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A Guide for Educators:

Helping Families Engage in Their Children's Learning

A research-based guide to support teachers and administrators in creating a vibrant school community by developing partnerships and by helping their students' families to better understand:

- State Learning Standards
- College and Career Readiness
- Family Practices to Help Children Learn
- Family-School Relationships

Find this guide and many other resources and information on our services at www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org or call 1-800-759-1495.

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All families want their children to succeed in school.

This guide is designed to give teachers, principals, and other school staff information and tips to partner with parents, grandparents, and other caregivers to improve every student's potential for success in school from prekindergarten all the way through high school.

Solid research shows that children from homes where families are engaged with their children, other parents, and their children's schools:



Earn better grades,



Get better test scores,



Enjoy school more, and



Are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college or technical school.

Becoming and Sustaining a Vibrant School Community

Too often, teachers and administrators report feeling less than well prepared to interact with and engage families in their children's learning and to create a positive school climate. Other school staff—including but not limited to front office staff, paraprofessionals/aides, therapists and specialists, custodial and cafeteria staff, and bus drivers—often receive no training at all, and yet they are vital members of the school community and have an important role in making sure students and families feel welcome and respected. School leaders can use the suggested actions below to create a vibrant school community.

Creating a sense of community within the school

- Set the tone—have outsiders visit your building and offer feedback on how welcome they feel and then take steps for improvement—both in the physical aspects (signage, etc.) and in the way people interact.
- Convene groups with stakeholder representatives (parents, teachers, administrators, community members) to help facilitate shared leadership and common purpose.
- Jointly create policies that define roles and goals of the school community, then make plans with timelines to meet the goals.
- Offer opportunities for further education (for families and staff together, if possible).
- Provide multiple opportunities for association and shared celebration with the entire school community, including families, throughout the school year.

Reach out to all stakeholders

- Use multiple means to contact families and invite two-way communication.
- Conduct home visits (and/or meet families in their neighborhoods), using established best practices.
- Encourage informal home gatherings where parents gather in one parent's home and someone representing the school is included, usually a teacher, to discuss supporting the purpose of the school.
- If the school has several immigrant families who come from more collectivistic cultures (compared with the individualistic U.S. culture), consider offering more group meetings rather than or in addition to individual conferences.
- Invite the community at large to become active in supporting the school community and to celebrate the school's victories.

Provide professional development for effective communication with families

- Rehearse using everyday language without acronyms or educational jargon.
- Practice active listening techniques using role playing and other methods with attention also given to nonverbal communication.
- Use open-ended questions which are nonthreatening and encourage description.
- Promote empathetic understanding by using verbal reflection of content and feelings.
- Learn about students' and families' cultural norms that might affect communication; for example, nodding may or may not imply agreement. Another example: School personnel born and raised in the U.S. expect to have eye contact during conversation as a basic sign of attention and respect from the listener. However, for many other cultures, the opposite is true—looking away or down shows respect and deference to the speaker.
- Consider the wording of printed materials carefully, as words can be easily misinterpreted; for example, offering a workshop or tip sheet on “parenting” may insult families.

College and Career Readiness

Families' unique knowledge of their children positions them to support their children's learning and helps them look to the future with wonder and hope. The school can encourage families to explore questions with the child, such as: “What do I most enjoy learning about or doing?” and “Where will my education take me?”

Both families and teachers can help students see a connection between what they learn in school and how it may help them reach future goals. The many tips in the sections below will help schools support families in getting a child ready for a career including the steps needed to begin—often a college or trade school, depending upon the career chosen.

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Teachers and counselors also want to help students plan for the future, whether that is how to thrive in the next school grade or in their plans after graduation. Staff can help bridge home and school using these tips:



Let families know what is provided at school to help the students learn about career options.



Explain to families how teachers help students connect school learning with everyday life, including possible future occupations or areas of service.



Ensure teachers, counselors, or other leaders communicate with families in everyday language (avoiding jargon and using trained translators as needed) about what a child needs to do to prepare for a chosen or potential future path—selecting the right classes and activities to be on track may begin as early as fifth or sixth grade.



Encourage families to talk with their child frequently about the future and how important attitudes and actions right now may be in reaching future goals and dreams.



Explain to families how the school helps nurture personal competencies (cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, social/emotional) at school and what they can do to reinforce them at home. For more information on personal competencies, see *The Something Other: Personal Competencies for Learning and Life* and other resources [here](#).*

Curriculum of the Home: Family Practices to Help Children Learn

The “curriculum of the home” is made up of the patterns of family life that support a child’s ability to learn in school. Parenting practices and the relationship families build with each child’s school help the child succeed. School personnel sometimes do not recognize the power of these practices and therefore do not communicate about them or support them with families. However, research has demonstrated that the subtle actions, conversations, and attitudes of families are the strongest predictor of student success.

Every member of the school community, from the principal to the custodian, can understand and help in communicating to families their importance and value in the school community.

Remind families just talking with their child often about their hopes and dreams for the future is important! They don’t have to understand the advanced math homework to help.

Encourage family discussions of books, TV programs, web content, games, etc.

Promote the sharing of family stories and traditions; they give a sense of meaning and belonging.

Suggest that families establish a daily routine with regular mealtimes, bedtimes, homework/study time, and outdoor play/exercise time.

Find more tips and suggestions that can be shared with parents and families on cultivating the curriculum of the home—including the parent–child relationship, the routine of family life, and family expectations and supervision—in our free companion guide: [A Guide for Families: Helping Your Child Succeed in School](#)**

Family–School Relationships That Support Children’s Learning

It takes time and effort to build great relationships between home and school, but it is well worth it for the success of our students and our school community.

Communication

Children benefit from parents and teachers talking and listening to one another. Below are some opportunities for communication:

Positive phone calls/messages

- Establish positive communication with each family early in the school year. Setting the tone for partnership makes a huge difference in ensuring that any difficulties which may arise will be met with a team approach to finding solutions.
- Frequent, brief text messages to the family can increase students’ attendance and engagement.

Electronic communication

- Ask each family about preferred methods for ongoing, two-way, spoken and/or written communication.
- If your school uses an online portal, a learning management system, a communication application (smartphone app), email, or other methods to communicate, make sure families have opportunities to become familiar and comfortable in using them. This might be through workshops or webinars, etc.
- Ensure any families who do not have consistent access to reliable internet have other options for communication, homework completion, and other needs.

Parent–teacher (and parent–teacher–student) conferences

- Consider instituting student-led conferences, with the student demonstrating recent work and helping set future goals.
- Encourage families to bring questions they have to the conference and to discuss what is on their mind.
- Discuss the student’s strengths, both in academics and in social/emotional or character traits, and ask families to share about those they see in their child.
- Ask families about their child’s study habits and attitude toward school, and offer tips for supporting these in positive ways at home.
- Discuss with the family what they, you, and the child should do next to support learning.

Report cards

- Encourage families to set a time to meet if they have any questions or concerns about their child's report card.
- Discuss with the family how they can support their child in areas he/she may need to improve.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings (if the child has one)

- Make sure families understand what services are available to them and their child.
- If possible, have the staff person who conducted the child's assessments or other personnel meet with the family ahead of time to go over any test results and explain in everyday language what that means for the child and any options available, so the family can begin processing the information and ask questions they may have before the IEP meeting.
- Encourage families to be a part of the team that makes plans for the child. This means listening carefully to their input and concerns and addressing them in the plan.
- If a family's home language is not English, ensure a trained interpreter (per federal regulation and best practice) is available for the IEP and other meetings or conferences.

School or classroom newsletter and other notes from school

- Encourage families to check their child's backpack daily for flyers and read them (provide skilled translations for any families whose home language is not English).
- If families do not answer and return permission slips, emergency forms, or surveys in a timely fashion, consider trying other methods of communication—notes in the backpack are often not the most reliable method.



Involvement in School and Community

Remember, research shows parent involvement at home has the biggest effect on a child's school success. However, there are many other ways for families to be involved in their child's school and community. Encourage families to, if they can, participate in the school community.

Welcome families to school activities

- Invite families to interactive events with their children. These may be focused on a content area (like literacy or math) or on a theme linked to learning.
- Promote attendance at school plays, sports events, award ceremonies, concerts, and other gatherings. Even if their child isn't participating, these events are fun and great opportunities for families to get to know other parents, their children's friends, and teachers and other school staff.

Encourage family engagement related to adult education programs or workshops to support children's school success

- Survey families on what topics they would like to explore.
- Have parents lead such workshops for other parents and help recruit attendees.
- Provide logistical help to facilitate families' attendance—this may include transportation, snacks or meals, childcare or intergenerational activities, trained translators, etc.

Invite volunteers to help at school

- Here are just a few examples of things schools might ask parent/family volunteers to do:
 - Tutor and mentor children.
 - Go on field trips.
 - Supervise the playground or lunchroom.
 - Share hobbies and talents with the class.
 - Put up bulletin boards.
 - Help with a Parents' Bulletin Board or a Family Resource Library at the school.
 - Help plan and conduct Family Reading Night (or Game Night, etc.).
 - Collect and donate materials for projects.
 - Make costumes and props.
 - Make welcome signs.
 - Do projects for teachers at home and then bring them back to school.

Engage families in helping make decisions

- Ensure families are part of developing the school's compact and other family engagement policies and plans.
- Support an inclusive, welcoming, and active parent organization.
- Invite and support family participation on school committees and advisory boards.
- Enlist (non-staff) family members of currently enrolled students for the School Improvement Plan team.

Suggest ways to connect with the community

- Offer families a list of community resources, including contact names. This list may include the school, libraries, medical centers, community agencies, police and fire departments, and places of worship. Urge families to teach their children how to use this list.
- Encourage families to have a backup plan if the child cannot reach the parent. Who should they call? Where should they go?
- Suggest families participate with their children in community activities, such as block club parties, holiday parades, back-to-school events, etc.
- Encourage participation of families with children in programs offered by the public library.
- Promote registering children with their pictures and fingerprints when the school or police department offers this program.
- Suggest families volunteer with their children to help in the community—for instance, at a food pantry, visiting senior citizens, neighborhood cleanup, etc.



Homework

Homework can help students practice what they've learned, explore subjects more fully than time permits in school, and develop good habits and attitudes. Homework can also bring families and educators closer together; parents who supervise homework learn about their children's education.

Students learn best when homework is assigned regularly, graded, returned promptly, and used primarily to rehearse material first presented by the teacher at school. With this in mind, pass along these tips to families for making homework work for their child (find more detailed suggestions in our companion guide: [A Guide for Families: Helping Your Child Succeed in School](#))**

Be positive—your attitude about homework will make all the difference!

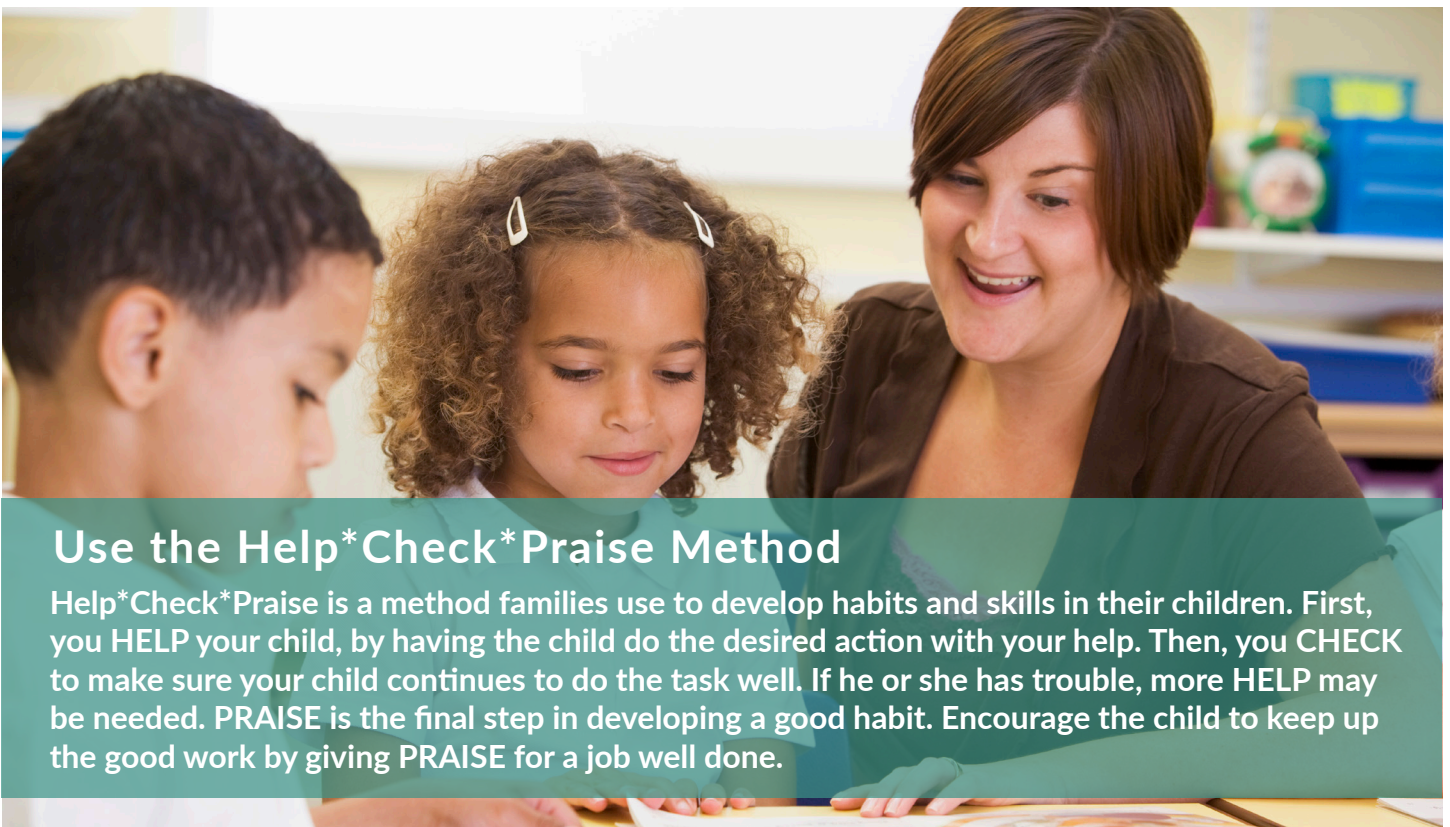
Set a regular study time and place

Keep supplies that might be needed nearby

Be interested, available, and supportive—without doing the work for the student

Help your child with time management

Reward persistence, progress, and hard work



Use the Help*Check*Praise Method

Help*Check*Praise is a method families use to develop habits and skills in their children. First, you **HELP** your child, by having the child do the desired action with your help. Then, you **CHECK** to make sure your child continues to do the task well. If he or she has trouble, more **HELP** may be needed. **PRAISE** is the final step in developing a good habit. Encourage the child to keep up the good work by giving **PRAISE** for a job well done.

Community–School Relationships That Support Children’s Learning

The neighborhood or larger community often has a vested interest in seeing that students succeed in school. With some strategic investment of time and resources in building relationships, outside individuals, groups, businesses, and organizations can contribute in creative and supportive ways to enhance students’ education.

Invite the community to invest in learning

- Encourage local businesses to partner with your school or classroom by providing financial support, volunteers, computers or other supplies, etc.
- Partner with nonprofit, health and wellness, faith-based, and other community organizations.

Find the time

- With the help of partners, grants, or strategic reallocation, invest time in establishing and maintaining partnerships.
- Consider creating a partnership liaison position, freeing up certain blocks of time for teachers and/or administrators, or other creative uses of time for communication and collaboration.

Strive for community–school partnerships to be win–win for all partners

- Establish healthy, open, regular communication.
- Build relationships on mutual respect and trust.
- Build consensus for shared mission, vision, and goals.

Keep “return on investment” in mind

- Businesses are interested in results, including both better prepared workers and increased traffic and sales (which in turn allows them to be more charitable).
- Business and other leaders are often interested in making a cultural contribution to schools and individual students and families, even when a financial return is not expected.
- Nonprofits and other groups hope for advancing their own mission as well as that of the school.



Note: A bibliography of research on family and community engagement is available on our website at <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/English.aspx>

Visit www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org to access our free [Resources in English](#), [Recursos en Español](#) and [Parent Resources searchable database](#), learn about [our services](#) to build your school community, and much more.

*Further information about personal competencies may be found at <http://www.centeril.org/research.html>

**A Guide for Families: Helping Your Child Succeed in School is available at <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/docs/FamilyGuide.pdf>

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