

Engaging with families for children's early learning and development



There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's early learning and development. So how can early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners best work with families for learning?

This guide makes recommendations based on the best available research evidence about how early childhood services with 3-5 year-olds can engage with families to enhance children's early learning and development.¹ It sets out 'promising' and 'not promising' approaches drawn from multiple studies which have measured the effects of different strategies. While there is room for improvements in the quality of available research evidence,² these approaches provide 'best bets' for guiding practice. This guide also sets out next steps for early childhood services and practitioners to consider how the findings are relevant to them.

Note that some of the examples offered may not apply in all contexts. Reasonable adjustments should be made where necessary to ensure full access and participation for all families.

Early Years Learning Framework

Principle 2: Partnerships

Working in partnership with families, educators use the Learning Outcomes of the EYLF to guide their planning for children's learning.

National Quality Standard

Quality Area 6

Quality Area 6 recognises (among other things) that collaborative relationships with families are fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for children.

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Focus Area 3.7 (Engage parents/carers in the educative process)

Focus Area 7.3 (Engage with the parents/carers)

The Teacher Standards outline professional expectations for engaging effectively with families. They recognise the importance of working in partnership with families to improve learning outcomes for students.



Promising

Research evidence shows these approaches for engaging with families have a **measurable positive effect** on the learning and development of 3-5 year-olds when implemented well. All of these approaches reinforce standard practice within the National Quality Framework.



Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Recognising and supporting learning that takes place in the home has been shown to improve children's early learning and development.³ Families who feel they are working in partnership with practitioners can be more likely to engage in practices to support learning and development at home.⁴

For there to be genuine recognition and support of families' engagement in learning at home, families and practitioners need to be seen as equal, trusted partners who both influence a child's learning. This could be achieved in the first instance by having conversations with families about:

- talking with their child about what they are learning or exploring
- resources available in the local community that link to learning experiences at the service (for example, local libraries, local cultural sites and outdoor environments).

However, it is not recommended that early childhood services simply *tell* families techniques or tools they should use at home.



Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development

Two-way communication (from practitioners to families, and families to practitioners) has been shown to improve children's early learning and development.⁵ To be most effective, two-way communication should draw on the knowledge and expertise of both families and practitioners about children's learning needs and developmental milestones.

Additionally, low-cost, light touch updates from services to families about learning have been shown to improve children's outcomes,⁶ particularly for children requiring additional support to meet developmental milestones.⁷ Texts, smartphone apps or emails could:

- provide ideas for games or activities families could do with their children
- send follow-up prompts to help families use the games.

Light touch updates should be personalised, positive, concise and focused on learning, and should enable families to respond if required. Directors should consider how light touch updates can be maintained without increasing practitioners' workloads.⁸



Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

A literacy-rich environment is where language in various forms (like talking, listening, reading, storytelling and visual arts) is part of daily life. This type of environment allows children to practise their literacy skills often, in functional ways.⁹

One specific way early childhood services can support a literacy-rich environment at home is by promoting shared reading. There are many forms of shared reading, including reading a book with a child before they have started to read, and dialogic reading (where a family member interacts with the child by asking questions or having a conversation about the book). Shared reading between families and their children has been shown to have positive effects on language development of 3-5 year-olds.¹⁰ However, it is important that shared reading efforts are sustained over months rather than weeks.¹¹



Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families and practitioners has been shown to improve children's early learning and development.¹² It helps to share responsibility for decision-making and learning. It can also ensure that families and practitioners are using a consistent approach for addressing a child's unique learning and development needs.

Collaborative planning could involve practitioners working with families and children to identify children's individual goals (including developmental goals) and strategies for achieving these goals.

Examples of collaborative problem-solving could include asking families to note examples of child behaviour and language at home, reviewing this information together to identify any areas for focus or developmental needs, and selecting strategies for working on those.¹³ For example, practitioners and families might discuss how to best support a child who sometimes feels anxious about coming to the service.



Promising

Reflection questions



Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Educators and teachers

- How do you show families that you recognise their role in children's learning?

Service leaders

- There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way of recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home. What does or could it look like in your service?



Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development

Educators and teachers

- How do you or your colleagues invite families to share their knowledge and expertise about their child's learning and development needs, and how do you share your knowledge and expertise in return?

Service leaders

- What supports (for example, translation services) are in place to help all families and staff communicate with each other?
- Does your service cater to differing levels of adult literacy?
- How much time are staff spending on sending personalised updates to families? Could any of these updates be automated (but still personalised)?
- Has your service consulted with families about preferred frequency and time of day of communications?



Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

Educators and teachers

- What might a 'literacy-rich environment' at home look like for your children?
- How do you or your colleagues support families to create a 'literacy-rich environment' at home for each child?

Service leaders

- How might aspects of 'literacy-rich environments' at home change as children grow?



Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Educators and teachers

- How do you work with a child and their family to identify a child's individual goals?
- How do you work collaboratively with families to achieve these goals?

Service leaders

- How easy is it for families to raise issues or challenges about their child's learning and development with your service?
- Are there systems in place to allow for collaborative problem-solving with families?
- How are a child's individual goals and successful problem-solving strategies communicated as that child transitions from one room to the next?

Not promising

Research evidence shows these approaches may have no effect or, in some cases, even have a negative effect on children's learning and development.

Relying on one-way home-to-centre communication

The benefits seen from building two-way communication between families and early childhood services are generally *not* seen when communication stops at the early childhood service. One-way information sharing from families to their child's practitioner or service (that is, when communication is initiated by the family and *not* reciprocated or acted on by the service) has not been shown to improve children's early learning or development.¹⁴

Reflection questions

Educators and teachers

- Think about the types of information that are important to share with families. How can you encourage a two-way conversation with all families?

Service leaders

- Do structures and policies in your service allow for two-way communication between staff and the child's family wherever possible?
- Are there systems that help practitioners to share important information from families even when there is staff turnover or when children transition between rooms?

Delivering one-off, light touch parenting education programs

Parenting education programs run by early childhood services which occur only as a single session, or don't allow for practical modelling or practice, have *not* been shown to have a positive impact on children's cognitive or pre-academic skills.¹⁵ It may be challenging for some families to change aspects of their own behaviour (for example, to be consistently warm and responsive when interacting with their child). Light touch parenting education programs delivered by early childhood services are unlikely to provide enough support for families to change their behaviour in a way that then improves children's learning outcomes.¹⁶

Reflection questions

Service leaders

- If you currently deliver parenting or family education programs, are these one-off sessions or part of a series? Do the sessions allow for modelling and practice?



Where to next?

Consider which of the scenarios in the table below most closely resembles your current practices.

We're already using some or all of the promising approaches	We're currently using some or all of the not promising approaches	We're just starting to engage with families at my service	We're using other approaches not covered in this practice guide
<p>That's great – the evidence suggests these are good approaches to try. You could focus on embedding, sustaining and monitoring quality practice For example, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicitly consider implementation barriers and enablers — that is, the factors that are helping and hindering family engagement • focus more on tailoring approaches to meet the diverse and unique needs of families • share your approaches, challenges and successes with colleagues, and/or service leaders • monitor and review how these promising approaches are going (for example, by observing how children are learning, and asking families, colleagues and children about what is and is not working, and what adjustments could be made to improve outcomes). 	<p>There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to family engagement, and findings in the research evidence may change as further studies are carried out or approaches are tested in more settings. However, based on the best available research evidence, these 'not promising' approaches are less likely to be successful and may even have negative impacts on children's learning and development. In this context, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • closely monitor how the approach is going in general and for specific groups of children and their families (for example, by observing how children are learning, and asking families, colleagues and children) • review the evidence you have collected to see if the approach is giving you a good chance of success • consider trialling some of the promising approaches. 	<p>Family engagement in children's learning has been linked with positive outcomes for children's early learning and development, so it's great that you're looking for strategies to try. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with colleagues to identify the main needs of families in your service • select which one/s of the promising approaches you could first focus on to meet these needs • monitor how this approach is going (for example, by observing how children are learning, and asking families, colleagues and children) • ask colleagues, and/or service leaders for feedback or to discuss challenges that arise • browse AERO's resources. 	<p>Family engagement can involve many different activities. Your approach may not yet have been tested by researchers, or may have been tested in studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for this guide. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to monitor how your approach is going (for example, by observing how children are learning, and asking families, colleagues and children) • try some of the promising approaches you haven't tried already • review the evidence for your approach using AERO's Research reflection guide.



For more information

This is a very short summary of recommendations drawn from the research evidence. To check how we synthesised the most rigorous and relevant approaches from meta-analyses, systematic reviews and primary studies, see our [brief description](#) or [detailed description](#). For further guidance, see the practical resources, [annotated reference list](#), and detailed implementation guides on the [AERO website](#).

Endnotes

- ¹ In this practice guide, “early learning and development” is used as an umbrella term to describe outcomes reported in the included studies. These studies reported on a range of child outcomes, including outcomes described as “academic outcomes”, “academic behaviours” and “social-behavioural competence”. These were measured through, for example, language assessments and measures of engagement/persistence and social skills: Smith et al. (2020).
- ² For example, there is a need for more replication studies to test approaches in different contexts, and to better understand how family engagement approaches work when they involve multiple strategies operating at the same time.
- ³ Smith et al. (2020).
- ⁴ Smith et al. (2020).
- ⁵ Smith et al. (2020); Sheridan et al. (2019).
- ⁶ See et al. (2021); Robinson-Smith et al. (2019); York, Loeb & Doss (2019); Jelley et al. (2016); Jelley & Sylva (2018).
- ⁷ See et al. (2021); cf. Cabell et al. (2019).
- ⁸ See et al. (2021).
- ⁹ For examples of specific family literacy programs delivered through early childhood services, see Burgoyne et al. (2018), Neumann (2018), Soto et al. (2020) and Teepe et al. (2019).
- ¹⁰ Noble et al. (2019); Higgins & Katsipataki (2015). The best current research evidence suggests that the effects of shared reading are smaller than previously thought, but this is also due to limitations in the research to date (Noble et al., 2019). Note also that research evidence involving children under 3 years includes different findings (for example, Goldfeld et al., 2011).
- ¹¹ Shorter-term efforts (for example, 6-8 weeks) are unlikely to have much effect: Noble et al. (2019).
- ¹² Smith et al. (2020); Sheridan et al. (2019).
- ¹³ Chao et al. (2006).
- ¹⁴ Smith et al. (2020).
- ¹⁵ Grindal et al. (2016).
- ¹⁶ Although one-off, ‘light-touch’ parenting education programs have generally not been effective, specific programs delivered by trained ECEC practitioners in the home to help build parent-child relationships show promise. Certain efforts of ECEC practitioners to build parent-child relationships have been found to improve children’s social and emotional development (O’Connor et al., 2016). These focus on, for example, building trusting relationships, modelling interactions, affirming parent competence and giving positive feedback. To date, studies have focussed on specific programs like ‘Promoting First Relationships’ and the ‘Getting Ready Intervention’. These are delivered in the home by qualified ECEC practitioners who have trained in the program. Further research is needed to test if these programs would have the same positive effect when delivered within an early childhood service premises (O’Connor et al., 2016; see also Sheridan et al., 2019).