

# Parent Engagement Practices Improve Outcomes for Preschool Children



This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

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## Executive Summary

Children begin learning at home long before they ever reach the classroom, so parents play a critical role in supporting early childhood learning and school readiness.

But low-income families often face many barriers to providing high-quality early educational opportunities for their children. As a result, there is a wide achievement gap between children from low-income families and those from high-income families. This gap starts early. Kindergarten teachers report fewer than half of children from low-income homes are “ready to succeed in school.”

Supporting parents’ efforts to help their children develop during the preschool years improves child school readiness, reduces child behavior problems, enhances child social skills, and promotes academic success. Effective parent engagement programs can help close the gap in school readiness associated with family income.

Many preschools do include efforts to support parent engagement but many lower income families do not participate. Rigorous intervention studies with low-income parents suggest that intensive, strategic efforts are needed to ensure preschool children are ready for school.

Many effective parent support programs focus on the earliest years of life (ages 0–3). To address children’s school readiness needs, however, parent engagement efforts need to intensify during the preschool years. The following approaches, based on randomized-controlled trials, provide the strongest evidence that focused parent engagement programs during the preschool years can improve child outcomes.

**Programs that promote positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships.** During multiple sessions, parents are taught how to focus attention on their children, set clear expectations, use praise to reinforce positive behavior, and effectively set limits to reduce parent-child conflict and negative parenting practices.

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***One half of children from low-income homes are not “ready to succeed in school,” according to kindergarten teachers. Effective parent engagement programs help address this need.***

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**Programs that promote home learning activities and effective teaching strategies.** These programs are typically delivered individually during home visits, or through a series of school-based parent group meetings. Parents are given learning materials and shown how to use them to help their children enjoy learning.

**Programs that strengthen parent-teacher partnerships.** By facilitating communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, these programs boost child academic and social-emotional skill development.

**Programs that emphasize child physical health.** These programs are designed to increase parent knowledge about nutrition and/or physical activity, build parenting skills (particularly parenting strategies around healthy eating and exercising), and restructure the home environment to facilitate healthy and active lifestyles.

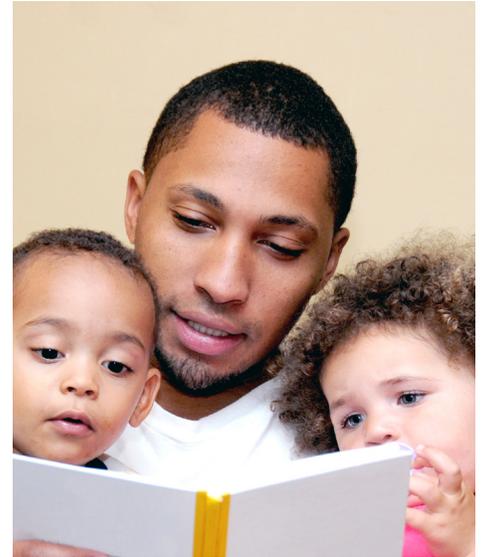
With 32 million children in the United States living in poverty or low-income homes, it’s imperative that we come together and build on what works to promote parent engagement, reduce the income-based achievement gap, and give all children the opportunity for school readiness.

## Introduction

Fifty years of research in early childhood development highlight the central influence that parenting attitudes and behaviors have on children’s development.<sup>1</sup> During the preschool years (ages 3-5), the ways that parents interact with their children and the relationships they form with their children’s caregivers and teachers play an important role in supporting a child’s social-emotional, cognitive, and physical readiness for school.<sup>2,3</sup>

Social-emotional, cognitive, and physical readiness for school in turn sets the stage for school success. When children are ready for kindergarten with strong language, thinking, and self-management skills, as well as good health, they are likely to have success in elementary and middle school. The ability to follow instructions and routines, pay attention, get along with others, and manage strong feelings in kindergarten is especially important for positive school adjustment, high school graduation, and long-term employment.<sup>4,5</sup> Indeed, teachers have long identified children’s social skills and behavioral adjustment as a key marker of children’s readiness for the demands of kindergarten.

For these reasons, schools, communities, and families can benefit from implementing programs and practices that support parent engagement and parenting practices and that help parents support their children’s school readiness. This research brief describes current approaches and highlights findings from recent studies with preschool children (ages 3-5) that document both the promise and challenge of effectively engaging families and children at risk for poor school readiness. We focus in particular on effective parent engagement models that improve school readiness outcomes in well-controlled studies. Systematic approaches and next generation research are recommended to improve the impact of parent engagement programs in order to reduce disparities in school readiness associated with family socioeconomic status.



## Key Findings

### Parent Engagement During the Preschool Years is Key to Children’s Success

During the toddler and preschool years, important changes occur in children’s capacity to communicate and learn about the world. Language and thinking skills blossom, and children become increasingly social, building new friendships and sustaining play and learning activities. These advances reflect rapid maturation in the frontal part of the brain that strengthens children’s ability to

control their attention, manage their feelings, share ideas and solve problems with others. High-quality preschool programs catalyze this developmental potential, promoting long-term benefits including higher rates of high school graduation and increased earnings, along with lower levels of unemployment and crime.<sup>6,7</sup> Engaging parents as key partners in children's development during the preschool years is particularly important because of the positive impact that parenting practices have on child school readiness, reducing child behavior problems, enhancing child social skills, and promoting academic success.<sup>2</sup> In addition, when preschools engage parents effectively and coordinate the efforts of teachers and parents in partnership, it sets the stage for positive parent engagement in subsequent school years.

## Parent Engagement Efforts are Especially Critical for Children Growing Up in Low-income Families

Children growing up in poverty or low-income homes and communities are disadvantaged in their early learning, showing a slower pace of language, social-emotional, and thinking skills. Despite high levels of emotional investment in their children, parents living in poverty lack resources and supports and face disproportionate burdens that impair positive parenting practices and limit parental involvement in children's schooling. These include overcrowded and unsafe living conditions, low levels of parental education, frequent single-parenting, and elevated parental health and mental health disabilities.<sup>8,9</sup> Compounding these difficulties, preschools in low-income communities often lack sufficient resources and are low-quality.<sup>6</sup> Using data from a national study (the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort), the Brookings Institute found that 75 percent of children from families with moderate to high incomes were prepared to enter kindergarten, compared to 48 percent of children from families living in poverty.<sup>10</sup> Currently, more than 15 million children in the United States (21 percent of U.S. children) live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, and another 23 percent live in low-income families, making the reduction of these educational disparities a national priority.<sup>11</sup>

Positive parent involvement and support for learning can improve disadvantaged children's school readiness and start to close this gap in school success. For example, one study with parents of children attending Head Start found that home-based parenting practices, including parent-child reading and learning activities, predicted substantial growth during preschool in areas of attention and language skills, and reduction in problem behaviors.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a study with parents in an urban school district showed that when parents got involved at school (e.g., participating in school activities, volunteering in the classroom, or attending parent-teacher conferences), their prekindergarten children showed accelerated

### What is Parent Engagement?

Parent engagement involves parents, caregivers, and family members working with schools to improve child learning, development, and health. It reflects both the efforts adults make to promote their children's social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development, and the efforts initiated by schools, child-care programs, and communities designed to foster partnerships to support family wellness and children's well-being. Children grow up in a wide variety of family settings, with parents, extended family members, or other adults caring for them. For simplicity and to reflect the research cited, this brief will use the word parent to refer to any adult caring for a child.

### What is School Readiness?

School readiness refers to the acquisition of the competencies, attitudes, and behaviors that promote school success at kindergarten entry. Physical health and basic academic knowledge (knowing letters and numbers) promote early learning. In addition, social-emotional skills are essential to school readiness and sustained school success, including the capacity to manage emotions, focus attention, constructively approach learning tasks, and establish positive relationships with peers and teachers.

growth in social and academic skills, suggesting another important component of parent engagement.<sup>2</sup> When parents increase their involvement over time, children show concomitant increases in achievement, with the effects strongest for children in low-income families.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the quality of communication and collaboration between teachers and parents also is an important predictor of child school readiness.<sup>2</sup>

## Early Education Programs Set Parent Engagement Goals but Challenges Remain

Based on this research, efforts to promote parent engagement are a key feature in programs that have promoted long-term gains in child outcomes. Efforts to engage parents are required for accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)<sup>14,15,16</sup> and are included in the 2016 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).<sup>17</sup> Because of these policies, many preschools include active efforts to support parent engagement. Reviewing current practices, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that 93 percent of state-funded preschool programs reported one or more types of family engagement activities. These included opportunities for parents to become involved in activities at school (85%), parent conferences or home visits to support parent-teacher communication (79%), and parenting support or training programs (51%).<sup>18</sup>

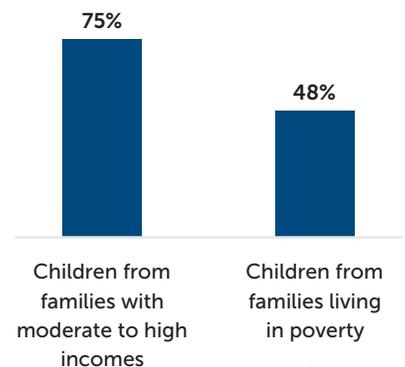
However, when schools create opportunities for parent involvement, family background characteristics, including parental education, family income, home language, parental feelings of efficacy, and social support play a strong role in determining rates of participation, with more advantaged families showing higher participation rates.<sup>19,20,21</sup> If preschool-based efforts do not attract disadvantaged families and if they do not successfully increase the parent attitudes and behaviors that directly affect child development, they will not improve child school readiness or reduce socio-economic disparities in school readiness and success.<sup>17</sup> We have learned much about the types of effort needed to effectively engage vulnerable families in their children’s schooling from recent studies that have successfully improved child school readiness.

## Parent Engagement Programs Can Promote Positive School Outcomes for Children

A careful look at rigorous intervention studies with socio-economically disadvantaged parents suggests that intensive and strategic efforts are needed to promote sustained positive changes in the school readiness of preschool children. The following sections provide an overview of evidence-based approaches tested using randomized-controlled trials that provide the strongest evidence that parent engagement programs can improve child outcomes. Most of these programs use home-visit or parent group interventions to promote parenting practices associated with child social-

### Readiness for School

**% of children prepared to enter kindergarten**



Currently, more than 15 million children in the United States (21 percent of U.S. children) live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level.

emotional or academic readiness. Others target child physical well-being to reduce child obesity, or alternatively, have focused on promoting preschool teacher-parent partnerships to support child learning.



**Programs that promote positive parenting practices and parent-child relationships.** One type of program focuses on improving parenting practices and parent-child relationship quality to reduce child problem behaviors (e.g., noncompliance and aggression) and improve child social competence. Typically, these 10-14 session programs target specific parenting skills, and are delivered either via school- or community-based groups or during individual face-to-face sessions. For example, parents are taught how to focus positive attention on their children, set clear expectations, use praise to reinforce positive behavior, and effectively set limits. The goal is to reduce parent-child conflict and negative parenting practices and to increase positive parent-child interactions. Examples of these programs include the Incredible Years Parent Training Program,<sup>22</sup> Chicago Parent Program,<sup>23</sup> Dare to be You,<sup>24</sup> 12-Ways/Safe-Care Planned Activities Training,<sup>25</sup> and Parent Corps,<sup>26</sup> among others. Each program has been studied with rigorous methods, and shown benefits for both parents and children: Positive parenting behaviors increase, harsh punishment decreases, and the quality of parent-child relationships improve. Particularly when paired with similar teacher training programs, child behavioral improvements are evident at school and home, including reduced behavior problems at school and improved relationships with teachers and with peers.



**Programs that promote home learning activities and effective teaching strategies.** A second type of effective parent program for preschool children focuses on promoting child learning readiness. These programs are typically delivered individually during home visits, or through a series of school-based parent group meetings.

Parents are given learning materials and shown how to use them to help their children enjoy learning. These programs enhance child readiness by (1) enriching the learning materials available at home, and (2) by improving the quality of parent-child interactions in ways that will foster thinking skills, learning motivation, and in some cases, self-regulation and social competence. A few programs use parent workshops (1-2 sessions) to introduce specific teaching strategies such as interactive reading. These programs show that, after brief presentations, parents can learn to use specific teaching strategies, but benefits for children are often only short-term. In contrast, significant and lasting benefits are emerging for programs that include more coaching for parents (ranging from 8-40 sessions).

Several programs (Family Mathematics Curriculum,<sup>27</sup> Getting Ready for School,<sup>28</sup> Companion Curriculum<sup>29</sup>) offer parents and children multi-session workshops (8-12 sessions) taught by preschool teachers. Teachers demonstrate learning activities, and provide parents with materials to use at home with

## Three Ways to Improve School Readiness



**Reading at home**



**Supporting school activities**



**Participating in parent-teacher conferences**

their children. These programs documented gains in child academic skills in the specific areas that were targeted. Other programs used home visitors to introduce learning activities and talk with parents about the best ways to use them with their children (Let's Play in Tandem<sup>30</sup> HIPPIY,<sup>31</sup> and REDI-P<sup>32</sup>). All three programs documented improvements in child cognitive skills and improved behavior or social competence. An important key to success in these home programs was the provision of developmentally sequenced learning games and activities for children, along with support for parents in effective use.



**Programs that strengthen parent-teacher partnerships.**

A third approach to parent engagement during preschool focuses on strengthening teacher-parent partnerships. Two programs provide examples of this approach (Getting Ready Program,<sup>33</sup> Companion Curriculum<sup>29</sup>). Both provide teachers with training in how to build strong relationships with parents. The Getting Ready Program supports teachers in making regular home visits and hosting collaborative planning conferences with parents; it has produced gains in child language use and pre-reading skills, as well as positive learning behavior in the classroom. The Companion Curriculum features Family Corners in preschool classrooms to welcome parent visitors. By facilitating communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, these programs boost child academic and social-emotional skill development. However, simply having parents spend time or volunteer at their children's schools has not emerged as a strategy that boosts child outcomes.



**Programs that emphasize child physical health.**

Recognizing the critical importance of child physical well-being and motor development for early learning,<sup>34</sup> other parent engagement programs focus on promoting preschool children's healthy physical development. These programs are designed to increase parent knowledge about nutrition and/or physical activity, build parenting skills (particularly parenting strategies around healthy eating and exercising), and restructure the home environment to facilitate healthy and active lifestyles. For example, one program (Buffalo Healthy Tots) includes 10 group sessions about diet and physical activity with an emphasis on parenting and behavioral strategies. Parents also keep food and physical activity diaries and meet individually with a coach before or after group sessions to develop and review goals. A recent trial indicated that this approach reduced parent and child body mass index (BMI).<sup>35</sup> Other group-based parent programs focusing on nutrition and physical activity (e.g., Salud con la Familia, Pediatric Overweight Prevention through Parent Training Program), typically 7-12 sessions in length, also have shown positive impacts on child BMI.<sup>36,37,38</sup> Another program (Healthy Habits, Happy Homes) also reduced child BMI and weekend television time by providing parents with four home visits emphasizing motivational coaching by health educators, along with educational materials, phone calls, and weekly text messages.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, very brief counseling for parents delivered in the primary care setting does not appear to produce similar impacts on children's BMI.<sup>40,41</sup>



*When positive parenting behaviors increase, harsh punishment decreases, and the quality of parent-child relationships improve.*

## Future Research Needs

The existing research demonstrates that parent engagement programs can be an effective way to improve school outcomes for children, and may play an important role in reducing the school readiness gap that exists for children from economically-disadvantaged families. However, a number of important research questions relevant for policy and practice remain.

First, effective parent programs for preschoolers with impact on child outcomes have tended to focus on a single domain—improving child social-emotional skills, academic readiness, or physical health. Little is known about whether boosting outcomes in one area (for example, improving social-emotional functioning alone) might also enhance learning outcomes and vice versa, but evidence for cross-domain synergy is emerging.<sup>42</sup> A key question is whether program effects are domain-specific and, if so, how they might be combined to produce benefits for children across multiple areas of well-being, without losing their strategic focus (and hence impact).

Second, it is important to better understand how the length of a parent engagement program and the delivery format (e.g., group sessions, home visits) impact parent participation and program impact. In general, very short programs (1-2 sessions) appear to offer limited benefits, but moderately long programs (10-16 sessions) may be as effective as very long programs. If the impact of these program characteristics were better understood, it would help guide the design of optimally cost-effective programs. In addition, a better understanding of the key mechanisms of action that account for program effects could help refine intervention design and implementation.

The parent programs with strong effects on child outcomes are generally longer and more intensive than standard preschool practice, raising issues regarding how effective practices might be paid for and sustained. Future research should clarify the key factors or critical program elements that produce benefits for children to determine whether programs could be streamlined without a loss of impact. A related question for the future is the degree to which technology-assisted intervention components or delivery systems might increase the accessibility of parent engagement programs and decrease their costs. For example, one recent intervention used regular text messages (three per week during the school year) to remind parents to engage in different home activities that could help their children learn to read, promoting improved child letter-sound knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, issues regarding how to motivate and support stressed parents to improve participation rates in parent engagement programs require greater attention. Understanding the extent to which program modifications are needed to effectively support children with different school readiness needs, and the degree of modification needed to adapt to different family or cultural



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***A number of important research questions relevant for policy and practice remain regarding how parent engagement programs can improve school outcomes for children.***

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contexts, is also important. Recent research suggests that family background and culture can influence engagement practices and preferences, suggesting that more inclusive and culturally-responsive programming could increase engagement in teacher-parent partnerships.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion and Implications

Parents play the lead role in supporting their children’s early development and school readiness. When parents are able to provide nurturing care and strategic support for learning, they foster child brain development in ways that increase capacity for learning—building early attention, memory, and problem-solving skills. The quality of early parental care also shapes the development of child skills for making friends, getting along with others, and managing emotions and behavior. Because these core school readiness skills grow rapidly during the preschool years, it is a developmental period when parent engagement can have a particularly strong impact on child school readiness and future school success. In addition, positive parent-teacher partnerships established when children are just beginning school set the stage for on-going parent engagement and home learning support in the school years that follow.

Schools, child-care programs, and communities can support parent practices and enhance child outcomes by providing parents with support and guidance in the use of home learning materials and support warm and responsive parenting, while also providing opportunities for parents to get involved at school, using conferences and/or home visits to support parent-teacher communication and collaboration.

Yet, a gap still exists, as stress and socio-economic disadvantage often undermine parent engagement by decreasing access to capacity-building resources and burdening parents with other pressing priorities. Evidence from rigorous research studies suggests that the parent engagement programs that support the most vulnerable families and effectively reduce gaps in child school readiness associated with socio-economic disadvantage must be intensive and strategic, considerably longer and more involved than the kinds of parent engagement practices that are widespread in preschools now.

A national commitment to the provision of systematic supports for parent engagement in early childhood has the potential to promote optimal development for all children. Building upon the growing research base of “what works,” additional program development and research is needed to identify strategic and cost-effective parent engagement strategies with sufficient intensity to close the school readiness gap and with the potential to go to scale in cost-effective ways.

### **Authors/Affiliations**

Karen Bierman, Ph.D., is an Evan Pugh University Professor in the College of the Liberal Arts at the Pennsylvania State University; Pamela Morris, Ph.D., is Vice Dean for Research and Faculty Affairs, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University; Rachel Abenavoli is a post-doctoral fellow at New York University. The authors gratefully acknowledge Christine M. McWayne, Ph.D., of Tufts University for her helpful comments on an earlier version of this brief.

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