



# Family-Childcare Partnerships in Early Childhood

## First Steps to Success

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*Research shows the positive effects of purposeful family-childcare partnerships for children's learning and development. Meaningful collaborations between home and childcare are critically important for educators, children, and their families and should be an intentional part of the daily childcare routine. In this NebGuide, we provide an overview of the benefits of family-childcare partnerships. We also give suggestions for how early childhood educators can promote strong partnerships. In this guide, we use the terms 'family' and 'parent' to refer to caregivers, including guardians, extended family, and close friends.*

### Development in Context

For families who rely on childcare, their young children spend most of their time at home and in childcare. Their development and learning is shaped by the interactions they have with family, early childhood educators, and their peers. Interactions that are nurturing and supportive promote children's social skills and school readiness. Working together to ensure children have similar positive interactions and learning experiences across home and childcare contexts is important. Family-childcare partnerships that involve effective communication and collaborative efforts toward meeting shared goals are essential in supporting children.

### Family-Childcare Partnership Defined

Family-childcare partnerships emphasize relationships, complementary expertise, and joint responsibility for supporting children's development and learning. They also emphasize shared contributions, information, and goals. The *relationship* between children's primary caregivers—parents and early childhood educators—is a key driver of successful partnership. Parents and educators are better able to meet the needs of the child when they develop strong working relationships. The relationship is the foundation for the *partnership* between the two most influential settings in which children's learning and development occur—home and childcare. A key part of all successful family-childcare partnerships is the belief that families and educators are both essential and committed to the child's well-being. Families and educators must share responsibility for children's development. Through this partnership, both families (including parents, guardians, and primary caregivers) and educators can enhance children's development and address obstacles.

It is important to recognize that family-childcare partnerships begin the moment a family enrolls their child in a program. All staff and administrative structures of a program can support a strong partnership, even if most of the communication with families is with a child's primary teacher.

## What are the benefits of purposeful family-childcare partnerships?

These partnerships are associated with positive outcomes for children, families, and educators. Childcare programs that focus on promoting family strengths and building constructive partnerships improve:

- the home learning environment
- the parent-child relationship
- parenting skills
- parent empowerment
- family involvement in children's learning

Childcare programs that focus on promoting family strengths and building constructive partnerships employ educators who have:

- a more holistic and enhanced understanding of child skills and development
- a greater awareness of strategies to support child success at home and in childcare

Family-childcare partnerships are associated with several important child outcomes, such as:

- improved social skills and adaptive behaviors
- increased language, literacy, and math skills
- reduced challenging behaviors

Family-childcare partnerships are also linked to increased job satisfaction and decreased job-related stress for educators. Partnerships between families and educators greatly enhance the amount, quality, and scope of services available to help support children's development. Partnerships are particularly important during the early childhood years when parents are learning more about how they can become an active participant in their children's learning and development.

## Developmental Considerations for Engaging in Successful Partnerships

In early childhood, effective family-childcare partnerships provide opportunities for 1) parents to gain

confidence and parenting skills, 2) conversations between families and educators to develop consistent practices between the home and childcare setting, and 3) engaging in joint goal setting and frequent two-way communication. The level of engagement in each of these three key components may shift during the early years, but the following core values and beliefs should be emphasized throughout.

Responsive educators:

- Understand that families have important information and ideas to contribute. Families are experts on their children. The educators' experience and education are valuable, but responsive educators do not assume that they are the only expert.
- Understand that a culturally responsive and equitable approach is essential. Responsive educators work to assess their own culture, and incorporate the cultures of all families into their classrooms. They value diversity and recognize that all children do not have the same experiences, and all families do not have the same priorities for their children's development. They work to incorporate those varied experiences and priorities into strategies to support children's learning and development.
- Are intentional in their efforts to engage families. They recognize that there is not a "one-size-fits-all" model to partner with families.
- Use developmentally responsive practices. During early childhood there is a wide range in children's developmental progress. The environment should accommodate all children achieving their developmental milestones.
- Are strengths-based. They understand that every family and child have strengths. They focus on the strengths of the family to promote positive outcomes for the child.

The next sections provide information on strategies to support family-childcare partnerships specific to the child's age. When engaging in these strategies it may help to reflect upon *how* the childcare program is engaging with families and *why*. Regardless of child age, important first questions to ask a family joining the childcare program are, *Who do you consider to be part of the child's family? How does your child like to be soothed when upset?*

## Using Family-Childcare Partnerships to Address a Challenge

Educators often find it difficult to approach parents about a challenge the child is experiencing. The summary below provides an example of how an educator may prepare for and guide a potentially difficult conversation with a parent.

Alana is a preschool teacher. She is feeling stressed and nervous about communicating with Kirsten's father, Dave, about his daughter. Kirsten has difficulty focusing during large group activities, refuses to eat her lunch, and has been disruptive to other children. Kirsten is 3 years old and lives with her father and two older brothers who are in middle school. Dave is often late dropping Kirsten off and is always rushing to leave when picking her up. Alana asked if she could talk to Dave for 15 minutes when he picked up Kirsten this week. To feel better prepared and less nervous, Kirsten does the following:

- Thinks about the conversation and plans what she will say
- Identifies some of her concerns and writes them down factually (e.g., Kirsten was disruptive during nap time and left the large group activities several times last week to play in other areas of the room)
- Thinks about Kirsten and Dave's strengths
- Chooses a place to have the conversation that will be private

During the conversation Alana:

- Identifies Kirsten's strengths and focuses on behaviors that are positive
- Asks Dave for his perspective on Kirsten's strengths and his observations of her behavior at home
- Identifies Dave's strengths and focuses on behaviors that are positive
- Identifies goals she and Dave share for Kirsten (e.g., how can she be supported to get adequate rest)
- Allows for long pauses in the conversation to facilitate thinking and processing feelings
- Asks a lot of questions to ensure Dave is an equal partner in the conversation and can share his ideas and thoughts
- Purposefully states the desired outcomes that Alana and Dave mutually determine (e.g., for Kirsten to stay on her cot to rest or engage in a quiet activity during nap time)

After talking to Dave, Alana reflects on the conversation and sends an agreed upon action plan to Dave in an email or letter. Then she checks to see if Dave agrees with her summary.

## Effective Family-Childcare Partnerships: Infants and Toddlers (ages birth to 3)

It is important for educators to create co-caring relationships with families. In co-caring relationships, parents and educators intentionally communicate the child's daily experiences and needs across the home and childcare settings. It can be impactful to communicate something positive about the infant or toddler's day, because children of this age cannot share their experiences. Families will appreciate knowing simple information, such as: "Michael really enjoyed looking at himself in the mirror today," or "Surin tried broccoli today, and really liked it." It can be meaningful if educators include photos with their messages if desired by the family. It can also be helpful to ask questions at drop-off, such as, "How was bedtime last night?" These specific questions help to support the relationship by building trust, and helping the family feel welcome.

An especially important aspect of family-childcare partnerships during infancy and toddlerhood is adopting a strengths-based approach. The aim of this approach is to support parents' confidence and competence to effectively care for their children. This is important because a child's earliest relationships with their parents set the stage for later learning and academic success. Parents are essential in teaching their infants and toddlers healthy ways to control emotions and behaviors and skills for positive peer relationships.

**Infants:** During infancy, a central focus of the family-childcare partnership is building trust. This may be the first time that a parent is allowing another adult to care for their baby. It may take some reassurance and frequent two-way communication to foster the trust needed to build the relationship. Sharing how the baby slept, what the baby enjoyed, and what you noticed the baby learned during the day can support a family's comfort and may build their competence. Educators can serve as a trusted resource by providing relevant developmental information for parents.

**Toddlers:** Partnerships with families of toddlers may focus more on goal setting and joint planning. This will help ensure consistency as children learn self-control and how to manage their strong feelings. Toddlers are beginning to notice that they are separate individuals and want to assert their preferences while also learning to use language to express their thoughts and needs. This can create challenges for families and educators because toddlers do not understand logic. They need a diaper change, but yell, "No diaper!" Intentionally discussing how and why to help toddlers express themselves in developmentally appropriate

ate ways across the home and childcare setting can benefit everyone.

### **Effective Family-Childcare Partnerships: Preschool (ages 3 to 5)**

Meaningful family-childcare relationships in preschool have the potential to positively shape the child's and family's perceptions of school over time. In preschool, it is important to engage in two-way communication that helps families understand how to prepare their child for school. Educators can share photos of children engaged in activities and provide information for how these activities facilitate their learning and development. It can be beneficial to invite families to observe the childcare setting, participate in activities, and read or tell stories, or facilitate activities that represent the family's culture. Educators can invite parents to share how they foster their preschooler's learning and development of literacy or math skills at home (e.g., cooking or gardening). Another strategy is to invite a professional in the community to share information during an evening family session. This family session could be an opportunity for families to bring and share food and then observe the professional interacting with the children (e.g., how to engage in storybook reading). In preschool, it may also be helpful to support the families in preparing for and navigating the transition into kindergarten.

For families who cannot visit or participate in the childcare setting, there are other ways to engage them in their child's learning. Educators can share the daily schedule with parents and discuss the home schedule. Educators can also encourage parents to share photos that can be displayed on a photo board in the classroom. They can use technology such as classroom apps or text messages that allow for two-way communication. They can also send home specific lessons the children are receiving at school, with guidance on how parents can practice with their child at home. They can request information about events and activities happening at home that can be incorporated into lessons at school. Two programs being used in Nebraska that effectively engage families to increase their knowledge, confidence, and competence are the national program, ReadyRosie, which is supported by the Nebraska Department of Education (<https://www.education.ne.gov/oec/readyrosie/>) and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Getting Ready approach (<https://gettingready.unl.edu/site/>). ReadyRosie provides videos in English and Spanish that teach vocabulary and model interactions for families and educators to watch. Getting Ready provides educators with strategies to use to support parental engagement and

encourage strong partnerships between educators and families living in poverty.

### **Family-Childcare Partnerships: Specific Considerations**

#### *Children with Special Needs*

Partnerships between families and educators are foundational for educating young children with disabilities and other special needs. Early childhood special education emphasizes the importance of responsiveness to families' unique priorities and values. Family-childcare partnerships can increase the effectiveness of an individualized education plan (IEP) and an individualized family service plan (IFSP) and promote improved outcomes for young children with disabilities. Furthermore, family-childcare partnerships are a critical factor in successful transitions into kindergarten for students with special needs. Unfortunately, special educators often report a lack of confidence for partnering with families, especially families with diverse backgrounds. Similarly, parents of students with disabilities are often unsure about how to support their children's learning, and are unhappy with the IEP/IFSP process. To promote improved family-childcare partnerships for students with special needs, early childhood programs can:

- Ensure that parents are partners through every step of the problem-solving process
- Include parents as experts on their children and recognize that evidence-based decisions are impossible without them
- Co-establish shared goals, regular two-way communication, and expectations
- Co-identify parents' roles in interventions
- Solicit parent input for needs
- Provide parent support sessions and relevant community referrals

To improve parent satisfaction with IEP/IFSP meetings, early childhood programs should consider the following:

- Procedures
  - Develop an agenda, ensuring time for parent input and questions
  - Contact the parent before the meeting (review agenda, ask about parent goals)

- Explain team member roles
- Time and setting
  - Co-identify meeting start and end time, and place of meeting
  - Consider parent comfort (e.g., temperature, lighting, chairs that are arranged in a way to promote an at-ease environment and open communication, meet parent and walk to the meeting to open a line of communication)
  - Involve only key individuals (a large team of professionals may be intimidating)
- Facilitation
  - Decide who will lead the meeting in advance
  - Provide parents with the meeting agenda prior to the meeting
  - Follow the agenda, and stay on task
  - Use effective communication skills—verbal (e.g., limited jargon, use of reflections, summaries, clarification, information giving, modeling, positive regard) and nonverbal (e.g., facial expressions, posture, cultural practices)
  - Check for understanding and agreement for team decisions (e.g., clear IEP goals and plans)

### **Engaging Families for Culturally Responsive Educational Experiences**

Many educators report feeling undereducated about different cultures. One way that educators can overcome this is by finding opportunities for education, either through formal classes or by engaging more with families from different backgrounds. Being open to new experiences and being flexible with activities can help families from other cultures feel more welcome. Educators should encourage parents to incorporate their culture into suggested activities. Educators may also invite families to share their culture with others in the program. For example, a family member can share traditional dress or go to the center to cook a traditional meal with the children. Families can also engage in storytelling with children, either through a relevant book or through oral storytelling. When children are encouraged to observe, experience, and share their home culture in childcare settings, they are more likely to have positive feelings about their culture and to use—rather than reject—their home language.

### **Children Living in Rural Communities**

Although living in rural communities places unique stressors on families, such as limited access to quality childcare, rural communities also have many strengths. Family-childcare partnerships that capitalize on close-knit, often generational, rural relationships can build trust with families and increase access to resources. Parents can be a valuable resource in underserved rural communities, helping to fill gaps in early childhood settings by volunteering their time or donating supplies.

Parents in rural communities often have fewer resources available for educational enrichment, like libraries, museums, and community centers. Childcare settings may help make up for these missing resources by providing parents with suggestions for activities, keeping them updated on local events, and even providing resources (e.g., allowing parents to borrow books). Early childhood curricula that foster family-childcare connections can promote active engagement in learning and positive outcomes for children living in rural communities. Additionally, a strong family-childcare connection promotes school readiness skills for children from minority groups living in rural communities. These early partnerships have effects not only on children's early academic outcomes, but also on their later outcomes. In fact, when there are strong partnerships between parents and early childhood programs in rural communities, children's rates of high school completion improve.

### **Professional Development to Strengthen Partnership**

Ongoing professional development and collaboration with coworkers are ways that educators can establish and maintain positive relationships with families. Childcare directors serve an important role in ensuring childcare staff attend trainings to learn new and effective ways of partnering with families. In Nebraska, Extension educators who are part of the Learning Child team offer professional development trainings on the topic of facilitating family partnerships in childcare settings. It may also be helpful to reach out to an Early Learning Coordinator to identify professional development opportunities related to this topic. Educators can also collaborate with coworkers to learn, share, and strengthen these skills. Finally, educators can continue to ask and learn from families about their preferences and ideas for how to strengthen their partnership.

### **Reflection Questions**

Reflecting on what you have read may spark additional ideas for fostering positive family-childcare partnerships. Ask yourself:

1. Are you using family-inclusive language?
  - a. For example, “adult” or “caregiver,” instead of parent, Mom, or Dad—not all children have a mom and/or dad
  - b. “Children” rather than son or daughter—some caregivers may be grandparents or foster parents.
  - c. “Family members” rather than people in your household—some children have family members who do not live in their household (e.g., a parent who is incarcerated)
2. What is my understanding of child behaviors and routines at home? What is my understanding of the family’s priorities for development?
3. What are my areas of strength for engaging with families from different backgrounds? What are my needs, or areas for improvement? How can I take steps to work toward improving myself in those areas?
4. How am I facilitating engagement that is relevant and useful to each family’s unique needs and context? How am I using diverse and varied strategies to engage families from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds?
5. How am I regularly assessing the quality of my family-childcare partnerships? How can I get families’ input on this partnership?
6. Are families critically and meaningfully contributing to the planning of activities used to support their child’s learning and development? How can I get families’ feedback on what activities they would like their children to participate in while in childcare? What are they hoping they will learn?

#### RESOURCES

##### EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR PARTNERSHIP GUIDES

- Iruka, I. U., Curenton, S. M., & Eke, W. A. I. (2014). *The CRAF-E<sup>4</sup> engagement model: Building practitioners’ competence to work with diverse families*. Cambridge, MA: Academic Press.
- Keyser, J. (2017). *From parents to partners: Building a family-centered early childhood program*. St. Paul, MN: Readleaf Press.

- Koralek, D., Nemeth, K., & Ramsey, K. (2019). *Families and educators together: Building great relationships that support young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- HeadStart Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center: Head Start parents, family, and community engagement network, at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-parent-family-community-engagement-framework>

##### EQUITY AND CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Implementing the pyramid model to address inequities in early childhood discipline, at <https://www.pbis.org/resource/implementing-the-pyramid-model-to-address-inequities-in-early-childhood-discipline>
- National Association of School Psychologists: Understanding race and privilege, at <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/social-justice/understanding-race-and-privilege>

##### FAMILY-CHILDCARE PARTNERSHIP INTERVENTIONS

- University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools: Getting Ready: Advancing early learning and development, at <https://gettingready.unl.edu/site/>
- University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools: TAPP (Teachers and Parents as Partners): Partnering for the future, at <http://cyfs.unl.edu/TAPP/>

##### KEY RESEARCH FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Marvin, C. A., Moen, A. L., Knoche, L. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2020). Getting Ready Strategies for Promoting Parent–Professional Relationships and Parent–Child Interactions. *Young Exceptional Children*, 23(1), 36–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250619829744>
- Sheridan, S. M., Moen, A. L. & Knoche, L. L. (2017). Family-school partnerships in early childhood. In Dearing, E., Votruba-Drzal, E. (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood development programs, practices, and policies: Theory-based and empirically-supported strategies for promoting young children’s growth in the United States* (pp. 289–309). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Elicker, J., Wen, X., Kwon, K. & Sprague, J. B. (2013). Early head start relationships: Association with program outcomes. *Early Education & Development*, 24, 491–516.
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