

Engaging with families to support student learning in primary school



There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's learning. So how can primary school teachers and leaders best work with families to support student learning?

This guide makes recommendations based on the best available research evidence about how primary school teachers and leaders can engage with families to bring about improvements in students' learning outcomes.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 considering how the findings relate to your individual practice or whole school strategy.

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.

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)

Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Professional Practice 5 (Engaging and working with the community)

The Teacher and Principal 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 can have a **measurable positive effect** on student learning outcomes. While some promising approaches may seem obvious, the key is that they have been shown to improve student learning outcomes when they are implemented well.



Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Recognising and supporting learning that takes place in the home has been shown to improve students' academic achievement, academic behaviour, and social-behavioural competency.³ Families who feel they are working in partnership with their child's school can be more likely to engage in practices to support learning at home.⁴

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

- talking with their child about school and what they have learned
- conveying family expectations around learning and/or
- resources available in the local community that link to the school curriculum (for example, local cultural sites and outdoor environments).

However, it is not recommended that schools simply *tell* families techniques or tools they should use at home, or ask families to assist with homework.



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

Two-way communication (from school staff to families, and families to staff) has been shown to improve students' social-behavioural competency.⁵ Effective two-way communication draws on the knowledge and expertise of both families and teachers about students' learning needs and achievements.

Additionally, low-cost, light touch updates from schools to families about student learning have been shown to improve students' academic achievement,⁶ particularly for students at risk of falling behind.⁷ Texts, emails or phone calls could:

- inform families about upcoming tests or assignments
- provide assignment results
- inform families about missing assignments or homework and/or
- provide short summaries of a lesson to prompt conversation at home.

Light touch updates should be personalised, positive, concise and focused on learning, and enable families to respond if required.

Updates are more effective when schools ask families how often and at what time of day they prefer to receive messages.⁸ Leaders should consider how updates can be maintained without increasing teacher workload.⁹



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.

One specific way schools can support a literacy-rich environment at home is by promoting shared reading. There are many forms of shared reading, including dialogic reading (where the family member interacts with the child by asking questions or having a conversation about the book). The practice of shared reading between families and their children has been shown to have positive effects on language development of younger students.¹⁰ 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, students and school staff has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes and social-behavioural competency.¹² It helps to share responsibility for decision-making and learning. It can also ensure that families, teachers and leaders are using a consistent approach for addressing a student's unique learning needs.

Collaborative planning could involve working together with families and students to identify students' individual goals (for example, around developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly from primary to secondary school), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.

Examples of collaborative problem-solving could include asking students and their families about questions you have when reviewing a student's progress, and actively discussing learning opportunities for students.

Promising

Reflection questions

Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Teachers

- How do families you work with already support their children's learning?
- Have you had explicit discussions with students and families about high expectations for learning?

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 school?
- What strategies did your school use for remote learning during COVID-19? Is it possible to leverage some of these strategies in future to support family engagement in learning?

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

Teachers

- How do you or your colleagues invite families to share their knowledge and expertise about students' learning needs and achievements, and how do you share your knowledge and expertise in return?
- How could light touch updates remain positive when they are about missing assignments or disappointing results?

Leaders

- What supports (for example, translation services) are in place to help all families and staff communicate with each other?
- Do school communications cater to differing levels of adult literacy?
- Does your school have a systematic process in place for providing families with personalised, light touch updates about student progress? Could some of these updates be automated (but still personalised)?
- Has your school consulted with families about their preferred frequency and time of day for communications?

Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

Teachers

- How broadly do you define 'literacy' when talking with families?
- What might a 'literacy-rich environment' at home look like for your students?
- How do you or your colleagues support families to create a 'literacy-rich environment' at home for each child?

Leaders

- If you already encourage shared reading approaches in the home, how can you help to ensure this is more than a short-term effort?
- How might aspects of 'literacy-rich environments' change as students progress through primary school?

Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Teachers

- What types of goals are your students working towards? Do you invite or encourage families to help shape some of these goals?
- How do you collaborate with families to help ensure students can achieve their goals?

Leaders

- How easy is it for families to raise issues or challenges about learning with school staff?
- Are there systems in place to allow for collaborative problem-solving with families?
- How are student goals and successful problem-solving strategies communicated between school staff as students transition from one year to the next?

Not promising

Research evidence shows these approaches are **risky**. They may have no effect or, in some cases, even have a negative effect on primary school students' learning outcomes.



Relying on inviting families to activities on the school grounds

Families are often encouraged to be involved at school — for example, by volunteering in the classroom, attending back-to-school nights or fundraisers, and being involved in parent committees. While these may have many other benefits, encouraging parents to be involved in these ways has generally *not* been found to improve student learning outcomes.¹³ In other words, these activities *by themselves* cannot be expected to lead to improvements in student learning.



Relying on one-way communication from families

The benefits seen from building two-way communication between families and schools are generally *not* seen when communication stops at the school. One-way information sharing from families to their child's teachers or school (that is, when communication is initiated by families and not reciprocated, harnessed or acted on by school staff) has *not* been shown to improve student learning outcomes.¹⁴



Expecting families to use specialised reading strategies in the home

Although encouraging a literacy-rich environment in the home is a promising approach, expecting families to use complex instructional strategies may *not* be the best way to improve students' literacy outcomes.

Training families in specific reading strategies (such as phonemic awareness and read-aloud skills) has *not* been found to improve students' reading skills.¹⁵ One possible reason this has not generally been successful is because of differing levels of adult literacy. If family members have low literacy themselves, it can be difficult for them to support children with challenging vocabulary or to use specific reading strategies (like identifying vowel digraphs).¹⁶

Similarly, simply sending books home with children without providing any further supports (such as letters to families or in-class discussions with students about the books they have selected to take home) is unlikely to be successful.¹⁷



Encouraging families to monitor, assist with, or check homework

Although using light touch communications about upcoming assignments or missing homework is a promising approach, encouraging families to supervise, check or directly help their children with homework is not. Generally, this has *not* improved student learning outcomes.¹⁸

One possible reason this does not improve learning outcomes is because there can also be differences in how families and teachers explain content or interpret tasks.¹⁹

Not promising

Reflection questions

Relying on inviting families to activities on the school grounds

Teachers

- How many of your efforts to engage with families directly link to student learning?
- Do you or your colleagues feel that families who rarely come to school are less engaged in their child's learning?

Leaders

- How many of your school's family engagement efforts have direct links to student learning?
- Is there a culture in your school of thinking that families who rarely come to school are less engaged in their child's learning?
- How do you build the capacity of staff to engage families in their child's learning? How could this capacity be further developed among your staff?

Relying on one-way communication from families

Teachers

- Do you find that some information shared by families about students' learning needs or achievements is being lost within the school? What factors make it difficult for you or your colleagues to act on information that could be useful in the classroom?
- Could proactive collaboration and problem-solving with families help them feel that any issues or challenges for their child's learning are being heard?

Leaders

- Does your school have a culture of listening and responding to families?
- What systems are in place for encouraging two-way communication between a child's teacher/s and the child's family wherever possible?
- Are there systems that help teachers of students within the same family to share information from that family where appropriate?

Expecting families to use specialised reading strategies in the home

Teachers

- What are the specific reading strategies you currently use in class? How easy or difficult might it be for all families to use these at home?

Leaders

- Do teachers and families in your school have a clear understanding of how specific aspects of reading develop over time?
- How could you keep families informed about your school's literacy program (including how it may differ from families' own schooling), while recognising that family members have differing levels of literacy?

Encouraging families to monitor, assist with, or check homework

Teachers

- When setting homework, are there tasks you could set that encourage students to talk with their families about what they are learning, but also encourage students to complete the tasks independently?
- If you've noticed that families are helping with homework, what alternative actions could you suggest they take to support students to complete homework independently (for example, homework routines)?

Leaders

- How are students and families first introduced to homework in your primary school? Do you explicitly discuss the role of families in homework?
- Do staff expect families to check or monitor their child's homework?



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	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 among the school community focus more on tailoring approaches to meet the diverse and unique needs of families share your approaches, challenges and successes with other colleagues or school leaders monitor and review how these promising approaches are going (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students 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 'risky' approaches are less likely to be successful and may even have negative impacts on student learning. 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 students and their families (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students) 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 student learning, 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 of your students 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 collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students) ask colleagues or school 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 practice guide. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> continue to monitor how your approach is going (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students) 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, “learning outcomes” usually refers to academic achievement (measured through grades or test scores) and/or academic behaviours (such as engagement/persistence, school completion or time spent on homework). Some studies also reported on “social-behavioural competence” (including social-emotional learning outcomes like social skills and behaviour regulation). While this practice guide includes social-behavioural competency outcomes where they were reported in the included studies, it is not intended to be a comprehensive guide for how schools can work with families to support students’ social-emotional learning outcomes. In other words, there may be other promising approaches (not included here) that schools can use to engage with families to bring about improvements in students’ social-emotional learning outcomes.

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); Doss et al. (2017).

⁷ See et al. (2021). Text messages, emails and phone calls from schools to families have been shown to have small positive effects on student achievement. These communications have generally been more successful in Mathematics compared with English or Science. They have been found to benefit students with lower academic attainment, but not students who have English as an Additional Language/Dialect. Communications sometimes also took place via school communication systems.

⁸ For example, Bergman (2015) trialled updates several times per month and Miller et al. (2017) tested messages during and after school.

⁹ See et al. (2021).

¹⁰ Noble et al. (2019); Higgins & Katsipataki (2015); Colgate & Ginns (2016). 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).

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 Smith et al. (2020).

¹⁴ Smith et al. (2020).

¹⁵ See & Gorard (2015); Higgins & Katsipataki (2015); Tracey et al. (2016).

¹⁶ See & Gorard (2015).

¹⁷ See (2015).

¹⁸ Higgins & Katsipataki (2015); See & Gorard (2015); Smith et al. (2020); Kim et al. (2016); Stein (2017).

¹⁹ Hill & Tyson (2009).