



# Connecting with Parents in the Early Years: Executive Summary

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Communicating effectively with parents is a basic goal of early childhood programs. In recognition of the importance of strengthening the capacity of early learning programs to communicate effectively with parents, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided funding to the Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for a project titled “Connecting with Parents in the Early Years” to examine current perspectives on this topic. The project consisted of two principal parts: conducting a review of the relevant literature and convening a symposium comprised of parents and representatives from national organizations and early childhood programs, social work, the media, charitable foundations, research institutes, universities, and professional education programs. This group spent three days in late March 2003 at the University of Illinois’s Allerton Conference Center discussing the potential benefits and the challenges involved in increasing the effectiveness of communication between parents of young children and the staff of programs who serve them.

In preparation for the symposium, the ECAP staff prepared an interdisciplinary review of the literature on parent-program staff communication within the larger context of parent-staff relationships. As work on the project began, the staff became aware of the vast range of the literature related to parent-program relationships and the need to select a focus for both the symposium and the literature review. In view of the current national concern with helping young children become well prepared to enter school, the staff elected to focus on parent-staff connections that are directly or indirectly concerned with enhancement of children’s school readiness.

At the symposium, three speakers with extensive experience and expertise were invited to address this topic from a variety of perspectives. In addition to these major presentations, ample opportunities for discussion of closely related topics with panels of professionals and parents were built into the agenda.

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The literature review includes studies analyzing parent-program relationships from four programmatic contexts: (1) programs and services for children who experience biological risks to their development, such as chronic or acute illness, injury, or disability; (2) programs and services for children considered “at risk” because of environmental factors such as poverty; (3) programs and services for typically developing children who are not considered subject to identified “risks”; and, finally, (4) programs and services for children in elementary and secondary schools that might provide useful and relevant perspectives for preschool programs.

Although few of the studies located for this review were rigorously experimental, many offer insights and raise issues that contribute to dialogue in a field in which facts and conclusions based on experimental evidence are exceedingly difficult to obtain or are simply not available.

### School Readiness and Vulnerability in Families

An examination of the literature on school readiness reveals that children’s readiness to participate in formal schooling has long been recognized as important, although definitions of the concept of school readiness continue to vary widely. Policy makers, researchers, and practitioners have for a number of years been committed to the goal of readiness expressed in the 1994 “Goals 2000” legislation and, more recently, the “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001.

The foundation for the development of physical and cognitive competence is built in the early years and is clearly a major factor in school readiness. The role of parents, who are often referred to as “the child’s first teachers,” is important in fostering school readiness to the extent that parents dedicate a variety of resources to their child’s education. Literacy, in particular, has been a focal point for researchers investigating home influences on children’s academic achievement and adaptation to school. Recent literature related to school readiness has emphasized two other interrelated developmental domains in which it is reasonable to assume that parents and other early caregivers have the major role: the ability to regulate one’s emotions, or *self-regulation*, and the development of *social-emotional competence*.

Given the major role of parents, the interrelationships between family poverty and stress can have a number of consequences for school readiness. Poverty and stress can profoundly affect a child’s social-emotional development in families rendered vulnerable by financial hardship, unemployment, disability, mental health problems, disruption through death or divorce, or other emotional and psychological difficulties. In the face of these challenges, of course, some families exhibit more resilience than others. The literature suggests that providing resources to vulnerable families of young children is urgent. If programs can help such parents address at least some of the challenges they face, family stress will be reduced, and the children may be more likely to be better prepared for school. Providing resources to vulnerable families also may reduce the possibility that these families become

isolated and less able to connect with programs that might help to address at least some of the challenges they face. Yet educators and service providers often experience difficulty in recruiting parents to take part in programs, and they face substantial challenges in keeping parents engaged with programs that are intended, directly or indirectly, to benefit their young children.

## Programs Serving Young Children and Their Families

Over the past century, a variety of programs have been developed in which staff members work with parents toward the goals of enhancing their children’s growth and development—including parent cooperatives, Head Start, Early Head Start, HIPPI, Parents As Teachers (PAT), Hawaii Healthy Start, or Healthy Families America. All of these widely applied programs include features that are meant to support effective communication between parents and staff. Reports of these programs frequently stressed the need for deeper understanding of (1) obstacles to recruitment and to the reduction of dropout rates in programs serving vulnerable families; (2) the extent, types, and intensity of parent participation (with special attention to participation demands that may be too difficult for some parents to meet); (3) the nature of parent meetings and how to make them more interesting and appealing to parents; (4) special concerns related to father involvement in such programs; (5) services that focus comprehensively on parents; and (6) the role and efficacy of home-visiting components.

## Communicating with Parents

The exchange of information and other resources is a key component of the relationship between parents of young children and the staff of programs that serve them. Staff-parent communication practices are frequently addressed in the practitioner literature, but they are seldom studied systematically. Yet communication practices are recognized as indicators of the quality of services provided to parents of young children in both the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation materials.

Information seeking, defined here as a communicative activity through which individuals or groups try to “create a meaningful order of things,” is thus viewed as something that parents engage in within the varied contexts of their daily lives. For its theoretical framework, the discussion of information needs, information-seeking behaviors, information preferences, and information use draws heavily from Dervin’s (1999) sense-making theory, Savolainen’s (1995) ideas about everyday-life information seeking, and Chatman’s (1996) ideas on how the forces of power and authority in society strongly influence both those who provide information and those who use it.

Issues of information access are relevant to the ability of parents to acquire and to understand information intended to help their children get ready for school. Information science terminology can help early childhood educators “unpack” the problems related to information access. Information science researchers distinguish between *physical access to information* (which may

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be affected by geographic factors, sensory and physical disabilities, and programmatic characteristics, such as scheduling) and *intellectual access to information* (which depends on literacy levels of staff-parent interactions, of materials prepared for parents, and on the availability of home language materials for parents), and suggest that these concepts are central to any discussion of information access. *Information poverty*, another information science term, refers to a cluster of important problems related to information access. “Information-poor” individuals, for example, experience a generalized relative lack of information that might help them solve their problems and attend to the tasks of life. People who live in poverty are less likely to have access to the Internet, for example, a fact that gave rise to the concept of a “*digital divide*” between Internet users and people who for economic reasons remain not only technologically illiterate but also out of touch with the wealth of information on the Internet.

Social science researchers suggest that another way to think about the structures and processes of human communication is to examine *social networks*, or the patterns of relationships among individuals, groups, or organizations that permit or inhibit the exchange of resources, such as goods, services, social support, influence, and information. Using this concept to examine the resources that programs offer to parents (and that parents offer to programs) leads to the conclusion that, in general, parents and program personnel best serve children’s interests when they freely provide each other with information, identify problems and strengths within the family and the child, and decide together how best to employ their resources and support those strengths, with the goal of enhancing the child’s growth and development. Some of the current recommendations for good practice in parent-program communications include:

- Conveying mutual trust and respect
- Maintaining regular, two-way, meaningful communication between home and school
- Focusing on communication that is for “the good of the child”
- Recognizing the importance of partnerships between parents and programs
- Using a variety of connecting methods such as notices, phone calls, conferences, memos, conversations, and other venues
- Recognizing and working to overcome potential barriers to communication, such as language differences and/or low literacy
- Becoming familiar with the information needs and the patterns of information seeking and use in the community served

## Relationships between Parents and Programs

Programs serving families of young children are generally considered “effective” when accountability measures indicate that they have directly or indirectly helped parents and children in areas related to school readiness. Effective communication between staff and parents, on the other hand, is more difficult to measure. A number of factors influence parent-staff

connections, including demographic variables; community characteristics and family mobility; and issues related to language and literacy, culture, class and classism, disabilities and “ableism,” gender, and sexuality. Characteristics of programs are also likely to influence relationships between staff and parents, as are parents’ and staff members’ individual experiences and traits. It is difficult, for example, for a program to serve parents who do not believe that participating will be useful to them; these parents are clearly among the “hard-to-serve” parents. Furthermore, parents who believe that participating in a particular program will be useful still may be unable to sustain their commitment because of external factors and stressors in their lives.

Two popular conceptions of the parent-program staff relationship—the partnership construct and the family centeredness concept—have arisen from concern for creating parent-staff relationships that reflect confidence in parents as agents of change and growth in their own lives and those of their children. Although these two perspectives differ in origin and in focus, they have in common an emphasis on parents’ responsibilities for determining the family’s life course and a belief in parents’ right to do so. Assumptions about family strengths and parents’ abilities to make decisions about family life strongly influence an organization’s policies related to parent-staff interactions, as well as how parents and professionals interact within a program’s social network.

Given the many potential differences between program staff and the parents they serve, the achievement of relational trust is an important but challenging part of parent-program relationships. Four components form the foundation for relational trust for both parents and staff: social respect, personal regard, perceived competence of the participants, and perceptions of basic integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

## Emerging Issues

Several emerging issues were identified in the literature review and reinforced by discussion at the symposium. These issues include:

*The content of parent-program communication.* As with any other group of information seekers, parents are likely to feel the strongest interest in content that they believe will be useful to them—that is, information with the potential to bridge a gap that they perceive in their knowledge (Dervin, 1999). In addition, program staff members need information from parents in order to be effective in their work with children and families.

*Recruitment, retention, and commitment in programs serving families with young children.* Comparatively little appears in the research regarding the variety of reasons behind a parent’s lack of participation in a program. The actual decisions parents may make that result in their being “hard to serve” are seldom addressed in discussions of how to foster relationships with them. As one example, evidence can be found in qualitative studies that language-minority parents want program personnel to understand that they are deeply concerned about and interested in their children’s school

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experiences, despite the frequent misperception that such parents are uninvolved and uninterested in them.

*The nature and nurturing of program-parent relationships.* Trust is considered fundamental to parent-professional relationships. Without it, parents are unlikely to be forthcoming about their own concerns and needs, and they will be unlikely to accept staff suggestions and implement strategies or behaviors that program staff members recommend.

*The potential of comprehensive, integrated programs to connect with parents.* Comprehensiveness of programs, an emerging issue, requires making resources available that address the widest possible range of family issues and problems. When services are integrated and comprehensive, they are connected by a common vision for providing services to families, and by careful planning and coordination on the part of the administrators and program staff.

## Connecting the Threads

Future directions in research and practice are based on the literature review and upon the recommendations shared by the participants at the Allerton symposium in March.

Recommendations for researchers concerned with parent-program relationships include the following:

- Recommendation #1: Develop coherent, comprehensive, interdisciplinary research agendas for the study of connections between parents and programs that serve young children.
- Recommendation #2: Promote interdisciplinary understanding of parent-program relationships, using mixed research methods to approach complex questions and situations.
- Recommendation #3: Construct studies that “ask the right questions” and have the potential to evoke still more questions about parent-program relationships.
- Recommendation #4: Through critical literature review, including meta-analysis, increase interdisciplinary awareness of common challenges in studies on specific aspects of parent-program relationships.

Recommendations for practice and policy include the following:

- Recommendation #1: Programs working with parents of young children should put a high priority on creating a culture of mutual trust.
- Recommendation #2: Acknowledge that parents share responsibility for defining school readiness, and support parents’ efforts relative to their children’s readiness to begin school.

- Recommendation #3: Sustain the capacity of programs to work with parents effectively by allocating adequate resources.
- Recommendation #4: Take deliberate steps to strengthen the capacity of program staff to work effectively with parents.

Recommendations for charitable foundations and other concerned agencies include the following:

- Recommendation #1. Foundations can support the development of coherent, comprehensive, interdisciplinary research agendas for the study of connections between parents and the programs that serve young children.
- Recommendation #2. Foundations can provide substantial support for the development of research-driven tools to assist parents with helping their young children prepare to begin school.

Many approaches to parent-program connections have been developed, tried, and implemented over extended periods of time. Head Start, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and HIPPIY have served families for more than a generation, while Healthy Start America, AVANCE, MELD, and others have done so for more than a decade. Given the difficulties of conducting formal assessments of their long-term effectiveness, these and similar programs have been sufficiently successful with vulnerable families to earn continued support. The challenge remains for such programs to reach still more parents of young children who could benefit from the resources offered.

In addition to the literature review, this document includes three papers presented at the symposium. Each paper is followed by participant questions and a summary of a follow-up panel session.

The papers are:

- Powell, Douglas R. “Relations between Families and Early Childhood Programs.”
- Rodriguez, Gloria. “Connecting with Parents: The AVANCE Experience.”
- Moore, Evelyn, & Barbarin, Oscar A. “Respecting the Voices of Parents: How the Spirit of Excellence Parents Empowerment Project Connects with African American Parents” (presented by Wanda Roundtree Henderson and Rozita La Gorcé Green).

Summaries of two additional symposium panel discussions are also included. The first was a panel comprised of parents who had participated while their children were young in various programs represented at the symposium: HIPPIY, AVANCE, MELD, and PAT. The other, the final panel discussion of the symposium, consisted of representatives from four discussion groups that

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had addressed how the various fields might take action to promote improved program-parent communication.

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