

Ten Tips for Involving Families through Internet-Based Communication

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The research is clear—a family's involvement in their child's early education improves outcomes in areas such as the child's language, self-help, social, and motor skills (Connell & Prinz 2002; Henderson & Mapp 2002; Sheldon 2003; Epstein 2004; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006). The more frequent the contact between home and school, the more the child benefits (McWayne et al. 2004).

While traditional forms of home-school partnerships (for example, parents participating in class activities and teachers sending home children's work) are associated with positive results, they are limited in their ability to effectively reach all families. Some children divide their time between two households as a result of divorce, and some parents cannot volunteer in the classroom due to daytime work

hours. In such cases, teachers need to use different methods of home-program communication.

A variety of Internet-based communication methods exist to help increase the frequency and outreach of communication between families and early childhood programs. We recommend the strategies that follow after observing and interviewing teachers who have successfully used them in their own classrooms.

Using technology to improve home-school communication

All of the following methods emphasize two-way communication. Unlike one-way communication approaches in which families are merely informed of their child's progress, two-way communication approaches invite parents to participate in their child's learning process, thus creating an ongoing dialogue between home and program (Abdal-Haqq 2002; Vazquez-Nuttall, Li, & Kaplan 2006).

1. Create a classroom website. Many schools and programs have websites that teachers can add to. For teachers without this option, tools to create web pages, such as Google Sites and Facebook, are free and accessible from any computer (see "Resources for Creating a Website," p. 53). In addition to using print sources to give families information about your classroom activities, post items on the website. Embed a calendar, your family handbook, newsletters, announcements, wish lists, permission slips, and volunteer opportunities. It is best if your website is

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password-protected and accessible only to the families of children in the class. Be sure to keep the information on the website current. If you have a large number of families whose home language is not English, post all key messages in families' home languages.

2. Send individual e-mails to families to share positive information about their child's activities and accomplishments. Although teachers need to reach out to families when a child is facing challenges at school, e-mail may be too impersonal and too easily misinterpreted for these sensitive types of communications. However, teachers can send e-mails to share short anecdotes about children's developing interests, newly acquired skills, or ability to be a good friend that day. These types of positive, spontaneous communications can create two-way conversations when parents reply with similar anecdotes or questions.

3. Post photo stories on the class website. To help families see the process through which their child learns rather than just seeing an end product, create photo-essays—a series of photos with captions that capture children engaged in a project (for example, building with blocks, painting a picture, planting seeds). Post the photo-essays for families to view; many software programs and websites provide easy ways to upload photos. (Because photos on the Internet can be copied by anyone with access to the originating page, take special care to select photos for your website that do not show children's faces clearly,

and do not use their names in captions.) Sequenced photos give families a more accurate picture of their child's developmental progress. Also post photos of children's work.

Change the photos often, and make sure to display each child's work at least once a month.

4. Provide at-home educational activities. Your website can help families use home computers as avenues for extended learning. Prepare a short list of activities that use readily accessible materials, and include links to age-appropriate sites related to classroom topics. For example, if the children are learning about birds, add a link to the National Audubon Society website, which families can explore with their children. Encourage families to document their children's learning at home by keeping a portfolio of their work, taking photos, and jotting down their children's questions. Also ask them to share links to good websites they have found while investigating topics of interest to their children.

Teachers can send e-mails to share short anecdotes about children's developing interests, newly acquired skills, or ability to be a good friend that day.

5. Create a family response link or form on the website to elicit comments, questions, and feedback. This is a good strategy for inviting families to monitor and comment on their child's progress. Parents can complete a short online form to provide comments and questions and e-mail them directly to the teacher.

6. Establish and moderate a family support discussion forum. The purpose of discussion forums is to offer a place where families can share their thoughts and questions. As the discussion forum moderator, you can initiate forums, but work toward families becoming the major contributors. Check the forum regularly to highlight important points, pose follow-up questions, and delete contributions that are inappropriate. As new topics emerge, archive old forums for future



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reference. Examples of topics might include ways to address challenging behaviors or ideas for nutritious meals or snacks for children. Also share listings of upcoming community events for families.

7 • Communicate logistical information through group e-mails.

In addition to using informal communication (conversations at drop-off and pickup) and formal communication (parent-teacher conferences, letters home), send group e-mails to remind all families about upcoming events, such as field trips and parent-teacher conferences.



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Interactive Learning
Family Response



My Mom

My mom helps me bake cakes. My mom helps me bake breakfast. My mom helps me bake cakes with the Easy Bake Oven. She helps me love her.

Pesty Brothers



Pesty brothers can be very hard to take care of. When they pull your hair you get very mad and tell your mom. When they eat ice cream and cookies you get very mad and tell your mom and dad. When they hide you go and find them, and when you find them they have a fake sword and you don't. When they go in your room they get out

your books and scribble in them. When they go in your room they destroy your computers. When they go in your back yard they destroy your ducks. When you get very mad you blow your head off and they tell your mom. When they go outside they destroy people and birds. When they go in your front yard they pull out your flowers. When they go out back they destroy your dogs. When they go in your room they go berserk in your room. When they go out front they destroy the whole universe. When they go out back they destroy the world. But I still love them.

Techniques for increasing access

While these methods are opportunities to increase communication between programs and families of young children, they also raise concerns of equity. The following techniques offer ideas about how to increase access to computer technology for all families and teachers.

8 • Ensure families' access to technology.

To ensure that families who do not have computers at home are included, continue to communicate through traditional means and by printing and sending home hard copies of your website announcements and general e-mails. Remember, some families may need these items in their home language. You might apply for funding from various public and private sources to secure laptop computers that families can check out for home use. For example, the following organizations award computer grants to schools serving pre-K through grade 12 students: (1) Computers for Learning, <http://computersforlearning.gov>; and (2) the HP Technology for Teaching Grant, www.hp.com/hpinfo/grants/us/programs/tech_teaching/k12_main.html. In addition, the Teachers Network posts technology grant opportunities at www.teachersnetwork.org/Grants/grants_technology.htm. Computers acquired through grants can be placed in the family area of your center or school.

Staff members could take turns becoming "experts" and train others in how to use the technology.

9. Provide opportunities for families to increase their technology skills. In certain circumstances, technology-based solutions can produce an unintended communications gap. To ensure that families receive your communications, offer a brief orientation to your classroom website during Open House or parent-teacher conferences. Demonstrate how to access and navigate the site. Focus on teaching families how to use the interactive features (discussion board, e-mail response). Distribute information about computer availability at public libraries and any other local organizations that provide computer access.

10. Set aside time for technology-based communication. Teachers need time for training, maintaining a website, keeping information current, and preparing regular communications. Seek professional development opportunities to learn how to use new technology, or consider contacting experts (or an older student) who can assist with the initial setup. Alternatively, access free online tutorials. Staff members could take turns becoming "experts" and train others in how to use the technology. Visit the Web site of the NAEYC Technology and Young Children Interest Forum, www.techandyoungchildren.org, for more information.

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Resources for Creating a Website

Google sites

<http://sites.google.com>

Provides web-based templates for creating web pages and announcements, plus file cabinet (<10mb document upload), dashboard, and lists. Web pages can be modified easily by anyone who has editing privileges, and can include videos, Google docs, spreadsheets, presentations, photo slide shows, and calendars. The site manager designates members as owners, viewers, or collaborators. No advertisements.

Webs

www.webs.com

Template-driven website construction lets you create blogs, discussion forums, and calendars and allows for comments. Share ideas, information, photos, and videos. Can accommodate group publishing and can be set up for either public or member-only viewing. Web-based construction allows editing from any computer with Internet connectivity. Fee-based version does not contain advertisements.

Wikispaces

www.wikispaces.com

Features include page editing, file and image uploads (including video), and links to web pages. Allows unlimited members and discussion posts. RSS feeds can notify members of changes to the site. Free version for educators contains no advertisements.

Wikispaces for educators

www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers