Honest, caring, understanding, and respectful exchanges with family members lead to their sharing important information with teachers that help to inform how to care and support each child’s learning and development. Taking the time to find out from family members about their child’s unique characteristics and needs plays an important role in providing teachers with the information needed to set up appropriate learning environments for individual children. Establishing positive relationships with families helps to bridge children’s experiences between the program and home, and it fosters children’s sense of belonging in the early education setting.

Figure 7.1 - When there is a trusting relationship that values the family, it is easier for parents to trust the care of their children to early educators.[1]

Teachers view families as children’s first teachers and seek their assessments of a child’s needs, interests, and abilities. Different families and communities have different views and expectations of three through five-year-olds. The effective early childhood educator recognizes, understands, and respects the values of children’s families and communities and attempts to make the environment as congruent with those values as possible. In high-quality early childhood programs, the teacher speaks frequently with family members and, whenever appropriate, strengthens the links between the home
and program. Frequent communication between program staff and family members is important, especially in the case of children with disabilities or other special needs. Through collaboration with families, preschool teachers can gain insight into ways in which they can be important contributors to the child’s learning and development. To support children’s learning across home and school contexts, the program can encourage family participation in activities at the early care and education program. [2]

“Family engagement with schools has been linked to important outcomes for children of all families, including families with children who are dual language learners . . . Numerous positive developmental child outcomes have been associated with family engagement, including early literacy skills, cognitive and language development skills . . . socio–emotional skills . . . and academic achievement.”


Programs and Teachers Build Relationships with Families

Programs convey an important message to families when they seek their views and collaborate with them in the care of their children. This message helps family members understand that their preferences and their concerns about the learning and development of their child are important to teachers and program leaders. When a teacher has open, honest, and understanding relationships with family members, the resulting links between the home and the early care and education setting often help their child feel safe and comfortable.

Programs

• Support the participation of all family members, being responsive to their cultural, linguistic, and economic differences, as well as to any disabilities or special needs of the children or a family member.
• Involve family members in making decisions about the program and its policies.
• Recognize and acknowledge that teen parents are still adolescents developmentally even though they are in an adult role as parents.
• Provide a way for families to give feedback to the program, such as regular evaluations or opportunities for informal discussion.
• Schedule regular meetings, social times, and other special events for families so that they can learn more about the program, get to know each other and staff members, and build a sense of community

Communication

• Seek and consider families’ views when identifying and hiring new staff members.
• Create an area for posting information for families (daily notices, outside services, child development information, community events, and job and education opportunities).
• Encourage communication between teachers and family members at the beginning and end of each day.
Teachers

- Share a child’s records with his or her family, including assessment information on the child’s learning, experiences, and developmental progress.
- Learn about the different families in the program.

Communication

- Engage in a two-way exchange of ideas, preferences, and child-rearing philosophies during the first meetings with family members, setting the tone for future communication.
- Listen, reflect, and respond when family members communicate concerns and ideas about their child.
- Initiate discussions with families to understand and resolve issues when they arise.
- Engage in communication with family members at the beginning and end of each day about the child’s care, activities, interests, and moods.
- Communicate to family members that they are always welcome to visit or call to check on their child.

Reflective Practice

Explore in discussions with family members both families’ and teachers’ assumptions about young children and how they learn.\(^4\)

Moving from Parent Involvement to Family Engagement

Family Engagement as Parent Involvement

Parent involvement refers to parent participation in the systems and activities the early childhood education program in ways that support them as the primary educators, nurturers and advocates for individual children and for all children enrolled in the program. Parent involvement refers to opportunities for parent participation in a variety of program activities that support child and adult development, including policy and program decision-making.

Family engagement refers to ongoing, goal-directed relationships between staff and families that are mutual, culturally responsive, and that support what is best for children and families both individually and collectively. Staff and families share responsibility for the learning and development of children, the progress toward outcomes for children and families, and for parent involvement in the program. Parent involvement is a part of this larger construct of family engagement.

Table 7.1 - Examples that Illustrate the Shift\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Involvement</th>
<th>Family Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement is primarily the responsibility</td>
<td>Family engagement is embedded in the work of</td>
</tr>
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### Parent Involvement

- of family services staff (or parent involvement specialists, home visitors, or transition specialists).

### Family Engagement

- all staff members, management systems and leadership priorities.

### Parent Involvement

- Parent involvement might revolve around outputs—for example, the number of parents who show up at a meeting.

### Family Engagement

- Family engagement focuses on evidence of positive, goal directed relationships, for example, that result in family progress in one (or more) of the seven outcome areas.

### Parent Involvement

- Parent involvement works with a small % of families involved in leadership opportunities (policy council, parent meetings, special events).

### Family Engagement

- Through ongoing relationships, family members are engaged in a variety of goal directed ways related to Parent and Family Engagement Outcomes.

### Parent Involvement

- Programs that involve parents collect data from children and families—for example, information about parent participation.

### Family Engagement

- Programs that engage families use child and family data to improve services. These programs help families understand and use child data to support their children’s progress and development.

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### Engaging and Collaborating with Families

#### Programs

- Develop and implement program policies that give families and staff members opportunities to observe and discuss children’s development and behavior.
- Support families by providing tools and resources that help them contribute to their children’s learning.
- Invite families to participate formally and informally in the development, governance, and evaluation of program services and policies, as appropriate.

#### Teachers

- Recognize that working with families promotes children’s development.
- Build relationships with families to ensure meaningful two-way collaboration, supporting the children’s learning and development and helping families to understand child development.
- Attentively greet family members when they arrive and depart from the program setting, and use those opportunities to exchange information about the family’s child.
• Contribute ideas and resources to promote each child’s learning and development in the home and community.
• Collaborate formally and informally with families and colleagues to share observations, describe children’s accomplishments, plan for children individually and as a group, and address concerns about children.
• Support families as decision makers for and educators of their children.
• Actively solicit and listen to families’ goals, aspirations, and concerns about their children’s development.

Figure 7.2 - Children thrive when their families are engaged and included in their early childhood education program.[6]

Home Language

Programs

• Create strategies to engage family members from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and invite family members to share goals and strategies for supporting children’s home languages in the group or classroom. This may require the use of interpreters and translators (please see table 6.2, “Sample Family Languages and Interests Interview,” in chapter 6 as a way to gather important information from families).

Teachers

• Learn a few words in each child’s home language, such as greetings, names of family members, words of comfort, and important objects or places. Parents and other family members can be good resources for learning their language.
• Seek and use resources to facilitate communication with family members in their home language, ensuring that all families are included.

[7]

“Acknowledge, Ask, and Adapt” By putting into practice the following steps for culturally responsive caregiving, you will gain the information you need to support appropriately the growth of all the children in your care.

Step 1: Acknowledge The first step is a step of recognition in which you use your growing awareness of the existence of different cultural assumptions about child development. A willingness to be open with yourself is essential to the success of this step.

Step 2: Ask The second step is an information-gathering step. The goal is to get the information you need about the
parents’ and your cultural beliefs and values so that you can solve the problem together during the third step. Do not rush the second step.

Step 3: Adapt In this last problem-solving step, you use the information gathered in step two to resolve conflicts caused by cultural differences and find the most effective way to support each child’s growth.”

Programs and Teachers Value the Primary Role of Families in Promoting Children’s Development.

The family is central in children’s lives, as it is through their experiences with their families that children learn about themselves and the world around them (adapted from CDE 2006, 56). Family member is used to define the people who are primarily responsible for a child, including extended family members, teen parents, or foster families (text adapted from CDE 2006, 56). Programs support the healthy growth and development of the child within the context of the family by creating continuity between the home and the early care and education setting. Programs are responsible for learning about the children’s home life through communication with family members and, when possible, home visits. As part of this process, programs will learn to work with diverse family structures, including those headed by grandparents, foster families, same-sex parents, and teen parents. An essential aspect of high-quality programs is finding ways to support the growing relationship between the child and the family, and adapting to the strengths and needs of each child–family relationship (CDE 2006, 57). By getting to know families and understanding the importance of children’s relationships with caregivers at home, programs and teachers can support the primary role of the family in children’s learning and development.

Knowledge of Families

Programs

• Develop or adapt program policies, based on knowledge of the families and on their input and feedback, to support family engagement in the program.

Teachers

• Gather information from family members and engage in direct, effective communication to learn about family composition, values, and traditions to support the primary role of families in their children’s care and education and to engage families in the early education setting.
• Learn about each family’s values, beliefs, and practices by observing and engaging family members in conversation or by communicating with other staff members as appropriate.
• Find out about each family’s language preferences and language goals for the child.
• Refer to and use pertinent family information when responding to needs of children and families.

Parent–Child History and Relationships
Programs

• Develop program policies that support children’s relationships with their adult caregivers at home.
• Provide professional development for staff on facilitating parent–child relationships and identifying areas of concern.
• Provide resources or consultation as appropriate to address concerns related to children’s relationships with adult caregivers at home.

Teachers

• Understand that all children develop in the context of relationships and that the quality of children’s interactions with adult caregivers at home has an impact on child outcomes.
• Follow program policies or practices designed to support relationships between children and adult family members.
• Use a variety of techniques to facilitate and reinforce positive interaction between children and adult family members and support each adult family member’s capacity to be responsive and sensitive to the child.
• Understand that culture influences approaches to nurturing young children.
• Identify concerns related to children’s relationships with adult family members and follow up as appropriate.

Programs Create a Climate in Which Family Members Feel Empowered and Comfortable as Advocates for Their Children.

When programs and teachers engage in open, respectful communication with family members and strive to develop positive, collaborative relationships with them, family members feel included and empowered. The experience of authentically contributing to their children’s experiences in preschool helps family members become advocates for their children both within the program and in interactions with other service providers. For example, they are more likely to seek or request services for their children, such as referrals to special education, when needed or appropriate.

Programs can help families with dual language learners recognize their families’ cultural and linguistic strengths and learn the skills to ask for the types of services that they think will benefit their children. Families should be encouraged to share their strengths with the program and be asked to participate in joint goal setting and decision making about their children’s education. The entire program benefits when educators incorporate diverse cultures, languages, and talents of families with dual language learners into the program’s learning environment and curriculum. Once family members feel their contributions and opinions are valued, programs will benefit from their knowledge and experience.

Empowerment of Families

Programs

• Develop an open-door policy that encourages family members to visit the classroom or center at any time.
• Encourage families to offer recommendations for the program’s structure and curriculum and to observe the ways in which their contributions are used in the setting.
• Invite families to share their areas of expertise with the teacher, other families, and the children in the program.
• Ensure all families have the opportunity to participate in a policymaking capacity or leadership role (e.g., as
members of a board of directors or advisory board).

- Develop a climate statement that expresses the program’s appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity and share the statement with both staff and families.

- Invite families with young dual language learners to participate formally as part of groups that contribute to decisions for the program (e.g., boards, committees, and the like), and to share on an ongoing basis their ideas on how to support and engage with families.

**Teachers**

- Solicit help from family members in solving problems their child may be having in an early care and education setting.

- Invite families to volunteer regularly and to participate in activities.

- Hold conferences regularly, not just when there is a problem with the child.

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![Figure 7.3 - When families are welcome in the early education environment, their children thrive.][8]

**Programs Support Teachers’ Responsiveness to the Families’ Goals for Their Children’s Development and School Readiness.**

The most successful opportunities for parent engagement are those that address the ideas of parents about their roles in their children’s education and their sense of efficacy in helping their children to succeed in early childhood programs (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Working with parents to define shared goals helps to strengthen the home–school partnership. In particular, when programs and teachers work to integrate school and family experiences, implement school-readiness practices, and identify strategies for school readiness and transitions, both families and their children benefit.

Researchers have found that preschoolers achieved at higher levels when families and teachers shared similar child centered beliefs and practices. Thus, it is important that programs ask all families to collaborate and participate in joint goal setting for their children, and to ask families with dual language learners and those families who have children with
disabilities or other special needs, about effective strategies and the contexts in which their children learn best.

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### Integrating School and Family Experiences

#### Programs

- Explain the program’s philosophy on school readiness to classroom staff and families, with consideration for each child’s level of development.
- Incorporate the role of family members in facilitating their children’s transition from preschool to kindergarten.
- Ensure that families with young dual language learners are included as partners in their children’s education. Families should be consulted regarding their children’s early language learning experiences, their educational goals for their children, and the educational progress of their children.
- Ensure that families of young children with disabilities or other special needs are included as partners in their education. Families should be consulted regarding their children’s unique learning needs, their educational goals for their children, and the educational progress of their children.
- Invite families to collaborate with program staff on long-term language development and learning goals for their children. Actively recruit families to participate in classroom activities.

#### Teachers

- Respond to children and family members in ways that encourage them to share family experiences.
- Share information about children’s experiences in the early education setting with families.
- Support each child’s home language and culture at home and at school.
- Maintain confidentiality of family and child information as appropriate.
- Design early education environments that reflect the diverse experiences of children and families.

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### Implementation of School-Readiness Practices

#### Programs

- Collaborate with local transitional kindergarten and kindergarten programs, schools, and support staff in preparing children and families for upcoming transitions.
- Provide professional development activities for staff on school-readiness issues, including developmentally appropriate practice, communication with families, and social–emotional competence.

#### Teachers

- Describe the program’s philosophy on school readiness and transitions.
- Engage in discussions with families about children’s experiences in the group or classroom as the experiences relate to school readiness and transitions.
- Respond to questions from families or refer them to appropriate staff for inquiries related to school readiness.
- Articulate that school entry is one milestone in the context of a developmental and educational continuum.

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• Include all families as partners in the education of their children with attentiveness to families whose home language is not English.

Strategies for School Readiness and Transitions

Programs

• Coordinate developmentally appropriate experiences to support children’s school readiness in all developmental domains, anticipating upcoming transitions to new programs or schools.

Teachers

• Know the previous early care and education experiences of children in the group and plan for upcoming transitions to new programs or schools.
• Identify indicators of school readiness and developmental precursors of school readiness, as appropriate, for the ages of the children served.

Programs and Teachers Use Effective Communication Strategies That Reflect the Diversity of Families Served

Honoring diversity strengthens relationships with families and children, thereby enhancing the quality of care and education for preschool children (adapted from CDE 2006, 57–58). Being responsive to cultural, linguistic, and economic differences and how these differences affect the ways in which programs and teachers communicate with families demonstrates a program’s commitment to each family’s unique strengths. Programs and teachers can work to enhance their communication strategies, attending carefully to individual differences in family preferences for communication.

Two-way communication strategies have been found to be particularly effective with families with dual language learners who may otherwise feel disconnected from the program. Two-way communication allows both parties to share information about the learning progress and well-being of the dual language learner and to collaborate on ways to help the child reach important learning goals. This type of communication works well during one-on-one meetings with the teacher or in a more informal setting such as in the community or in a group setting with other families with dual language learners of similar linguistic backgrounds. Regular two-way communication may be the first step toward increasing family engagement and key to developing strong dual language learner family–program partnerships.

Communication Strategies

Programs

• Provide professional development for staff on the principles of and strategies for effective communication with families.
• Ensure confidentiality and privacy in communications throughout the program.
• Develop a language and communication policy that informs families with young dual language learners on the
possible modes to communicate with staff.

**Teachers**

- Respect each family’s style and preferred method of communication and interact with families in a transparent, accountable manner.
- Interact with families in a timely and professional manner to establish relationships that encourage mutual, two-way exchange of information about children.
- Maintain confidentiality and ensure privacy in communications regarding children, families, and staff and colleagues.

![Figure 7.4 - Open communication is vital to the relationships between families and teachers.[9]](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Child_Family_and_Community_(Laff_and_....)

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**Family Preferences for Communication**

**Programs**

- Interpret and apply communication policies (as appropriate) to ensure that diverse families are included and complex situations are addressed.
- Help staff to understand and apply communication styles based on each family’s expressed needs and preferences.
- Ensure that all communications are accessible and comprehensible to families (i.e., in the family’s preferred language).

**Teachers**

Use various ways to communicate with families (e.g., active listening, e-mail and telephone contact, text messaging), depending on each family’s preferences and on the situation.

- Model for families effective strategies for communicating with children, adapt strategies for communicating with children, and adapt strategies (as needed) to meet diverse language and literacy needs. [10]

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[3] California Preschool Program Guidelines by the department of Education is used with permission (pg. 40-41)


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