitions coordinator ensures the community has dedicated capacity to engage families so they can have smooth transitions. To aid leaders in their planning, New York's State Education Department (NYSED) provides a prekindergarten transitions tool that elementary school leaders can use to evaluate and guide their efforts to ensure children experience smooth transitions at kindergarten entry. www.p12.nysed.gov/upk.



Great Teaching Engages and Involves Families

Effective family engagement strategies are woven throughout the major features of high-quality early childhood teaching that are written about in the other briefs in this series: curriculum, assessment, interactions, and the environment.⁶

Curriculum

In order to engage families as partners in their children's education, it is important to help them understand how young children learn through play and responsive interactions with their family members, teachers, and peers. Through these practices, families can better understand how a comprehensive and developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate curriculum helps children gain the skills and knowledge that will support their language development and long-term academic and intellectual growth.

Assessment

Teachers use a variety of techniques to understand and build on children's knowledge and abilities in order to individualize instruction. To carry out high-quality assessments, it is important to engage families in understanding children's home language, prior experience, and abilities through conversations, surveys, or other informational gathering strategies. Teachers should also share assessment results and plans with families so they can work together to support children's development.

Furthermore, schools can work with community partners to offer families developmental screenings for young children as early as possible. Screening children before a child enters school helps identify needs early, which is when intervention can have the biggest impact. Developmental screening can also serve as a school's first positive touch point with families.

Interactions

Strong relationships develop when teachers foster regular, respectful, two-way communication that emphasizes each child's strengths. Teachers and leaders also support positive interactions by inviting families to participate in their child's school learning with fun at-home reading and hands-on activities in English and their home language, if multilingual. At the same time, families should be encouraged to share their skills, languages, and traditions, not just on special occasions, but as true partners in the everyday teaching and learning process.



Environment

Positive classroom and school environments expand on the diverse backgrounds, languages, and cultures of the children and the community. When the environment includes books, music, photos of children's families and their communities, drawings, and materials that reflect the children's families and languages, young learners feel secure and valued in the classroom community. They know they belong.⁷



High-Quality Family Engagement in Action

In a high-quality kindergarten, school leaders and teachers have a plan for family engagement that begins before a child's first day of school. It starts with building a strong sense of community in which each and every family feels valued. As soon as the class lists are developed, teachers call, or send a letter in a child's home language to each child's family, to introduce him or herself, learn about the child's background and interests, and answer questions. Parents are invited to visit the classroom with their child before school starts to see their child's cubby, drop off supplies, and meet the teachers, the other children, and their families.

When the school year starts, the team of kindergarten teachers has worked together to develop a series of materials to accompany their lesson plans. For instance, at the beginning of a unit on plants, the teachers send home a brief letter, email, or text message, written in the child's home language, about the key concepts that the children will learn. This includes important vocabulary, mathematical concepts, and the way that the class will observe, question, and investigate the plants' growth. These concepts are the content and critical thinking skills

embedded in the New York State Learning Standards. Then, each week of the plant study, teachers update families by sending a newsletter with interesting facts about the lesson, pictures of the children, and ways that children may see the life cycle at home and in their communities. The newsletter also shares tips for parents to reinforce the ideas that the children are learning in the classroom in order to support meaningful conversations about the work children are doing in school.

The school also helps families support their child's learning by creating opportunities for families to feel connected to the class and one another. For example, teachers extend an invitation in all pertinent languages to all families to come in on the first Friday of each month to eat lunch with the class. The school has parent-teacher conferences three times during the year. The class parents and teachers also work together to arrange regular family gatherings at a convenient location (e.g., school, local park) so that the families can get to know one another. Family game nights, basketball clubs, and other fun and active events also can help entice some families who may not have had a positive school experience themselves to get involved.



Family Engagement Supports Essential Skills in the New York State Learning Standards

The New York State Learning Standards describe the knowledge and skills in math, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language that students should gain as they advance through the grades. NYSED developed the **Prekindergarten Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards** to align with the New York State Learning Standards for K-12th grade to foster a cohesive foundational approach to instruction in prekindergarten through early elementary school. This tool addresses five essential early learning domains: approaches to learning, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, and physical well-being. The cognition and general knowledge domain reflects the competencies of the New York State Learning Standards. The New York State Learning Standards and the Prekindergarten Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards's developmentally appropriate practices both support interdisciplinary learning, higher order thinking, creativity, and the use of language and literacy skills throughout the day.

Teaching that helps children attain these learning goals finds a balance between child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and focused experiential learning guided by teachers as displayed in Figure 1.⁸ Neither didactic techniques nor hands-off approaches work as well.

Early childhood and elementary school teachers who use a balanced approach see positive results across all developmental domains.⁹ Furthermore, by creating a home-school communication loop, teachers can benefit from valuable information about each child's individual development and better understand knowledge that children bring to their learning. Teachers and families can work together to provide children with purposeful play that fosters deep learning, language development, and the essential skills that the New York State Learning Standards promote. Schools can help



parents to know about what their children are learning, what they enjoy, and what they have mastered. In short, the New York State Learning Standards' new and rigorous expectations for students' learning reinforce the need for strong collaboration between schools and families in support of children's learning.



Figure 1. Early Childhood Instructional Continuum¹⁰

The red section depicts the “sweet spot” for maximum learning, trust and discovery.



Strategies for Teachers¹⁰

- Welcome new children and families at the beginning of the school year (or mid-year or at any entry point if a child moves into the school district) by sharing your interests and background. Also let families know how they can be involved in the school and in their child's education, as well as, what their first week will look like. The child and family's first impression of their new school is critical for building a positive relationship.
- Establish a warm and inviting school climate for staff, parents, children, volunteers, and visitors.
- Develop activities that are interactive, informal, and fun for families to do with their children to extend children's learning at home. These activities should not be considered homework, but rather as family fun ideas in English and their home languages.
- Clearly communicate with families in their home language and through multiple methods to ensure all families are informed about their children's education and the school community in ways that all families can access (i.e., electronically, paper, phone,



in-person, in small groups). Ask families for their preferred language and method of communication.

- Share with families the many ways that young children gain foundational skills through linguistically and developmentally appropriate practice and purposeful play.
- Help connect families with resources and services that can support their capacity to actively partner with you in support of children's learning.

Strategies for Leaders

- Create a school culture that values home-school partnership through joint professional development. Staff who honor families as an important resource and families who are prepared and excited about supporting their child's learning are better able to form meaningful partnerships.
- Communicate with families at the beginning of the student's enrollment to develop a positive ongoing relationship in support of children's social and emotional development and learning. Provide families with a tour of the school and a chance to meet the teachers. If this is not possible, provide a secure link to a 'virtual' tour of the school and 'meet' the teachers and bus drivers.
- Provide appropriate interpretation/translation services for each family. School districts can be assisted with securing services through the NYSED Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages' Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network. www.p12.nysed.gov/biling/bilinged/betac.html
- Ask or survey parents to find out if they feel welcome at school, in their child's classroom, and at afterschool events. Solicit suggestions on ways to help all families feel welcome in their school.
- Work with the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) to establish a system to welcome and invite the participation of new families to the school community, including families of children with disabilities and those whose children are receiving English Language services.
- Hire linguistically diverse and culturally competent New York State certified teachers with expertise in early development and who are able to meet the needs of all learners to teach in prekindergarten through 3rd grade.
- Provide joint professional development that is interactive, allows time to practice new skills, and encourages responsive and appropriate family and community engagement for teachers from prekindergarten through 3rd grade.
- Provide instructional support in children's home language.
- Ensure teachers have dedicated time to have meaningful interactions with families at the beginning of the school year to build a trusting, positive, and reciprocal relationship that can flourish throughout the year.
- Implement a process and dedicate staff for collaborating with families, and early learning providers. Additionally build relationships with local private and public agencies and offices such as NYSED's Regional Bilingual Education Resource Networks and the Regional Special Education Technical Assistance Support Centers (RSE-TASC), or Early Childhood Directions Centers to fully understand children and families prior to school entry. www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed
- Establish or strengthen community/school - kindergarten transition teams that include community child care, nursery schools, faith-based organizations, special education providers, the local library, and others in the community who work with children.
- Provide information to families on the transition to and from each level from preschool through 3rd grade, including registration guidelines, placement options, teacher expectations, and health and nutrition information.
- Provide families with a clear and linguistically appropriate line of communication to the teacher, principal, nurse, and social worker, as well as, provide information about what kinds of supports the staff can offer parents and children.
- Provide information to all families about what to do if their child feels scared or bullied at school or on the bus. Also post such information on the school's website.

Resources

- The Center for the Study of Social Policy Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework: Program Assessment and Supports: www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/practice
- Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP): www.hfrp.org
- The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/school-readiness
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children Engaging Diverse Families Project: www.naeyc.org/familyengagement
- The New York State Education Department: www.p12.nysed.gov/upk; www.p12.nysed.gov/biling; www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed
- National PTA: www.pta.org

Sources

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- ⁵ Curtis, D. & Carter, M. (2008). *Learning together with young children: A curriculum framework for reflective teachers*. St Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- ⁶ For more information about these features of high-quality early childhood education, please see the other research briefs in this series. Download for free right here www.bit.ly/1AzskcY
- ⁷ Curtis, D. & Carter, M. (2008). *Learning together with young children: A curriculum framework for reflective teachers*. St Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- ⁸ Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2011). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. Alliance for Childhood. Retrieved January 14, 2014 from www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/kindergarten_report.pdf.
- ⁹ Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2011).
- ¹⁰ A detailed description of teaching competencies to support family and community relationships are provided in The New York State Core Body of Knowledge. www.earlychildhoodny.org/nywfc/cbk.php.

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At least once a month during the spring and summer months toddlers, preschoolers and their parents are invited to participate in Gardening Day at an ABCD center where parents, children, and staff join together in a spirit of community and partnership. Additionally families get to pick and eat the food that grows in the garden.



To learn more and view the other briefs in this series that address curriculum, the classroom environment, instruction and interactions, assessment and family engagement, please visit the New York ECAC website at www.nysecac.org or contact Patty Persell at Patricia.persell@ccf.ny.gov

