



Promoting Family Involvement in Preschool Programs

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Family Involvement Makes a Difference

Involving parents in their children's preschool education benefits children in a number of ways. Parents have perspectives on their children and can provide teachers with valuable information, helping teachers to design activities to better meet children's needs.¹ Parents' involvement in preschool classrooms decreases the number of children supervised by each adult, providing assistance for the teacher and extra hands-on support for the students. Bilingual parents also can provide translation support.

Participation in the classroom also provides parents with a model of adult-child interaction and activity ideas to copy at home to help promote their children's literacy and program readiness skills. Research studies also indicate that parents involved in their children's educational programs develop positive attitudes about themselves, increase their self-confidence, and often enroll in programs to enhance their personal development.²

Research shows that parent involvement in early education programs is an important way to start parents on a path of continued involvement in their children's education at home and in school.³ Further, parent involvement at home and in school promotes better student achievement.

This brief was prepared by SRI International for the First 5 California Children and Families Commission.

First 5 California's Commitment to Family Involvement

First 5 California is committed to providing all children prenatal to five years of age with a comprehensive, integrated system of early childhood development services that enhances intellectual, social, emotional and physical development. Given that the experiences a child has with respect to parents and caregivers significantly influence how he or she will function in a program and later in life, First 5 California selected "Improved Family Functioning" as one of its four strategic result areas. In addition, First 5 California's School Readiness (SR) Initiative, Special Needs Project, and Preschool for All (PFA) Demonstration Projects strive to improve the ability of families, programs, and communities to prepare children to enter school ready to learn. These projects are based on First 5 California's acknowledgement of the importance of preschool experiences for children and of parents' involvement in their children's education.

This brief highlights practices observed in First 5 California's preschool case studies as they pertain to the National PTA's six standards for parent and family involvement in educational programs.



**National Parent-Teacher Association's (PTA)
Six Standards for Family Involvement**

The National PTA developed six "Standards for Parent and Family Involvement in Programs (<http://www.pta.org/programs/pfistand.htm>). These standards build on the six types of parent involvement identified by Epstein in her comprehensive framework of family, program, community partnerships.⁴ Each standard produces unique gains for students, contributes to effective programs, and fosters program success. Gains for students are greatest when parents participate in activities in each of the six standard areas.

1. Communication
2. Parenting
3. Student Learning
4. Volunteering
5. Decision Making and Advocacy
6. Collaborating with the Community

Promising Parent Involvement Strategies

1. Parent-program communication is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

Almost all sites visited had open-door policies, allowing parents to visit and participate in preschool programs at any time and fostering a sense of openness and inclusion. A number of programs also provided parent orientations and enrollment interviews at the beginning of the program year, setting a tone for ongoing parent-teacher communication and interaction. All programs used child drop-off and pick-up times to talk informally with parents and to share pertinent information about children. Parent-teacher conferences were held once per year or more often at all program sites to support more formal communication regarding children's learning, progress, and development.

Additional communication strategies used included sending notes home, program newsletters, teacher-family goal setting meetings, and kindergarten transition

meetings. One site sent home weekly lesson plans showing parents how activities in the classroom were related to learning areas. Other sites regularly shared Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) and other assessment data with parents, showing where their child is developmentally and in relation to the child's goals. A number of programs sent materials home in multiple languages and made translators available.

Parents appreciated being informed about their children's progress and experiences. One parent shared, "The level of communication is great. There is a log of what the child did during the day. We also have monthly meetings. I don't feel like I am missing anything. There are notes that go home informing me of activities."

2. Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

An important component of high-quality preschool programs is parent training and education. By having parents work in the classroom, teachers can model practices that enhance children's development. Parent training also helps families establish home environments to support children's learning.

All sites visited offered parent education and training programs. Most sites offered classes on how to promote learning at home through reading and play. Other classes covered parenting skills, communication with children, behavior management, stress management, nutrition, first aid and CPR, and safety. Informal parent group meetings were also held at a number of programs, allowing parents to share their experiences and learn from one another.

Some programs offered ESL and other adult literacy classes for parents. These classes are based on the assumption that promoting parents' literacy, English language proficiency, and educational attainment will encourage their young children's early literacy and English language skills.

3. Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning, both in the classroom and at home.

All preschool sites visited expressed strong commitment to involving parents in their children's learning. When visiting or volunteering in the classroom, parents are engaged in all classroom activities, learning activities and communication styles to replicate at home. In addition, programs provided parents with information, materials, and activity ideas about how to foster learning at home, including talking to children about program-related topics and engaging in educational activities outside of program. Two preschool sites for example, participated in the Raising A Reader program, sending children home with different books and materials to read with their parents each week.

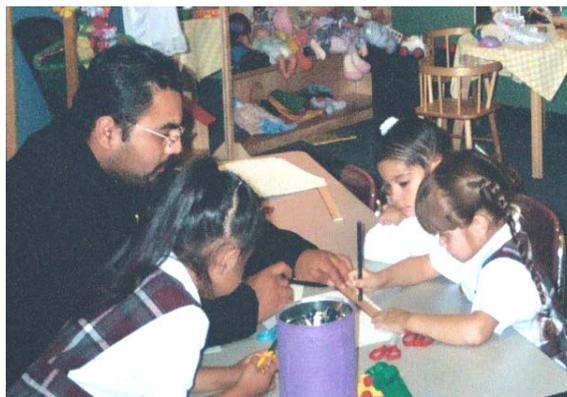
4. Parents are welcome in the program, and their support and assistance are sought.

All programs actively encouraged parent volunteerism. Four of the twelve sites had policies requiring parents to donate a predetermined number of hours per program year. For example, one preschool asked parents to volunteer 6 hours a month (two 3-hour shifts), while another program attempted to have two parent volunteers in the classroom at all times.

Parents volunteered in numerous ways including participating in classroom activities, assisting with teacher preparation, chaperoning field trips, helping with program maintenance including cleaning and painting, providing translation assistance, donating food and snacks, assisting in fundraising activities, and helping to plan and organize special events. Programs often invited parents to share specific skills or knowledge with students.

A parent at one program talked to the class about her cultural heritage. Another parent, who is a chef, occasionally came to class to cook for the children.

If parents' schedules deterred them from helping out in the classroom, the program accommodated parents' by suggesting out-of-school volunteer activities, such as preparing materials for art activities. One site invited parents to visit the school on Saturdays to help maintain the children's garden.



5. Parents are partners in decisions that affect their children.

High-quality programs include parents in program decision making and advocacy and support the development of parent leaders and representatives. The programs provided a number of ways for parents to participate in program planning, implementation, and governance. At the observed sites, parents participated in shaping program content and in governance and advocacy through involvement in parent associations, councils, and advisory groups.

One program, for example, invited parents to participate in the Classroom Parent Committee, which helps plan activities for the class and parent meetings, as well as a Parent Policy Council, which recommends and approves preschool policies including issues about nutrition, health and education.

6. Community resources are used to strengthen families, programs, and student learning and development.

All sites visited connected families to community services, further enhancing families' general capacity to support their children. These services not only serve as incentives to parent involvement and participation in programs, but also help to maintain and enhance parents' support of their children's learning and development. Sites provided family support services directly by employing Family Advocates, Family Service Coordinators, Health Outreach Coordinators or the like, or providing on-site Family Resource Centers, and indirectly by making referrals to other services in the area. The most common support services included screenings for developmental, health, dental, hearing, vision, or psychological concerns. Sites also provided information for students and families on community, health, cultural, recreational, and social support programs.



Sites worked hard to provide whatever services families might need to best support their children's learning and development. Families received assistance and support with housing, clothing, food, health insurance enrollment, and domestic and financial issues.

One preschool offered a "Family Service Program." Upon enrollment, staff met with parents to discuss the family's background, needs, and concerns, and to share information about the types of available resources, including screening by doctors, dentists, psychologists, audiologists, and optometrists. They later followed up with families to make sure their needs were met.

Conclusions

As the examples show, preschools funded by First 5 are using a variety of methods to involve parents in their early education programs. Through parent involvement and education, these preschool programs are helping parents to better support their children's learning at home and bringing valuable resources to the classroom. By involving parents early in their child's education, these programs have laid the foundation for a course of parent involvement for years to come. Thus, parent involvement in preschool programs is an important strategy for helping young children succeed in school and life.

For full report, see *First 5 Preschool Case Studies*, available at www.first5eval.org.

References

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