



# Family Engagement and School Readiness

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement has created a Research to Practice Series on the Office of Head Start (OHS) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses how family engagement contributes to young children’s school readiness.

Aligned with related Head Start Performance Standards, this resource presents a summary of selected research and program strategies intended to be useful for the Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) community.

## Introduction

**Family engagement:** The family is the primary force in preparing children for school and life, and children benefit when all of the adults who care for them work together (Bronfenbrenner, 2004). When program staff and families are engaged as partners, they commit to working together on children’s behalf. When family members take the lead and make decisions about their children’s learning, they are truly engaged. Positive goal-directed relationships between families and program staff are key to engagement and children’s school readiness (HHS/ACF/OHS/NCPFCE, 2011).

**School readiness** is the process of early learning and development, from infancy to school age, when children gain the skills and attitudes they need to succeed in school. With developmentally appropriate programming, infants, toddlers, and preschoolers make advances that prepare them for school.

Early childhood experts describe school readiness in various ways, but typically refer to five areas of readiness: health and physical development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development and communication; and cognition and knowledge. The OHS Child Development and Early Learning Framework (CDEL) (HHS/ACF/OHS, 2012) addresses each of these domains.

Others use the term school readiness to describe a school’s ability to provide children with an education (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). It also refers to families’ readiness for the transition to school. School readiness is a shared responsibility among schools, programs, and families.



The OHS PFCE Framework is a research-based approach to program change that shows how HS/EHS programs can work together as a whole – across systems and service areas – to promote family engagement and children’s learning and development.





When parent and family engagement activities are systemic and integrated across PFCE Framework Program Foundations and Impact Areas, Family Engagement Outcomes are achieved, and children are healthy and ready for school (HHS/ACF/OHS/NCPFCE, 2011).

## What We Know: Family Engagement and School Readiness

### *Infants & Toddlers: Learning from the Beginning*

“School readiness means supporting and protecting the developing brain in such a way that the brain creates a strong physical foundation for learning” (Petersen, 2012). From the beginning, parents and other caregivers nurture the capacities children will need to be ready for school.

Early interactions with caregivers build babies’ brains. The qualities of babies’ interactions with mothers and fathers have measurable impacts on future learning (Cook, Roggman, & Boyce, 2012; Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). These qualities include warmth, mutuality, and parent sensitivity to children’s play and conversation. Interactions with these qualities lead to social and academic competence (Thompson, 2008). For example, cognitive stimulation by mothers and fathers in playful interactions during toddlerhood is related to literacy and math levels in third and fifth grade (Cook et al., 2012). Warm, responsive, and emotionally secure relationships also provide babies with healthy models for future relationships. Young children who consistently receive responsive and sensitive care are more likely to form positive relationships with adults and peers when they enter school (Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

Two major developmental achievements of infancy and toddlerhood are critical to children’s later success in school:

1. self-regulation (the ability to adapt one’s level of emotions to shifting situations)
2. joint attention (the ability to pay attention to what an adult or a peer is attending to).

**Self-regulation** emerges from children’s individual strengths and vulnerabilities, beginning at birth. Each baby’s unique qualities also shape the care that parents and other caregivers provide. At the same time, this individualized care contributes to each child’s self-regulation abilities.

**Joint attention** occurs when an adult and infant or toddler play cooperatively with the same toy, read a book together, or notice an event at the same time. Abilities such as paying attention and imitating others are partly built through joint attention. Joint attention in parent-infant interactions is related to greater social skills and language learning, both essential to school success (Carpenter, Nagell, Tomasello, Butterworth, & Moore, 1998).

Self-regulation and joint attention build the base for skills that children will need for success in school and later in life. These skills include:

- following instructions,
- focusing on a task,
- controlling emotions and behaviors with peers and adults,
- adjusting to different expectations in different environments, and
- solving problems in school (Center on the Developing Child, 2011).

Infants are born with the capacity to develop these skills through their interactions with caregivers in the earliest months and years.

Of course, language and literacy in the first three years are also important to school readiness. The amount of language that infants and toddlers are exposed to at home is directly related to later vocabulary growth (Hart & Risley, 1995). In families with low incomes, infants and toddlers who were read to more often have better language and cognition at age three than those who were read to less often (Raikes et al., 2006). Partnerships between EHS staff and families that encourage parents to talk with and read to their children at home positively impact future learning. The adults who partner together on behalf of young children help them develop the skills related to later school success – early language, literacy, attention, and self-regulation (Ayoub, Vallotton, & Mastergeorge, 2011).



### *Preschool: Developing the Skills for Success*

Family engagement in the preschool years builds on the first three years, and is linked to children’s success in kindergarten and beyond (Graue, Clements, Reynolds, & Niles, 2004). One study showed that in the year before kindergarten, children whose parents participated in center-based activities were more prepared for school (McWayne, Hahs-Vaughn, Cheung, & Green, 2012). Another study found that HS classrooms rated high in parent involvement also had high classroom quality ratings. Children from those class-

rooms performed significantly higher on tests of receptive vocabulary and math skills (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012). The effect of engagement is improved when it takes place both through home visits and in centers with high quality programming (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004).

Academic skills and social and emotional competence are closely related in children's development. Children who get along well with peers and teachers are more likely to participate in classroom activities, enjoy learning, and transition successfully from preschool to kindergarten (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Social-emotional competence contributes to academic success in reading and math through sixth grade (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison, 2006). Parent engagement focused on social-emotional outcomes helps children develop interpersonal school readiness skills, and reduces anxiety and withdrawal (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Relationships within the family remain the most critical for children's social-emotional development. Programs can make a big difference when they partner with family members to support their relationships with their children.

Fathers play an important role in children's emotional and cognitive development. Father engagement has significant effects on children's cognition and language at 24 months and 36 months and social and emotional development at 24 months, 36 months, and pre-kindergarten (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). Children with close relationships with their fathers have higher self-esteem and are less likely to be depressed (Dubowitz et al., 2001).

As with infants and toddlers, self-regulation and executive functions (impulse control, attention, memory, and planning skills) in preschoolers play a critical role in school readiness (Blair & Razza, 2007). Parenting continues to be important to the development of these abilities (Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). Home and center-based family engagement activities can encourage families to help foster these skills in their children.

Parents' contributions to preschoolers' literacy skills are related to school readiness. By engaging children in joint literacy activities and positive discussions about educational topics, parents promote successful transitions to school (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). One home visiting study demonstrated that when mothers were engaged in literacy activities with their children and learning materials were available, pre-kindergarten vocabulary and literacy skills were higher (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011).

Programs can engage parents and other family members in learning activities and expose children to printed materials at home and in school (Buhs, Welch, Burt, & Knoche, 2011). HS/EHS programs can encourage families to read at home and in the classroom. They can also link families to libraries and other organizations that offer books and family-centered reading activities.

## Elementary and Secondary Education: Building a Bridge to the Future

Active parent and community involvement are key components of high functioning elementary schools' success (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Mayer, Mullens, & Moore, 2000). A review of 51 studies (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) found that children whose parents were involved with their schooling had better academic outcomes, including higher grades, enrollment in advanced programs, passing to the next grade level, improved attendance, better social skills, and higher graduation rates.



**Children whose parents are engaged with their schooling have better academic outcomes.**

Across diverse economic and cultural backgrounds, family participation in elementary and secondary school is associated with greater student success. Studies of parent involvement among families with low incomes show links with school success, such as higher levels of literacy (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004). When parents engage in math activities at home, children are more likely to have higher math scores (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). One study of migrant families with young elementary school children found that family engagement led to better language skills. Families used learning materials, such as books, at home and with teachers in kindergarten (St. Clair & Jackson, 2006).

Since the establishment of the right to public education for children with special needs in the 1970s, school interactions with families of children with special needs have changed. School engagement with these families is now more often a "two-way street" in which families and educators work together to support children's learning (Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). Parents are engaged as full partners in developing and implementing individualized plans (Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) & Individual Education Program (IEP)), and in monitoring their children's progress. These partnerships have also helped advance schools' overall family engagement efforts.

Cultural and linguistic variations in family interactions with schools present both opportunities for and barriers against effective engagement (García-Coll et al., 2002). Family engagement can be highly effective when tailored to the unique interests, strengths, and needs of families from diverse cultural groups (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). One particularly useful strategy is to bring families of a specific cultural and linguistic community together so that they have a collective voice in the schools (Durand, 2011).



community partners to offer comprehensive family supports have a better chance of promoting family well-being, and as a result, improving children's readiness for kindergarten.

### **Program and School Relationships with Parents**

Positive parental attitudes toward school improve children's performance (Morrison, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2003). Yet parents' and schools' misconceptions about each others' roles can be a barrier to engagement (Ferguson, C., Ramos, M., Rudo, Z., & Wood, L., 2008). Misconceptions lead to mistrust and to less parent engagement. HS/EHS staff can help establish trusting family-program partnerships by creating a welcoming environment. It can also help to provide opportunities for families to express their views about the program and their relationships with staff. The quality of parent-staff relationships is central to family engagement (Porter et al., 2012).

### **Cultural and Social Capital**

When HS/EHS staff form strong partnerships with families, and connect families to each other and the broader community, they build cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers to knowledge about institutions such as schools that helps families advocate for their children. When HS staff transfer their knowledge about schools to families, families gain cultural capital. Social capital refers to the relationships that provide access to resources and power within a community (Lee & Bowen, 2006). When families connect with each other in decision-making activities such as Policy Council, they develop social capital. (See OHS Research to Practice Series: Family Connections to Peers and Communities and Families as Advocates and Leaders (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/rtp-series.html>) for additional discussion).

### **Conclusion: Bringing It All Together**

In the first months and years of life, children develop school readiness primarily within their families, and in all their earliest interactions. Self-regulation, joint attention, and other executive functions, as well as vocabulary, language, and other cognitive and social and emotional skills develop both at home and at school. HS/EHS programs can strengthen families' positive impact on their children's school readiness by partnering with families to make progress on the PFCE Family Outcomes. Helping families overcome challenges such as poverty, homelessness, family and community violence, and social isolation is vital to supporting children's learning. Through partnerships with HS/EHS programs as well as other community resources, families can play an active role in their children's learning, advocate for quality education for their children, and create the collective power to improve their children's educational opportunities.

## **Promoting School Readiness**

A systemic, integrated, and comprehensive focus on family engagement can help families prepare their children to learn and thrive in school. Family well-being, positive goal-oriented parent-staff relationships, and family social and cultural capital all promote children's school readiness.

### **Family Well-Being**

Children's physical and emotional environments affect their readiness for school. Stressful home environments can impact parents' ability to engage with programs in ways that support their children's learning. When a family's food, clothing, shelter, or social supports are inadequate, the children may not be able to focus on learning. Multiple threats to family well-being can interfere with young children's self-regulation, social skills, language and cognitive development. Stress associated with poverty can make it more difficult for parents to provide sensitive, predictable care (Ayoub et al., 2011). For more information about how positive relationships contribute to better child outcomes, see Positive Parent-Child Relationships <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/parent-child-relationships.pdf>, another resource in this Research to Practice Series.

The strong two-generational programming of HS/EHS protects and promotes family well-being and children's school readiness. For example, parents in EHS were more emotionally supportive, provided more language and learning stimulation, and read more to their children than parents not in EHS (Love et al., 2005). To reduce the stresses on families that can negatively affect young children, coordination with other services, such as child welfare and housing, is essential (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). Programs that engage

## What Can Programs Do?

HS/EHS staff provide families and children with a variety of experiences and tools to support school readiness and positive learning experiences. These include:

- forming positive, goal-directed relationships with families,
- providing programs that support children's learning and development,
- offering information on healthy development, and
- connecting families with resources to address causes of stress.

HS/EHS program staff, in all roles and across all program areas, can help children get ready to succeed in school by working together on effective strategies to engage families. Here are a few examples:

**Provide Regular Opportunities for HS/EHS Staff to Learn about Connections between Family Engagement and School Readiness.** Ongoing professional development is essential for all staff to understand how to apply family engagement practices to improve children's school readiness. Staff may also benefit from learning about

- what families believe about connections between family engagement and school readiness, and
- how to respond to beliefs that are different from their own.

HS/EHS programs can use a variety of professional development strategies (e.g., training, staff meetings, reflective practice and supervision, mentoring) to help staff promote school readiness in their everyday work. The effectiveness of these professional development strategies depends on adequate supervision and reasonable caseloads.

Visit Boosting School Readiness through Effective Family Engagement ([http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/pfce\\_simulation](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/pfce_simulation)) an interactive professional tool to practice everyday strategies to develop positive, goal-oriented relationships with families.

**Create Opportunities for Parents and Communities to Learn about School Readiness.** School readiness is a concept that is familiar to HS/EHS staff and many parents, but not necessarily to all the adults in children's lives. For example, some adults do not know that babbling with babies or reading with children promotes literacy skills. Conversations with family and community members about healthy child development can expand their knowledge about how to promote school readiness at home, school, and in the community. HS/EHS programs can also provide easy-to-read written materials on school readiness in families' preferred languages.

For more in-depth information on how positive relationships

contribute to school readiness see Positive Parent-Child Relationships (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/parent-child-relationships.pdf>).

**Engage with Families to Support Children's Transitions.** Work on transitions with families as early as the transition to Early Head Start and Head Start, followed by the transition to kindergarten. The more practice children and families have with transitions, the more ready they will be for the next transition. When families are successful with transitions in the early years, they develop skills that will help them when their children enter kindergarten and larger school systems. Program-level strategies include professional development and learning activities for staff and parents that promote knowledge about transitions and skills such as collaboration, leadership, and advocacy. Effective community-level strategies include connecting parents with each other and developing strong program-school and other community partnerships to ensure that children's strengths and needs are addressed as they transition to kindergarten.

For more information on transitions in the early years see: Transitions Strategies: Continuity and Change in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers ([http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs-resources/ECLKC\\_Bookstore/PDFs/transition\\_strategies.pdf](http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs-resources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/transition_strategies.pdf)) For more information about the transition to kindergarten, see Family Engagement and Transitions: The Transition to Kindergarten (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/transitions-kindergarten.pdf>).

## Additional Resources

Early Head Start National Resource Center. Technical Assistance Paper #8: The Foundations for School Readiness: Fostering Developmental Competence in the Earliest Years. DHHS/ACF/HSB. 2003.

Office of Head Start National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness. Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five. <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/operations/mgmt-admin/diversity/multiculturalism/revisiting.htm>

Office of Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. Best Practices in Parent and Family Engagement Video Series <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/video-series.html>

Office of Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. Research to Practice Series. <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center/rtp-series.html>

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