Increasing parental involvement in learning

Blog

Community education

Literacy and reading

What practical steps can education stakeholders take to increase parental involvement in their children’s learning? This brief presents a selection of programmes that have achieved improvements in learning outcomes by targeting parents’ engagement both at home and in school.

Enhancing parents’ engagement in their children’s learning has been a strong theme in educational planning and management for several decades, with the rationale that improving parental involvement can significantly impact student learning outcomes. There are potentially multiple ways that parents can positively impact learning, from a child’s birth through maturity.

Epstein’s Six Types of Support to Parental Involvement

- **Type 1**: Parenting—helping all families understand child and adolescent development and establishing home environments that support children as students
- **Type 2**: Communicating—designing and conducting effective forms of two-way communications about school programs and children’s progress
- **Type 3**: Volunteering—recruiting and organizing help and support at school, home, or in other locations to support the school and students’ activities
- **Type 4**: Learning at Home—providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and curriculum-related activities and decisions
- **Type 5**: Decision Making—having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees and obtaining input from all parents on school decisions
- **Type 6**: Collaborating with the Community—identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support


Particular forms of parental involvement may vary depending on the context, and much of the early
work on this issue has come from the Global North, but there is a growing body of international research on increasing parental engagement in children’s learning both at home and at school.[1] Not surprisingly, the research shows that some programmes are more effective than others, while in some cases increased parental involvement—especially at the school level—may even result in negative outcomes.[2] While not every programme has been evaluated in a rigorous way, it is possible to identify some of the more effective approaches for which a research base currently exists.

The programmes listed below each meet two criteria: having rigorous research evidence demonstrating a positive impact on parental engagement and learning outcomes, and having sufficient documentation available online to allow others to learn from the approach.

**Programs for Parents of Infants, Toddlers, and Pre-schoolers**

Parents can impact children’s learning outcomes from their earliest years, by providing the cognitive stimulation, nutrition, and loving environment necessary for healthy brain development.[3] Efforts to support parents in these issues have commonly been carried out as a component of holistic early childhood education programmes, through home visits and community meetings, as part of public health initiatives, and in some cases with mass media messaging (radio, television, and more recently e-mail, SMS, and social media).[4]

**Reach Up and Learn** is a programme of weekly home-visits conducted by trained community workers to parents of infants aged six months through three years old. It is based on the Jamaica Home Visit Program, which has demonstrated impact on parents’ practices, on children’s learning and behaviour, and on their earnings as adults 20 years after the original intervention.[5] During each visit, parents learn to create a simple toy out of available materials, practice using the toy in various age-appropriate ways to play with the child, discuss a key principle of child development, and learn a new song to sing with the child. The full home visit curriculum is available free of charge for those who register on the programme website. A similar home-visit programme, for parents of children aged 16 months to four years, is the Parent-Child Home Program.

**Reach Out and Read** is a US-based program that takes advantage of children’s regular medical check-ups from six months to five years of age, to encourage parents to support their children’s cognitive development. Doctors and nurses are trained to discuss with parents how their children learn from infancy and how they can support that learning by regularly reading books aloud to their children. Parents also receive a new children’s book to take home at each medical check-up. Research on this programme, and on several similar ones, shows, in most cases, that parents do indeed read more frequently with their children as a result, and that children develop larger vocabularies and stronger emergent literacy skills as a result, improving their school experiences in later years.[6] Actually providing books is an important part of the model; just providing parents with advice about reading does not appear to have the same impact on children’s learning.[7]

**Home Improvement for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)** was originally developed in Israel and has so far been implemented in fifteen low, middle, and high-income countries to promote children’s school readiness, particularly for children who may not have access to formal preschool opportunities. The programme is designed for parents of children aged three to five years, and involves weekly home visits and monthly parent group meetings and parent-child workshops. During the weekly home visits, parents receive materials from the HIPPY program, including activity books that help parents plan the learning and play that they will engage in with their children throughout the week, a kit of basic supplies they will need to carry out the activities, and storybooks to read with their children. The model has been the subject of dozens of research studies, with consistent
demonstrations of positive impact even as the approach has been refined over the years.[8] A well-known adaptation of the HIPPY program was the Turkish Early Enrichment Project (TEEP), which has demonstrated a strong positive impact for more than 20 years since the original implementation, in areas such as educational attainment and employment outcomes.[9]

**Programs for Parents of Primary and Secondary School Children**

At the age when children have entered formal schooling, parents can continue to support learning in various ways, such as by conveying the importance of school and high aspirations for their children’s education, directly assisting with homework and other formal learning activities, communicating with teachers about their children’s progress, volunteering in the classroom, and participating in school planning and management. Interestingly, there is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of parents’ efforts to be involved directly in schools and even on providing direct homework support,[10] suggesting that interventions should be carefully designed and piloted to determine if they are achieving the expected results.

**Mother Literacy – Child’s Home Activities and Materials Packet (ML-CHAMP),** a joint initiative of Pratham India and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), targeted mothers of children aged five to eight years old with the goal of helping them better support their children’s learning in primary school. The full programme implementation, which lasted 10 months, combined two hours of daily adult literacy and numeracy classes for mothers with a weekly programme of home visits. During the home visits, trained staff delivered and explained to the mother a child’s worksheet on basic language or math skills, and discussed ways in which the mother could support the child’s learning at home. Mothers were advised to review the child’s notebooks, provide sufficient time for doing schoolwork, and communicate with the child’s teacher, among other approaches. The impact on children’s literacy and math skills was modest, but the programme demonstrated the added-value of targeting parents’ own learning at the same time as helping them improve their skills in supervising children’s learning.[11]

**Literacy Boost,** a programme developed by Save the Children for the first three grades of primary school, includes teacher training, regular reading assessments for children, and a set of community activities to encourage literacy development as a part of daily life. This Community Action component includes a series of reading awareness workshops for parents, the establishment of local book banks, and the organization of recreational reading activities outside of school.[12] Analyses of Literacy Boost interventions in seven developing countries showed strong evidence of changes in the home literacy environment and improvements in literacy skills.[13]

**Mallette des Parents** is a programme in France targeting parents of children in the first year of primary school (CP), the first year of lower secondary school (6ème), and the final year of lower secondary school (3ème). The “mallette” (briefcase) consists of a set of materials to aid school leaders in organizing a series of discussions with parents. Materials include guidance on how to establish a positive relationship with parents, as well facilitation guides on the specific discussion topics, DVDs of presentations to show parents, and illustrations to stimulate discussion on a particular theme. An impact evaluation of the Mallette des Parents approach in the first year of secondary school showed increased participation of parents in school activities, improved student behaviour, and some effects on academic performance, particularly for weaker students.[14]

**References**


[8] National Research and Evaluation Center of HIPPY USA.


[12] Literacy Boost Community Action: Creating a culture of reading outside school walls. Save the Children.


Further Resources

The Early Learning Toolkit: Parent Engagement in Learning

This website from the Center for Education Innovations summarizes key principles and effective approaches for encouraging parents’ engagement in learning, offers case studies and links to featured programmes, and highlights key research studies.

Community-based Parenting Education, a set of resources developed by UNESCO Bangkok, includes a parenting education guidebook, a facilitator’s handbook and resource pack, and a set of video clips on each module of the parenting education programme.

The National Network of Partnership Schools offers a great number of resources on increasing parental involvement in schools. While these materials were developed specifically for the U.S. context, the Network’s research programme has been highly influential in shaping discussions around the world about school-family relations and school management practices.

Micro-Innovations 2015: Parental and Community Engagement This document published by STIR Education highlights small-scale innovative practices that a selection of teachers in India have developed to increase parental engagement within their own classrooms.

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