

Supporting Family Involvement in Children's Learning

Trainer Module: Background Information

Best Practices for Nonformal Educational Settings

Review of Recent Research

Families are the first and most important teachers for children. Families teach children their languages, their goals, and their values. They do so mostly in nonformal ways—not by lecturing in a classroom, but by talking across the breakfast table, chatting on a bus ride, or reading a bedtime story. Families engage in nonformal education virtually all the time.

Other adults also have rich opportunities to teach children outside formal classroom settings. Youth-

group leaders, after-school caregivers, and other caring adults can reach children and youths with messages that encourage both academic and personal development.

The practices described in this training are designed to help professional and volunteer workers in nonformal educational settings to use and to support their best resources—the families of children and youths—through family involvement.

What Does Family Involvement Mean?

Which of the following activities do you think represent family involvement in children's learning:

- Making cookies for a childcare program's bake sale?
- Attending a teacher conference for a kindergarten student?
- Selling gift-wrap for an elementary school's fund-raiser?
- Checking homework for a third grader?
- Serving on a middle school hiring committee?
- Chaperoning a high school dance?

Do you think that all of these activities represent family involvement? If so, you agree with many parents, caregivers, educators, and other experts. If you think that only some of these activities represent *real* involvement, then you agree with other parents, caregivers, educators, and experts. In short, there is no consensus on what *family involvement* means.

Davis (1991) described family involvement as a

shifting perspective that mirrors the changing nature of families and communities. He identified several important changes in recent decades:

Old Perspective	New Perspective
Focused on parents Included families only	Focuses on families Includes families and community agencies
Worked in school settings	Works in home and neighborhood settings
Recruited eager families	Recruits hard-to-reach families
Based agendas on teacher and administrator priorities	Bases agendas on family priorities
Viewed urban families as deficient	Views all families as containing inherent strengths

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Current Perspectives

Today, several assumptions underlie many views of family involvement (Jesse, 2002):

- Most parents genuinely care about their children.
- All families have something to contribute.
- Family involvement can and should take many forms.

These assumptions are expressed in various programmatic principles:

- Family involvement does not mean simply *parental* involvement. It may include involvement by grandparents, aunts, uncles,

older siblings, and other caring adults who take some responsibility for a child.

- Involvement represents a partnership among families and all community agencies that serve and support children.
- Many levels of involvement, ranging from active participation in a program to active interest, are encouraged.
- Communication is seen as a key component of family involvement.
- Respect for diversity is an integral part of family involvement.

Why Encourage Family Involvement?

Most research concerning family involvement has been done in connection with schools.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the benefits of family involvement would also apply to nonformal educational settings.

The research suggests that family involvement has a positive effect on students' academic achievement, behavior in school, and attitudes about school and work. The best results occur when families, schools, and community organizations work together (Epstein et al., 1997; Kirschenbaum, 1999).

Children benefit most when their families serve in the following roles (National PTA, 1993):

- As teachers, helping their children learn at home
- As supporters, contributing their skills and knowledge to the schools and organizations
- As advocates, ensuring that children are treated fairly
- As decision-makers, participating in problem solving at all levels

Beginning in the 1990s, researchers began to look at the relationship between family involvement and student success in school. They found that higher levels of family involvement were related to higher grades, higher scores on standardized tests, better attendance, and better homework

completion. Family involvement was also associated with higher rates of high school graduation and higher rates of enrollment in colleges and universities (National PTA, 1992).

Researchers also found that when programs were designed to involve parents fully, students achieved more, regardless of their socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial backgrounds or their parents' levels of education. In fact, with full parental involvement, disadvantaged children achieved at the same levels as did middle-class children (Fuerstein, 2000).

Increasingly, partnerships are being forged between the home, school, and community to support not only academic achievement but also the development of leadership and other social skills (Cooper et al., 1999; Locklear & Mustain, 1998; Marsh, 1992; Patten, 1999). Many of these partnerships aim to reduce drug use, crime, violence, and sexual activity among young people (Benson, 1997; Moore & Halle, 2000; Patten, 1999; Reynolds & Karr-Kidwell, 1996).

In fact, family involvement is considered so important that federal legislation, called the No Child Left Behind Act, now requires that schools develop formal programs to increase family involvement.

What Motivates Families to Become Involved?

Why do family members want to become involved and to stay involved with their children’s learning?

The answer to this question is different for different family members, of course, but many people are motivated by the following factors (Eldridge, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997)

- Knowing that they can make a difference in their lives and the lives of their children
- Believing that they are participating in something successful
- Feeling respected
- Feeling that their time and efforts are acknowledged
- Receiving training and guidance
- Receiving practical support, such as childcare and transportation assistance

What Hinders Families from Becoming Involved?

Barriers to family involvement may have their roots in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational differences, language, and culture. When administrators and staff differ from children’s families in these areas, the possibilities for misunderstanding and miscommunication regarding family involvement increase (Kieff & Wellhausen, 2000; Heleen, 1988; Liontos, 1992).

Administrators and staff may feel that, as the professionals, they do not need or want family involvement. Some may be concerned about losing authority or influence if families become involved in the programs. Others may feel little respect for the families. Still others may think that encouraging family involvement is not their responsibility.

Some barriers are found within the families, which may lack the time, money, or emotional resources to become involved. Family members may believe that it’s the staff’s job, not the family’s job, to help the child learn. They may feel that the program does not really want them to be involved or that the staff treats them disrespectfully. Some families also face language or cultural barriers that prevent them from communicating effectively with staff and administrators. Low literacy levels, transportation difficulties, and childcare issues may also present barriers.

Eliminating barriers on both sides is crucial to encouraging greater family involvement.

Supporting Various Types of Family Involvement

Family involvement can be classified in various ways. Epstein (1995) identifies six types of involvement. Using these types, we can identify activities and ways to encourage family involvement in childcare programs, after-school programs, and other nonformal educational settings.

Type of Involvement	How Family Members Show Involvement	How Programs Can Encourage Involvement
<p>Volunteering Helping in the program or with program-related activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve as a chaperone on field trips • Work as a telephone-tree caller • Participate in a parent safety patrol • Teach a skill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit and organize volunteers • Identify available talents, times, and locations of volunteers • Match volunteers with appropriate opportunities • Offer training for volunteers • Recognize volunteer efforts
<p>Parenting Establishing home environments that support children’s learning and development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish age-appropriate rules and guidelines for children • Talk with children about their interests, activities, and friends • Explain their hopes and goals for their children to the children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer clear parent-education information—via documents, workshops, discussion groups, videotapes, or classes—that shows respect for diversity of cultures, beliefs, values,

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Supporting Various Types of Family Involvement

Type of Involvement	How Family Members Show Involvement	How Programs Can Encourage Involvement
<p>Communicating Engaging in two-way communications about children's progress and the program's activities and policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read a progress report • Attend a parent conference • Read a program newsletter • Send a note to a staff member or call about the child's progress or problems 	<p>needs, and goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design effective program-to-home and home-to-program methods of communication • Provide clear information on program policies and activities that is appropriate for diverse literacy levels • Provide translations for written materials or interpreters for oral communications if needed • Send child's work home for the family to review
<p>Supporting learning at home Helping children learn outside the classroom</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss class work with children • Discuss homework assignments with children • Help children establish a homework routine • Visit the library with children • Help children rehearse for plays or concerts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsor family fun nights that focus on math, language, or other skills • Provide information and ideas about how families can help children with homework and other skill-building activities • Provide a lending library for educational books and games
<p>Decision making Participating in program decisions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join a friends-of-the-program organization • Serve on an advisory committee, council, or board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to families of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups • Offer leadership training
<p>Collaborating with the community Integrating school, community, and family resources to enhance programs, build partnerships, and support children's development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help children link to community resources, such as art, music, and theater • Encourage children to participate in community service, such as helping senior citizens, recycling, and peer tutoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give parents a list of community resources and services that support learning • Develop partnerships, coalitions, or collaborations with other community resources and services

Theoretical Models for Understanding the Family's Role in Child Development

Ecological Systems Model

Researchers who study child development use theoretical models to understand this process. One of the most popular models today is called the **ecological systems** or **bioecological model**, which was first described by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). This model, which looks at the context in which a child develops, helps to explain the importance of parental involvement. It also shows why it is reasonable to believe that the school-focused research findings also apply to nonformal educational settings. The figure below represents the model graphically.

The ecological systems model views a child as a person interacting with a set of environmental systems. That is, the child both influences and is influenced by the various systems.

The system closest to the child is the *microsystem*, where the child interacts with the immediate surroundings—the home, childcare program, school, and neighborhood. In the microsystem, the child is surrounded by people, such as family members, caregivers, teachers, and neighbors, who have first-hand knowledge of the child.

Next, the *mesosystem* encompasses connections between the child's microsystems, such as the relationship between the home and the program and between the program and the school. This

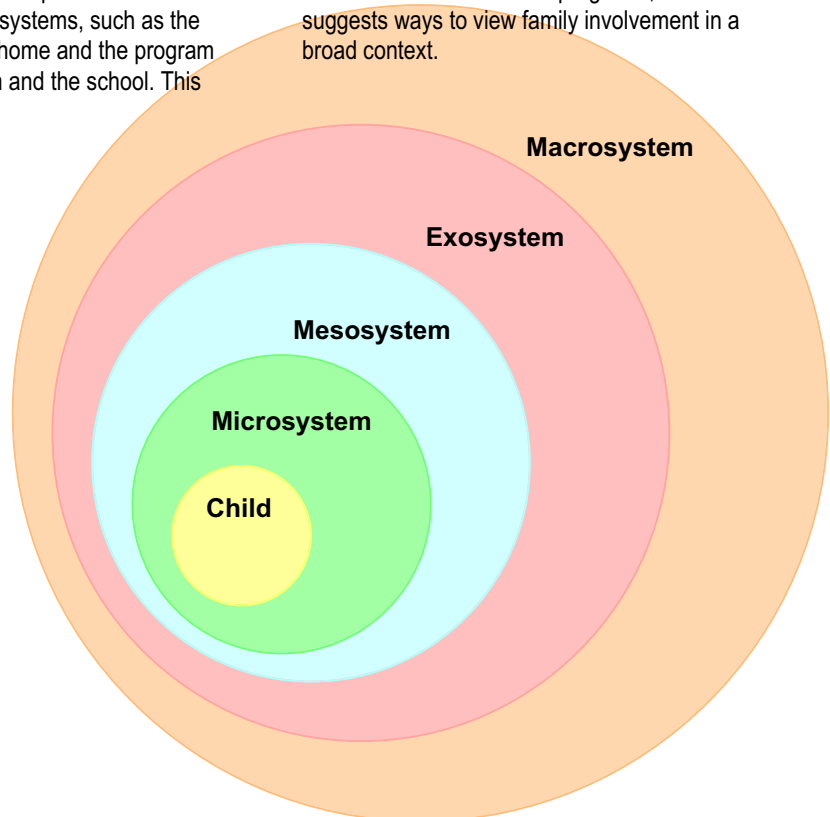
system is the most important for understanding parent involvement, because the mesosystem is where the family and the larger community can interact to support the child's development.

The *exosystem* refers to social settings, such as a parent's workplace or a community health center, that do not contain the child but that can affect and be affected by the child. For example, through policies on parental leave and flexible work schedules, workplaces can help or hinder parents' involvement in their child's development.

The outermost level, the *macrosystem*, includes cultural values, customs, laws, and resources that influence the inner systems. Accreditation standards for childcare centers, for example, can greatly influence efforts to enhance family involvement.

All of these ecological systems change over time, and such changes can alter the degree of family involvement in a program. For example, the birth of a sibling or a parent's new job can limit the time available for involvement. The developing child, too, changes over time, and these developmental changes require adjustments.

For nonformal educational programs, the model suggests ways to view family involvement in a broad context.



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Theoretical Models

Developmental Contextual Model

Ford and Lerner (1992) added a dynamic dimension to the ecological systems model. Their developmental contextual model emphasizes that all of the critical agents of development—child, parents, family, neighborhood, childcare center,

economy, and society—are constantly changing. Consequently, expressions of involvement also change, and responsive programs and centers should monitor their expectations to ensure that they adapt accordingly.

Focusing on Parent Involvement

Parent Involvement Model

A model that focuses more closely on the parent involvement process has been developed (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). The model identifies several factors that influence a parent's decision to become involved with a child's learning. Parents are more likely to become involved

- if they believe that such involvement is part of the job of being a parent
- if they feel they can be effective in helping the child
- if they are asked to become involved
- if they are presented with opportunities for involvement.

The parent's choice of the form of involvement is influenced by the parent's skills and knowledge, other demands on the parent's time and energy, and specific invitations for involvement from the

child or the school.

A parent who is involved in a child's education helps the child to succeed through strategies such as modeling effective actions, reinforcing positive behavior, and providing instruction. Results are best when the parent uses strategies that are appropriate to the child's level of development and when the parent's activities match the school's expectations.

The child whose parent does become involved effectively gains greater skills and knowledge, as well as a stronger sense that educational success can be achieved.

This model provides a useful background for understanding parents' decisions regarding involvement and for designing and developing tools to promote involvement

Training Program

Materials

This training program includes the following materials:

- This trainer module
- A PowerPoint presentation to be shown to the target audience—center staff, administrators, and other adults who help children in informal educational settings. Trainer notes are included in the presentation.

- Handouts for the target audience
 1. A trainee module
 2. Checklist for Programs
 3. Checklist for Staff
 4. Training Evaluation

Best Practices for Programs

The activities shown to be effective in attracting and maintaining family involvement can be grouped into three categories:

1. Developing policies and procedures that support family involvement

Policies include guiding principles that influence or determine decisions or actions. Policies are usually written and should be shared with staff and families. Procedures include the steps taken to implement the policies.

2. Supporting staff interactions that promote family involvement

Successful centers actively encourage staff to initiate and maintain efforts to involve families.

3. Fostering communication

Effective centers share information showing that family involvement is welcome and that opportunities for involvement are available.

See the [Checklist for Programs](#) for details.

Best Practices for Staff

“Supporting staff interactions that promote family involvement” is listed above as a best practice for centers. What are these interactions by staff?

Successful interactions can be classified into five categories:

1. Meeting and greeting families when children arrive and when they leave

2. Sharing something about themselves

3. Getting to know the family

4. Showing concern for the child

5. Showing concern for the family

See the [Checklist for Staff](#) for details.

Encouraging Involvement with Diverse Families

In all healthy families, in every culture, adults care about their children and want to play a role in their children’s lives. The expressions of that caring and the ideas of the appropriate roles, however, may differ greatly from one culture to the next. The most difficult challenges arise when program leaders, caregivers, and nonformal teachers come from cultures that are different from those of the children served by their program (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). In those cases, adult caregivers—if they wish to serve the children’s best interests—must work to understand the children’s native cultures and must demonstrate respect for those cultures (Southwest Education Development Laboratory, 2000).

1. Learn about the cultures of the children in your program.

There are various ways to learn about cultures—reading books, articles, and Web sites about various groups, especially those written by someone within the culture; attending cultural events, such as powwows or celebrations of Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth, and Chinese New Year; and visiting markets or stores catering to members of the culture. But look beyond the surface level of the culture. Pay attention to child-rearing practices and family relationships. While

it’s nice to know that a family celebrates Vietnamese New Year by eating special foods, it may be more important to understand how the Vietnamese family values respect for elders, what roles children play in the family, and who makes important family decisions. (At the same time, note that just as families and individuals in your own culture vary in what they believe and how they behave, so do families and individuals in different cultures.)

To encourage family involvement, learn who helps care for the children and try to engage them. For example, in many Latino families, godparents and grandparents play important roles in caring for children. In some African cultures, a boy’s most important mentor may be his mother’s brother, not his father. Seek to engage all the people who care for and about the children, whether they are parents, stepparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, more distant relatives, or family friends.

2. Get to know the family members.

Learning about their culture and showing your respect for it may help you to get to know family members. In so doing, you can work toward building a trust that will encourage them to become involved. Start by talking to family

Adapted from material developed by Linda Skogrand, Human Development Specialist, Utah State University

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members as they deliver and pick up children. Ask questions, but be aware that questions you consider merely friendly could be considered invasions of privacy in some cultures. Pay attention to any signs that your questions or friendly overtures are making family members uncomfortable. If they are, stop what you're doing and think of alternative ways to get to know the individuals and to earn their trust. Be patient—some families may have had unhappy experiences that make it difficult for them to develop trust.

3. Make sure that programs reflect the cultures of the children who are served.

Reflecting their cultures serves several important purposes:

First, it helps the children develop positive cultural identities. Simple efforts—such as putting ethnic art on a wall, serving ethnic foods, and teaching ethnic games or songs—can have lasting effects.

Second, it tells family members that you acknowledge the value of their culture, which helps to build trust between the family and the program.

Third, it gives family members opportunities to participate in activities where they are the experts. For example, family members can suggest arts or crafts to be displayed; demonstrate how to prepare ethnic foods; show how cultural holidays are celebrated; teach crafts and describe their significance; and tell traditional stories. Success in these activities may encourage family members to participate in other activities, such as advisory committees, fund-raising, or program planning.

Agenda for Family Involvement Training

Time	Slides	Focus
5 minutes	1	Introductions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainer and agency • Participants Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilities • Rules • Program
10 minutes	2, 3, 4	What does family involvement mean? Why should family involvement be encouraged?
30 minutes	5, 6	Types of family involvement Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish discussion groups • Distribute Trainee Module handout
5 minutes	7, 8	What motivates or hinders family involvement?
30 minutes	9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14	Best practices for family involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For programs • For staff Distribute best practices checklists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checklist for Programs • Checklist for Staff
5 minutes	15	Summary
5 minutes	16	Training evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribute Training Evaluation forms • Allow time for participants to complete the forms • Collect completed forms

Checklist for Trainers

Preparation for Training

General preparation

1. Select a training location that is comfortable for participants.
 - Appropriate learning environment (quiet, safe).
 - Handicapped access (including access to restrooms).
 - Adequate, well-lit parking.
 - Suitable size for the expected number of participants (neither too large nor too small).
2. Arrange for any necessary equipment
 - Computer.
 - Projector with extra bulbs.
 - Projection screen.
 - Extension cords
 - Blackboard with chalk, or whiteboard or flipchart with markers.
3. Set date and time.
 - Set snow date if the training will occur in winter.
 - Make sure that you have contact information so that you can notify participants if the schedule changes.
4. If appropriate, market the course.
 - Send out brochures, press releases, etc.
 - Make personal contact with prospective students or centers
 - Mail out registration forms, with spaces for participant's name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and affiliation (center, program, school, or other); include your return address
5. Develop participant list from registration forms received.
 - Mail confirmation with map and written directions to the training location.

Prepare yourself

1. Review all teaching materials before the presentation.
2. Practice the presentation until you feel comfortable delivering it.

Prepare your materials

1. Make enough copies of handouts and evaluation forms for the anticipated number of participants.
2. Make attendance sheets, with spaces for
 - Participant's name, address, phone number, and e-mail address
 - Participant's affiliation (center, program, school, or other)
3. Bring nametags and markers.
4. Bring additional pens or pencils and paper.
5. If appropriate, bring crayons and paper for any children who may come with their parents.
6. Always have one or more packets prepared to take with you on short notice.

Manage your time

1. Arrive early enough to set up the room and the equipment.
 - Set up seating.
 - Adjust temperature if necessary.
2. Start on time.
3. As much as possible, try to complete the training in the time allotted.
4. **But** allow flexibility if the participants need additional time to process important information.
5. If there are still questions at the end of the allotted time, write them down and offer to send the participants the information by mail or e-mail.
6. Make sure that arrangements have been made for cleaning up the room after the training.

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Additional Resources

For more information on family involvement or parenting, see:

www.childtrends.org
www.cyfernet.org
www.ed.gov/pubs/parents
www.gucdc.georgetown.edu/nccc
www.familyeducation.com
www.kidsource.com
www.nclb.gov/parents
www.nea.org/parents
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus

www.nncc.org
www.npin.org/initiatives
www.parent.net/article/index
www.parentcenter.com/parenting
www.parentsoup.com
www.projectappleseed.org
www.pta.org
www.scholastic.com/families
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