



Saskatchewan
Ministry of
Education

Family Engagement in Prekindergarten

A Resource Guide
for Prekindergarten
Teachers and
Associates



2012 Edition

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Notes:

In this booklet, the term “family” may include a child’s mother, father, grandparent, aunt, uncle, sister, brother, foster parent or other guardian.

The information outlined in this booklet complements the following Ministry documents:

- *Better Beginnings, Better Futures: Effective Practices Policy and Guidelines for Prekindergarten in Saskatchewan* (2008)
- *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* (2008, April)



Table of Contents

Introduction

.....	1
Family Engagement: What Does it Mean?	2
The Context: Why Family Engagement Matters.....	3
Beliefs about Family/School Partnerships	4

Prekindergarten Family Engagement Expectations

.....	6
Building Positive Relationships between Prekindergarten Staff and Families	7
Acknowledging, Understanding and Valuing Family Expertise and Diversity.....	8
Supporting Family Understanding of Early Childhood Development.....	9

Practices That Make a Difference in Family Engagement

.....	11
Applying Research to Practice	11
Key Practices to Support Family Engagement in Prekindergarten	12
Communicating Purposefully, Positively and Frequently	12
Encouraging Participation and Sharing of Family Knowledge and Experience	14
Conducting Home Visits.....	17
Integrating Families into the Classroom	20
Sharing Children’s Learning and Goal Setting	23
Focusing on Child Development	25

Revisiting and Evaluating Commonly Used Strategies

.....	27
Field Trips	27
Holiday-Themed Activities and Concerts.....	27
Gym Nights, Social Events and Activities.....	28
Family Days.....	29

Prekindergarten Teacher Success Stories

.....	30
-------	----

References

.....	31
-------	----

Appendices

A. Recommended Resources	35
B. Getting to Know the Community	36
C. Connecting with Family Education Programs in the Community.....	37
D. A Year Plan for Growing Family Engagement	38
E. Planning and Evaluation Template.....	39

INTRODUCTION

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education is committed to improving the learning success and well-being of all Saskatchewan children and youth. Saskatchewan's Prekindergarten Program provides the framework for a high-quality early childhood education experience. The Prekindergarten program represents a positive investment in children's development.

Engaging families is an expectation within the Prekindergarten program. The purpose of this resource guide is to offer supports, practices and tools for Prekindergarten teachers and associates to enhance the focus on family engagement. These resources will assist them in creating respectful, reciprocal relationships with families and in promoting authentic shared responsibility for children's learning and development. Time and funding for family engagement are included in the program design.

Early childhood is an exciting and tender time; it is a time of many firsts, all of which contribute to laying the foundation for future success. Considering an early childhood program may be one of those firsts. Families may anticipate enrolling their child in Prekindergarten with enthusiasm and excitement at the potential for a positive learning experience for the child and the family. Or they may approach the Prekindergarten experience tentatively and cautiously. Some families are isolated and coping with difficult circumstances. They may need support, respite and opportunities for their child and feel grateful and relieved when they discover that the Prekindergarten program can provide some of these supports for them.



What may feel to families like relinquishing their child to the care and direction of others requires their trust and hope that the experience will benefit all. The decision is usually not made lightly. Attending Prekindergarten may be the first time the child is separated from the family. Educators must remember that making a decision to place a child in Prekindergarten impacts the child and the whole family.

...engagement is about giving parents a voice and a place in the core work of schooling – teaching and learning.

Pushor, 2011

School administration, Prekindergarten teachers and associates and the rest of the school staff all share responsibility for making the child's transition into the Prekindergarten program and the school environment a welcoming, nurturing, safe and caring experience. This responsibility can be daunting; however, the opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of children is often cited as what motivates teachers to enter the profession in the first place.

To thrive, children need to spend the majority of their waking hours with people who care both about them and about one another. The younger the child, the greater the need.

*Baker and Manfred/
Pettit, 2004*



Family Engagement: What Does it Mean?

Families and the Prekindergarten team share a common focus; the well-being and development of the whole child. They also share the joy in watching the child grow. This shared joy creates a powerful bond between the important adults in the life of the child. Positive, caring relationships between the significant adults in a child's life are vital – no matter what setting. (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004). Adult relationships directly and profoundly affect a child's life.

In high-quality early learning programs, educators honour the family as children's first teachers and collaborate with them to provide consistent support and culturally responsive learning opportunities. Families are invited into the program to participate as members of the

learning community. This participation enables the children's feeling of security to increase as they observe trust developing between families and educators. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, April)

The Context: Why Family Engagement Matters

Since 1996, Prekindergarten programs in Saskatchewan have focused on the positive development of three- and four-year-old children facing challenges. These challenges add a deep level of urgency as well as an opportunity for educators and schools to apply their hearts, their heads and their resources to positively impact the life trajectory of these children, their families and their communities.

Many children attending Prekindergarten are of First Nations and Métis ancestry. It is important to be aware of, respect and honour the history, culture, traditions and the ways of knowing of First Nations and Métis peoples. Provincial data informs us that education outcomes and benefits are significantly lower for First Nations and Métis peoples than for non-Aboriginal peoples. The emphasis of the Prekindergarten program is on the development of the whole child. This emphasis is in keeping with First Nations and Métis beliefs; providing balanced opportunities for children to develop socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. Prekindergarten affirms that children are usually best served in the context of their home and culture.

(Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, April)

Within the Saskatchewan education sector, there has been considerable commitment to the belief that schools operate best as an integral part of the community. Together, school and community strengths and resources are mobilized to meet individual, family and community needs and wishes.

Research identifies these necessary elements as contributors to learning:

- consistent, responsive and nurturing relationships
- children's well-being, learning and development supported by their family and community
- school, community and family commitment to long-term achievement, beginning in early childhood, of all children
- coordinated services to support children's learning and achievement
- a culture where learning and achievement are valued, sustained and supported by communities, social organizations and the media.

(Schwartz, 2001)

Using public schools as hubs, schools knit together inventive, enduring relationships among educators, families, volunteers and community partners. Human service agencies, family support groups, youth development organizations, institutions of higher education, community organizations, businesses, and civic and faith-based groups all play a part. By sharing expertise and resources, schools and communities act in concert to transform traditional schools into permanent partnerships for excellence.

Talbot, 2004



Effective relationships between schools and families are based on mutual responsibility, trust and respect. A building block for effective relationships is created when families are acknowledged as the first educators of children, and credited as having significant ongoing influence on children's growth, development and educational success. Schools, teachers and families have distinct and important roles and responsibilities in building the educational foundations for each generation. Because family engagement can have a major impact on children's learning, it is vital that parents and teachers become partners in helping young children to be all that they can be.

Beliefs About Family/School Partnerships

Beliefs provide the basis for actions. The following belief statements include a whole school approach, which is fundamental to effective family/school partnerships. (Adapted from Family/School Partnerships Framework: A guide for schools and families p.4 <http://www.familyschool.org.au/pdf/framework.pdf>)

- All families and schools want the best for their children.
- All children have the right to the opportunity to reach their full potential.
- Families are the first and continuing educators of their children.
- Effective schools provide a nurturing and supportive learning environment.
- The diversity of families is valued and is used as a resource for building partnerships and communities.

To support these beliefs, research identifies some characteristics of effective partnerships:

- Leadership is critical to building, maintaining and renewing partnerships.
- Family/school partnerships improve student motivation and learning.
- Family/school partnerships strengthen the connections between schools and their communities.
- Partnerships can involve all organizations that support families and schools.

Reflection – Beliefs

1. All families and schools want the best for their children.
2. All children have the right to the opportunity to reach their full potential.
3. Families are the first and continuing educators of their children.
4. Effective schools provide a nurturing and supportive learning environment.
5. The diversity of families is valued and is used as a resource for building partnerships and communities.

How do these belief statements compare to my own beliefs?

Do some of the statements give me discomfort or conflict? Why?

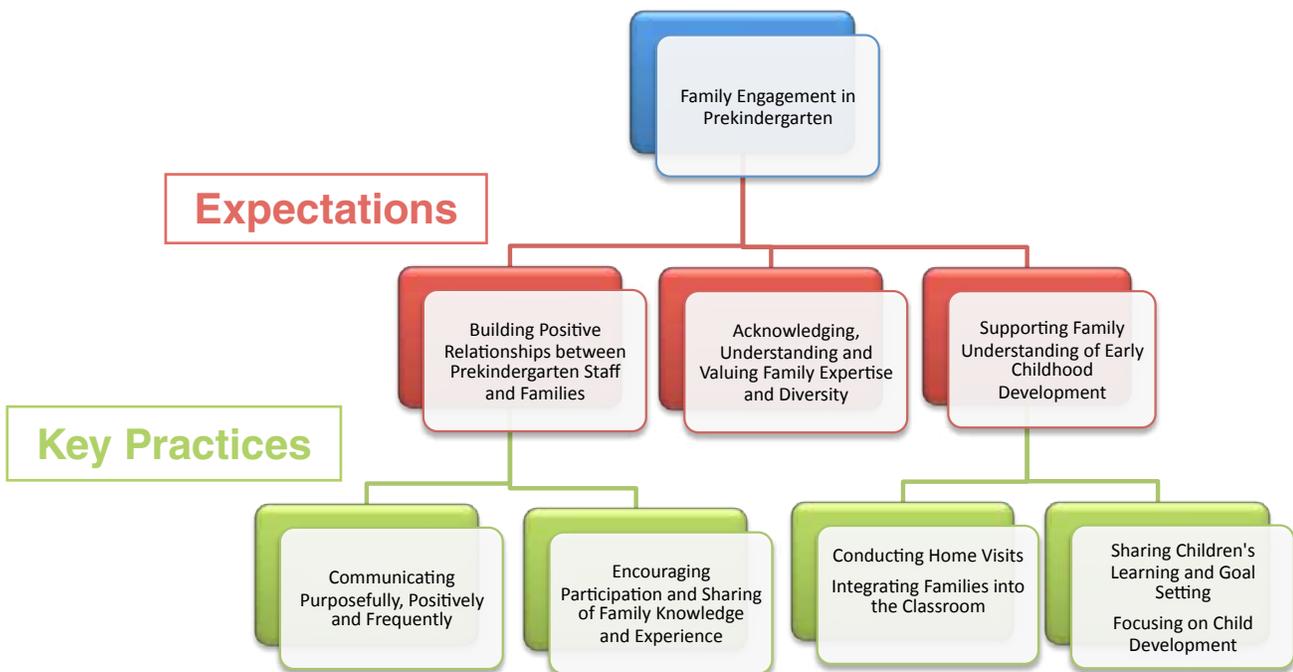
What influences have contributed to my beliefs?

What can be observed in my interaction with children and families that affirms these beliefs?

PREKINDERGARTEN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS

Saskatchewan’s Prekindergarten Program aims to support the total development of young children and to lay the foundation for school success and lifelong learning. Family engagement is central to the operation of an effective Prekindergarten program and to children’s learning.

The Ministry of Education has identified three overarching expectations for family engagement (highlighted in red in the visual below) that are key to an effective Prekindergarten program. Although each expectation is discussed separately in the following sections to provide detail and support, they are interrelated and not intended to stand alone, but rather to be worked on simultaneously, creating the “whole.”



I. Building Positive Relationships between Prekindergarten Staff and Families

The development of mutual responsibility, respect and trust between Prekindergarten staff and families is fundamental and critical to support the learning and development of children. Prekindergarten staff and parents have a point of strong connection – their mutual investment in the well-being of children. Ongoing and meaningful relationships with families happen through conscious and deliberate planning by Prekindergarten staff. Family members living in vulnerable contexts may appear easily intimidated and cautious, aloof and indifferent, angry or inconsistent. These responses may be coping strategies to protect themselves and their children from perceived harm, rejection or judgment by “the system.” Approach these outward signs of mistrust or wariness from a strengths-based perspective: be kind, accepting and non-judgmental; patiently and persistently reach out to families to help break down barriers and demonstrate authentic desire for connection and partnership.

Some considerations and ideas for intentional and purposeful planning to build relationships and trust with parents and families include the following:

- Use spontaneous and natural opportunities such as drop-off and pick-up times to get to know and build relationships with family members.
- Interact daily and informally.
- Invite families to share information about their child and their hopes for Prekindergarten. As part of the conversation and when appropriate, Prekindergarten staff may reciprocate by sharing with the family information about their child and the Prekindergarten program. **Focus on inviting and listening first, speaking and providing information second.**
- Reflect on why and how activities, events and practices are chosen and if they accomplished what was intended. How were families included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the event or activity? What processes were provided for families to offer input and feedback?
- Reach out to families who do not pick up or drop off their children or who seem reluctant to engage. These behaviours may signal that building the relationship is important. Ways to reach out to families can include personal telephone calls, scheduling of alternative times to get together, home visits, or invitations to meet at a coffee shop or other location.

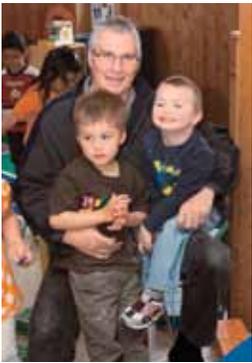
It is very important to our child to have opportunities to bring home and school together. Our child is always excited when we get to come to school and stay there with him. It is also nice to be able to build a relationship with the teacher because it gives us a chance to talk to her when she is not as busy as she is at the end or beginning of class.

Parent

EXPECTATIONS

Every Thursday, a folder is sent home with a note outlining what they did that week, what they had for snacks and any important dates coming up. This is GREAT!! Makes me feel in the loop and can then discuss the activities with my child.

Parent



A power imbalance is sometimes perceived between families and educators; the professional or expert vs. the lay person. As well, cultural differences and stereotypical views of each other may contribute to misperceptions. Responding to questions and concerns families may have, rather than offering them unsolicited advice, is one way to balance power dynamics. Another way is to be non-judgmental and communicate to the family your recognition, value and interest in the care, support, learning and cultural diversity children receive at home. Acknowledgement and appreciation of the child's existing competencies and development achieves two things; reinforcement of the partnership approach and building the necessary trust in order to share responsibility for the child's learning success.

Every interaction between Prekindergarten staff and family is an opportunity to build relationships and to demonstrate respect for the pivotal role of family in their relationship with their child.

II. Acknowledging, Understanding and Valuing Family Expertise and Diversity

The family is the child's first and most important teacher. Children spend many more hours each week learning within the home and community than they do in the classroom. Children's learning experiences outside of the school environment must be supported, acknowledged, understood and valued. Therefore, Prekindergarten staff will seek families' expertise about their children and use what they share as a way to understand, support and celebrate family strengths, diversity and ways of being. Reaching out to families and inviting them to share their knowledge creates a reciprocal partnership focused on children's learning and development. The development of this partnership requires Prekindergarten staff to be non-judgmental, inquisitive and appreciative when meeting families to be able to better understand children's experiences and development within their home and community. Families need to feel invited to engage with the Prekindergarten program, they need to feel that they have much to offer and that what they offer is valued and respected.

Traditional views of family can be a barrier to building relationships with families. Contemporary educators are called to embrace a broad view of family and to value children's cultural and learning experiences within the home and community.

Appendix A: Recommended Resources lists resources for working with families. The article by Karen Stephens called "Building informed relationships: What parents can teach us about their children" may be particularly helpful.

III. Supporting Family Understanding of Early Childhood Development

The Prekindergarten program provides the child with an environment focused on early childhood development and learning experiences. The program also allows families to be active, contributing and learning members in those experiences. Family members are offered a safe relationship and environment to share their concerns, their wonders and their struggles. Listening carefully, educators use the openings families give them to say, “What do you think about ...?” “Have you observed ...?” “I wonder how we might find out more about ...?” “Do you know anyone who might know something about ...?” Responding to questions, comments and concerns that families raise encourages engagement.

As we move from old ways of family involvement to new ways of family engagement, we enable parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, combining their knowledge of children and of teaching and learning with teacher’s knowledge.

Pushor, 2011

Families understanding of child development is enhanced by:

- visiting the classroom and seeing their child interact with others
- working with the teacher and associate and seeing modelling of interactions with children
- seeing documentation of children’s learning
- attending relevant discussion groups or seminars on topics of interest
- reading the Ministry of Education Family Brochures



Reflection – Expectations

What am I currently doing to build positive relationships with families?

Are these strategies effective? What else could I try?

How am I inviting and connecting with families to use their knowledge and support of their child's learning and development?

What am I currently doing to listen to families' comments and questions? Does the Prekindergarten environment encourage families to express their ideas or concerns?

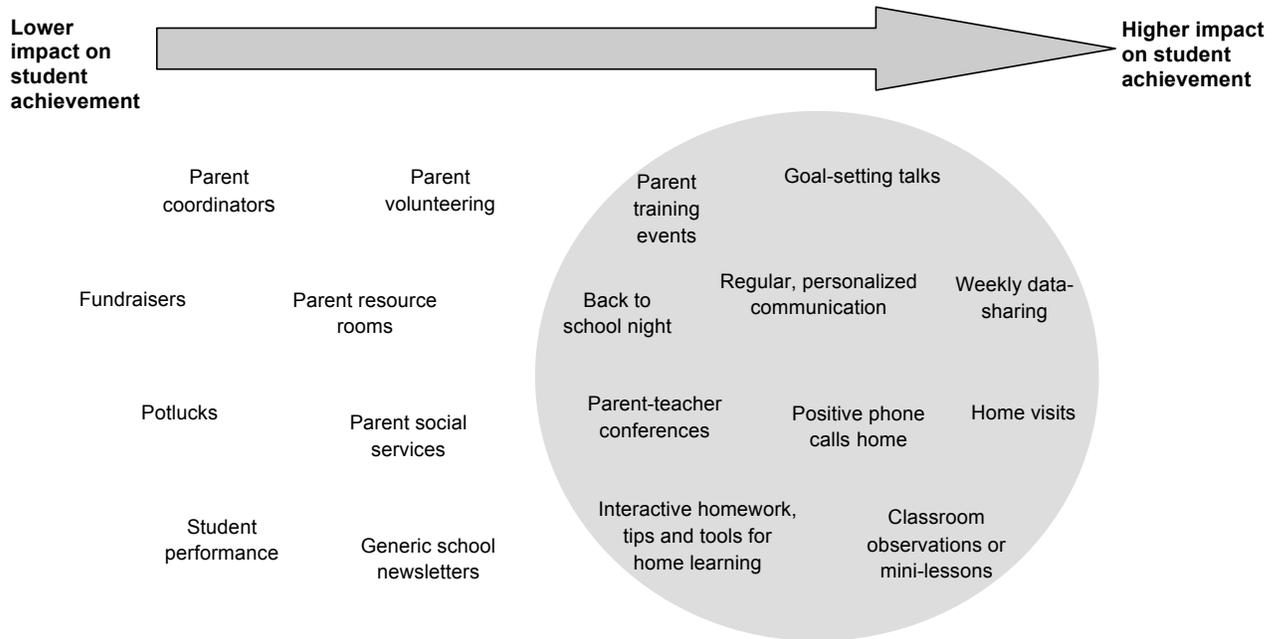
What have I learned from the families about their children? How has this learning contributed to ideas for further development and learning in the classroom?

How do I use families' interests and knowledge to strengthen and add to their understanding of early childhood development and their important role in enhancing their child's learning? What else could I try?

Three overarching expectations for Prekindergarten family engagement are identified on page 9. Are the three expectations evident and balanced in the program? If not, how will I achieve balance?

PRACTICES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Applying Research to Practice



(Harvard Family Research Project Webinar Series, 2011)

When reviewing this continuum of effective practices for family engagement, do not become discouraged or consider the practices with less impact as not worthy. Some lower impact practices may be valuable initial efforts to gain trust and attract families to the school or classroom. Engaging parents and families is an intentional process that deepens over time through continuous reflection and thoughtful planning. These practices are not intended to be implemented sequentially – **they are ongoing and interconnected and may occur simultaneously.**

The communication from the PreK classroom is excellent. The teacher is always available to provide information and will contact us directly if needed. All correspondence sent out is very clear. The monthly updates and newsletters are excellent as we have a great understanding of the classroom accomplishments and future activities.

Parent

Talking to the teacher directly is the best for us.

Parent

The newsletter works quite well. If we have questions, we know we can call or talk to one another directly.

Parent

I drop off and pick up my son so it allows me to see and speak to the teacher almost every day.

Parent

Key Practices to Support Family Engagement in Prekindergarten

I. Communicating Purposefully, Positively and Frequently

Continuously reaching out to families in a variety of ways to purposefully invite, inform, engage and sustain them in dialogue and actions focused on their child's learning and development is fundamental to the Prekindergarten program. Find out what works for each family and accommodate their preferences as much as possible. The methods used to communicate with families will vary depending upon the opportunities presented. They may include some of the following examples:

- informal conversations at drop-off and pick-up time or family events
- flexible and open invitations for family members to linger or join in the class activities whenever possible
- newsletters or other print materials and information
- individual, two-way letters or notes between Prekindergarten staff and families
- home visits
- family events, cultural celebrations, Elder's visits
- family meetings
- phone calls, text messages and e-mails to families
- invitations to participate and share family perspectives through dialogue, informal interview, discussion groups, joint activities, research or projects
- child/family/teacher conferences
- collaborative program goal setting
- sharing of child assessment information and individual child goal setting
- photo sharing
- celebrations of learning and social activities



Reflection – Communication

Which communication strategies are used the most in my Prekindergarten program? How do I know they are effective?

What feedback have I solicited and received from families about my communication methods?

Are there strategies that cause me discomfort or that I choose not to use? Why?

How do I communicate with families I do not see regularly or are hard to reach?

Working with diverse families, we have learned that, in particular, ethnically and racially diverse families are less likely to be perceived as equal partners in education, and their children are more likely to attend struggling schools. Families and communities have different perspectives on involvement in their children's schools. Different understandings of school exist across cultures.

Families can act as cultural advisors and brokers, social networkers, and links between schools and communities, greatly facilitating everything from outreach efforts to helping school staff develop culturally relevant instructional strategies.

*Governor's Office,
State of Washington,
2010*

II. Encouraging Participation and Sharing of Family Knowledge and Experience

Families know their child best. Their knowledge and experience, when linked to Prekindergarten staff experience with young children, provides a rich and powerful partnership to support child development and learning.

Prekindergarten staff may need to encourage families to share their knowledge and experience. Families are a source of information about such things as the child's likes and dislikes, fears, temperament and reaction to new people or situations. They can also explain family structure and share values, expectations and routines. Family insights and perspectives help Prekindergarten staff learn about and appreciate cultural beliefs and practices, leading to a better understanding of children's behaviour and learning within a cultural context.

Families may be aware of services and supports in the community that could benefit the Prekindergarten program. They also have knowledge, interests and skills they can be invited to share, thereby enriching both the Prekindergarten program and the relationships between home and school.

*EVERY day we have the coffee on! The door to our room is usually open and once the parents have helped their child hang up their coats and get their shoes on, they are welcome to stay. My Teacher Associate LOVES to fuss over the parents and probably could tell you what each parent drinks and how they like their tea or coffee! If you were to pop by our room in the morning you may find several parents visiting with each other or in our story corner sitting on the carpet reading to children. I love this part of the day as it allows me to visit with parents either one-on-one or in small groups. I have learned about my families in these **daily informal gatherings**. My Teacher Associate is so AMAZING at developing and nurturing these family relationships...I am truly blessed to work with someone who is so kind and caring towards our families.*

Prekindergarten Teacher

KEY PRACTICES

Prekindergarten staff and families know different kinds of things about children. Bringing their knowledge together like pieces of a puzzle makes it easier to understand the whole picture of what is happening for the child. Here are some examples of information families have to share and information they may like to learn from others:

What families want to share with Prekindergarten staff	What families want the Prekindergarten staff to share with them
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what we enjoy doing with our child at home • what our child likes and dislikes to eat • medical conditions (e.g., allergies, illnesses) • our child's general temperament • new accomplishments we have noticed • changes to our child's routine that might affect his or her mood and behaviour • family names and relationships • important dates (family birthdays, vacation dates, grandma's visit) • information about our family's religion and culture • information about languages spoken in our home • our family's goals for our child • our child's interests and favourite activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what my child does during the day (e.g., favourite games, toys, books) • new accomplishments • the words to songs and rhymes my child is learning • how the day went in general • special activities that are planned • who my child is playing with • any particular projects in which children are engaged • how our family can participate • general information about my child's stage of development • information about the Prekindergarten program and school policies • information about the program's goals and expectations for my child

Adapted from Canadian Child Care Federation: Families Building Partnerships with Practitioners (2008)

Knowing the family and community is essential for Prekindergarten staff to provide child development and learning opportunities that will be culturally appropriate, affirming and enriching for each child and family.

Appendix B, "Getting to Know the Community" provides tips on how to learn about and get to know the community. These ideas are especially useful if staff members do not live in the community.

Appendix C identifies some ideas for connecting families with support opportunities and services within the community.

Our child is much more comfortable going to school and we are more comfortable sending him when we are able to build the school-home connection.

Parent

Reflection – Encouraging Participation and Sharing of Family Knowledge and Experience

How is respect for family knowledge demonstrated in my practice?

How does family knowledge influence my understanding of the child and the family?

How do I integrate this knowledge into the classroom?

III. Conducting Home Visits

Home visits are identified in research as a practice that is associated with higher student achievement because they are powerful vehicles for relationship building. In the home environment, the Prekindergarten team learns more about the child, the family and their life within the community.

A minimum of three home visits per year per child are recommended within the Prekindergarten program, however, some sites implement home visits much more frequently. All home visits need to be arranged with the family.

An initial home visit is most often completed early in the school year, or before the child enters the Prekindergarten program.

While it is important to arrive at home visits without a fixed agenda, this does not mean without purpose or preparation! This initial meeting provides a rich opportunity to see the child and family in their home environment. The team learns about the child, the family, pets, the extended family, important family friends and **hears from the family** what their hopes and dreams are for their child. With this purpose in mind, the Prekindergarten team is ready for a relaxed conversation, remembering that they are in the home as learners and guests.



The home visiting component is our strongest and most successful strategy. The visits are an excellent connection to our families and really work to make our families comfortable.

*Prekindergarten
Teacher*

Home visits have been critical in securing the connection already built by daily contact with the families in the classroom. The home visit helped us to better understand the family context of our students. I believe it helped the families to see that we really care about the health and well-being of the child and it gave them the opportunity to address any questions or concerns that are too private to discuss openly in a busy classroom.

*Prekindergarten
Teacher*

KEY PRACTICES

What do you like best about having the Prekindergarten teacher visit your family at home?

I think they get a better feel for the family. As a person you are more relaxed in your own home.

Parent

It's more personal... an opportunity to see us in a different environment...gives her more information about our child.

Parent

I liked meeting the teacher at a more personal level.

Parent

It's a great idea for the teacher to enter the child's space first. It takes the edge off of a child entering the new space.

Parent

A sense that my child will be cared for in the classroom, making the effort to visit the home shows interest in the child.

Parent

The Prekindergarten team may learn about family activities, traditions, values, expectations, views on discipline, culture and others. This information can help the Prekindergarten team provide the most effective learning opportunities and supports for the children in the program. The visit is also an opportunity for the child to express thoughts and feelings about the experience that he/she is anticipating and to show the staff favourite toys or important items. The child and/or parents may have questions that can allow the Prekindergarten team to share information about the program. If conversation does not flow easily, Prekindergarten staff may introduce pictures of the classroom, take a photo of the child and family, read a story or play a game with the family to ease any tension.

If anxiety about safety in some neighbourhoods is a concern, express this to the school principal. He or she can provide advice and support or accompany the team on the home visit. It is acceptable to reschedule an alternate time or meeting location. Families who are uncomfortable with home visits often suggest an alternate location to meet. Some anxiety about visiting families' homes is not uncommon, but be careful not to overreact and become fearful or reluctant to conduct home visits. Focusing on the purpose and benefits of home visits may help to dissipate anxiety.

A mid-year home visit is recommended for January or early February. This visit enables the family to share their views on the child's development and to provide feedback about the Prekindergarten program experience so far. It also invites Prekindergarten staff to share information about, and examples of, the child's activities and creations that demonstrate growth. The mid-year visit can be a chance to celebrate successes and identify challenges or particular areas for development. Goals can be collaboratively identified and an agreement reached on how to accomplish them. The Prekindergarten team can seek input into planning for the next half of the school year, establishing priorities and identifying areas for family involvement.

The year-end home visit is a celebration of learning and a reciprocal retrospective of the year. As the child's portfolio is shared with the family, all parties in genuine conversation can reflect on the growth and learning over the last year and consider the next step for the child. Depending on the child's age, the next step could be a second year in Prekindergarten or a move to Kindergarten. Inviting the family to stay in touch and connected to the school may be part of this year-end home visit.

See Appendix D for a diagram of "A Year Plan for Family Engagement."

Reflection – Home Visits

What have I learned about the child and family by having home visits?

How is this new knowledge integrated into the learning opportunities and supports for the child in the program?

How has this strengthened my knowledge of and relationship with the family?

Are supports needed to ensure home visits are conducted as intended?

How would I help other Prekindergarten staff understand and feel comfortable with home visits?

IV. Integrating Families into the Classroom

Through creating a warm and welcoming classroom environment, families feel welcome within the classroom.

Prekindergarten Teacher

My child feels proud that I am in the classroom with her. Reinforces our relationship, it brings everyone together.

Parent

My children are proud of themselves that I could watch them in a school setting.

Parent

Helps me to see what he has learned outside our home.

Parent

It makes me feel special when you guys come to the classroom.

Prekindergarten child

Family members come with expectations, feelings, and beliefs about school and the Prekindergarten classroom. These preconceptions can range from very positive to very negative based on past experiences from a family member's own childhood or from school stories shared by older children or other family members and friends. Often people have ideals about what school should be like.

The moment family members enter the school and the Prekindergarten classroom, they have an emotional and intellectual response to what is around them. What they see and hear may make them uncomfortable and reinforce negative experiences, or they may be surprised and intrigued. They sense whether or not the environment is welcoming and inclusive and whether or not the presence of family members is encouraged and supported. What your school and classroom communicate (verbally and non-verbally) to families is powerful. Ideally the introduction to your school and classroom makes a positive and welcoming first impression.

Research affirms that family participation in the classroom contributes to improved student learning. Through regular opportunities to participate in the classroom, family members are able to share in their child's experiences, to gain greater depth of understanding about the program, to become comfortable with the classroom environment and staff and to see their child learning, socializing and exploring.

Families will be able to observe all the children in the context of the whole classroom and informally gauge their child's developmental progress. The time when families visit the classroom is an excellent opportunity to discuss the child's development and identify areas of strength and needs for continued growth.



KEY PRACTICES

Families need **frequent** and **ongoing** opportunities to be invited to the classroom and to authentically contribute to the program. Many Prekindergarten classrooms are open to arrange times that work for families or to accept and encourage spontaneous participation. This flexibility communicates, “You are welcome at any time. Come learn with us!”

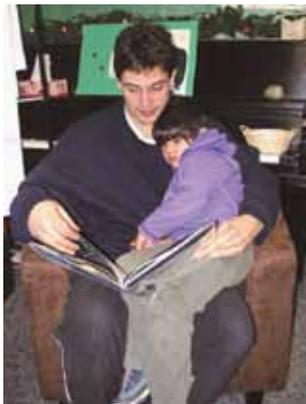
Many Prekindergarten educators have found that inviting either one family at a time or small groups of families facilitates an experience that reflects the natural flow of a typical Prekindergarten day. Families can engage with their child, the other children and the other families. They may learn from one another and build friendships and support networks that enrich their lives and strengthen their community.

Successful schools are intentional and organized about engaging families. To be intentional is to act purposefully, with a goal in mind and a plan for accomplishing it. Intentional acts originate from careful thought and are accompanied by consideration of their potential effects. An intentional teacher fully understands why and how collaborating with families contributes to the Prekindergarten program.

Collaborative planning strengthens the emerging and ongoing adult partnership between Prekindergarten staff and families. The planning process is enriched by integrating families’ experiences and knowledge of their children with the teacher’s knowledge and experience in child development and learning. Together, families and teachers create positive learning experiences for the children.

Appendix A, “Recommended Resources,” lists a book called *From Parents to Partners* by Janis Keyser that contains ideas for family meetings and family days in Chapter 8.

Appendix E, “Planning and Evaluation Template,” is a tool to assist with planning family engagement strategies.



Parents open the door for partnership by getting their children to school. Schools need to keep that door open wide, because when we work together, we improve our children's chances for success.

Governor's Office, State of Washington, 2010

Reflection – Integrating Families into the Classroom

How often do families participate in the classroom?

What approaches might increase the frequency of families in the classroom?

How do I encourage and invite families to take a partnership role within the classroom?

V. Sharing Children's Learning and Goal Setting

The ongoing and mutual sharing of information between families and Prekindergarten staff about the child's learning and goal setting deepens collaborative relationships. The sharing cements the relationships by valuing and including families in this meaningful dialogue. Inclusion of families is a reflection of educators' belief that families have valuable knowledge about their children. Focusing on collaboration can significantly contribute to family engagement. Families are also interested to know how the whole class is doing and to consider how their child is doing as part of the group. Focusing on collaboration can significantly contribute to family engagement.

Examples of methods for sharing children's learning and development are listed below:

- portfolios – home portfolios kept by families and school portfolios kept by teachers
- classroom documentation
- electronic documentation, video recordings of classroom/children's learning activities
- discussion of child's progress relative to whole group
- family observations and discussions with Prekindergarten staff
- assessment results and anecdotal records
- shared goal setting



What Families Want Schools to Do:

- **Involve us:** Reach out to us, welcome us, and make us feel part of the school.
- **Let us help:** Tell us where and how we can help.
- **Listen to us:** Respond to our concerns in a timely and friendly manner.
- **Keep us informed:** We want to know school policies, procedures, data, etc. Teach us what we need to know to support education.
- **Partner with us:** Consider us members of the team that supports the success of all children.

Governor's Office, State of Washington (2010)

Reflection – Children’s Learning and Goal Setting

How do I provide opportunities to engage families in their children’s learning and goal setting?

How do these opportunities enhance our partnership and shared responsibility for learning and development?

What is a new idea I might try?

Have other unexpected outcomes resulted from sharing learning and goal setting?

VI. Focusing on Child Development

Informal and impromptu conversations and observations of child development are continually exchanged between families and Prekindergarten staff. By listening carefully to families' thoughts and questions, Prekindergarten staff can suggest specific, focused sessions on various child development topics. Depending upon the child development focus, Prekindergarten staff may use their experience and knowledge or organize other resource expertise to facilitate the session.

In-depth sessions promote shared knowledge and insights and affirm collective work with the children. Creating an environment and dialogue where all participants are learners develops a culture and appetite for exploration and more learning. Engaging families in shared learning encourages and deepens their commitment and support of their child's education. Research has shown that families' valuing of education contributes positively to student engagement and achievement.

Adult learning models are considered when engaging families in child development learning opportunities.

Adults engage most when they are:

- encouraged to share their perspectives
- encouraged to hear and consider perspectives from other participants and the professional staff
- invited to consider the challenges that the professional staff may be encountering and to assist in problem-solving
- encouraged to reflect on how they might implement the new knowledge
- valued and respected for sharing

Making the sessions respectful, enjoyable, interactive and informative will ensure families will want to come to another session. Reinforcing the learning experience through activities that demonstrate concepts, activities that include the children, multi-media presentations and small and large group discussion are excellent methods to extend the learning. Repeating a topic using different examples or experiences increases the likelihood that the information will become more deeply embedded. For example, the importance of language development for young children can be a repeated topic allowing families to practise ways to actively engage their child in language development activities.



Reflection – Childhood Development

How are more formal discussions on child development organized to engage and encourage family sharing of perspectives and reflections about their children?

How do families communicate what their needs are for more information and discussion?

How can I make sessions respectful, enjoyable, interactive and informative?

REVISITING AND EVALUATING COMMONLY USED STRATEGIES

Reflecting on research and what has been learned over the years in Prekindergarten programs provides a vantage point from which to consider the approaches and outcomes of commonly used strategies. A generic planning and evaluation template, found in Appendix E, has been developed to assist in planning and evaluating engagement strategies.

1. Field Trips

Although field trips are not mentioned as a practice on the continuum “Applying Research to Practice” found on page 11, many Prekindergarten teachers have indicated the success of field trips. In Prekindergarten annual reports, teachers have noted that field trips increase family participation and provide families living in vulnerable circumstances with opportunities they may not otherwise be able to access. However, field trips must be planned thoughtfully and purposefully.

Questions to consider

- What is the purpose of inviting families to participate in field trips? How will participation in field trips help to build relationships? How will families gain a deeper understanding of child development and learning as a result of participating in field trips?
- What is the role(s) of the family in field trips? How do families contribute to planning field trips, understand the purpose of the trips and share perspectives on whether the purpose was accomplished?
- How can I share preparation for field trips with families?
- How do the field trips connect with children’s current development and interests displayed in the classroom?
- What is the measure of success of the field trips?



2. Holiday-Themed Activities and Concerts

In the diagram “Applying Research to Practice” on page 11, children’s performances (in holiday-themed activities and concerts) are identified as having lower impact on improving children’s learning. At the same time, these traditional activities have likely been repeated from decade-to-decade and may have become part of the school culture. Schools

expect to conduct these activities and families expect to attend them. The participation of families is usually high for activities where their children perform.



Questions to consider

- How are traditional activities important for Prekindergarten children, staff and families? Why? How can traditions be honoured, adapted or changed to meet current learning and development goals?
- How culturally relevant and responsive are these activities?
- How is the time investment to prepare for performances equally balanced with the benefits for the children?
- How can we use these seasonal opportunities with families and children to develop new culturally responsive celebrations and learning experiences?

3. Gym Nights, Social Events and Activities

Prekindergarten teachers have found that offering food or snacks to families when they come for activities seems to attract a larger turnout. Potluck lunches, dinners and brunches are well supported by families. Opportunities to share food can help families who may be struggling financially. In addition, sharing food together is a common human behaviour and experience that symbolizes welcoming and extending hospitality. These social events and activities may be planned just for fun, but they are also useful to promote deeper levels of connection and meaningful engagement and serve to strengthen community ties. Gym nights are also successful in attracting participation. The flexibility of an evening event encourages whole families to attend, including the Prekindergarten staff and their families. Gym nights promote physical activity, social connections and family fun. The Prekindergarten program often provides refreshments for these events.



Questions to consider

- What is the focus of the discussion with families when they attend a potluck or other social event?
- What is the role of families in a potluck or gym night event? How is this role determined by and with families?
- Will any families feel left out because they cannot afford to contribute to potluck events? How is this handled?

4. Family Days

Historically, the Prekindergarten program design envisioned that families would join the classroom weekly, usually Friday mornings, to participate in a wide range of activities and events. Feedback from Prekindergarten teachers and families has indicated this model often does not work for busy families, many of whom may be at home with younger children, working outside of the home or attending school. This model also may not work for families where parents do not reside together or where the child is part of two households. Sometimes transportation can be a barrier as well.

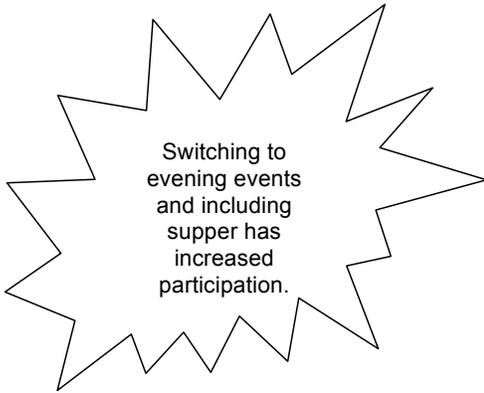
Many Prekindergarten programs have demonstrated flexibility and innovation in order to accommodate families' schedules. To ensure that families are engaged with the program, Prekindergarten educators have identified a number of strategies that have been successful; for example, offering family events in the afternoon as well as the evening and inviting smaller groups to participate in events throughout the month. Family Days contribute to engagement and collaboration. Ensuring regular and ongoing family engagement in the Prekindergarten program balanced with what seems to work in each community is the ideal model for Family Days.

Questions to consider

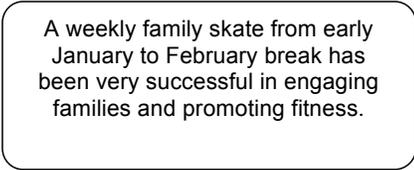
- Some sites have made Family Days or Family Fridays a mandatory requirement for their families. Does this expectation contribute to building relationships and collaboration? Does it create more pressure for Prekindergarten staff and families?
- How will we know if families find Family Days meaningful?
- How can we facilitate participants' learning and contributions?
- How do we ensure our practices reach all families?



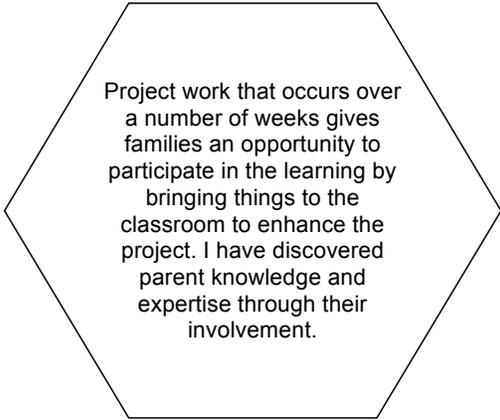
PREKINDERGARTEN TEACHER SUCCESS STORIES



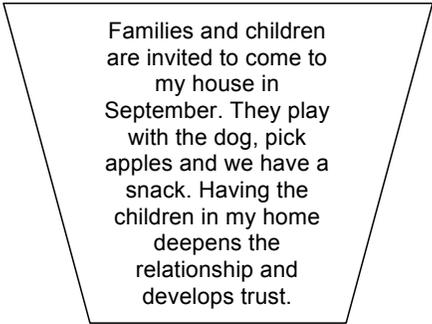
Switching to evening events and including supper has increased participation.



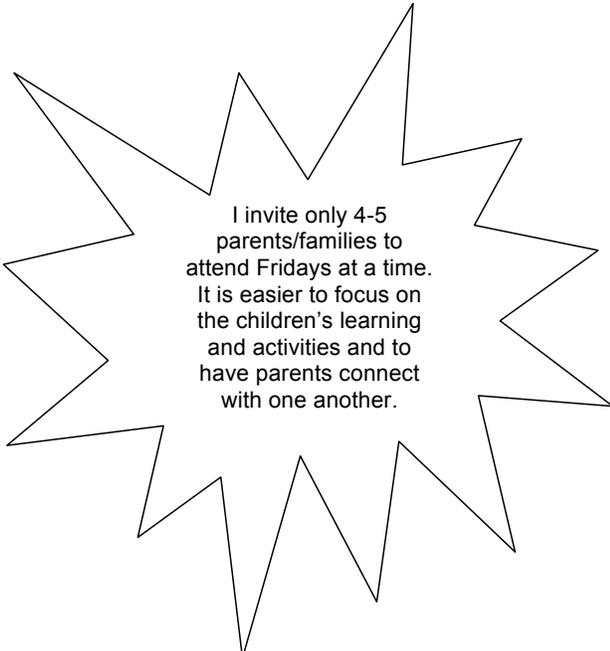
A weekly family skate from early January to February break has been very successful in engaging families and promoting fitness.



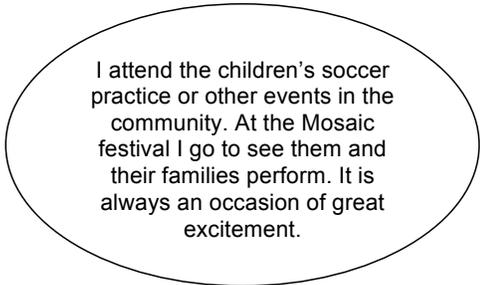
Project work that occurs over a number of weeks gives families an opportunity to participate in the learning by bringing things to the classroom to enhance the project. I have discovered parent knowledge and expertise through their involvement.



Families and children are invited to come to my house in September. They play with the dog, pick apples and we have a snack. Having the children in my home deepens the relationship and develops trust.



I invite only 4-5 parents/families to attend Fridays at a time. It is easier to focus on the children's learning and activities and to have parents connect with one another.



I attend the children's soccer practice or other events in the community. At the Mosaic festival I go to see them and their families perform. It is always an occasion of great excitement.

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Appendix A

Recommended Resources:

Books

Gonzalez-Mena, J., & Stonehouse, A. (2008). *Making links: A collaborative approach to planning and practice in early childhood programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Henderson, A., Mapp, K., Johnson, V., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family/school partnerships*. New York: The New York Press.

Keyser, J. (2006). *From parents to partners: Building a family-centered early childhood program*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Videos

Carter, M. (Producer). (2003). *Building bridges between teachers and families*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Harvest Resources.

Articles

Stephens, K. (2010, July/August). *Building informed relationships: What parents can teach us about their children*. *Exchange*. Retrieved from <http://secure.ccie.com/library/5019438.pdf>

Websites

Debbie Pushor. Creating a place and voice for parents in schools. <http://www.debbiepushor.com/>

Flamboyant Foundation. Classroom family engagement rubric. http://flamboyantfoundation.org/resources_and_publications/family-engagement-classroom-rubric/

<http://community.michiana.org/famconn/plgdres.html#anchor639225>
Partners in Learning: Brief synopsis of good resources, research and assessment tools.

Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau. About family-school & community partnerships. <http://www.familyschool.org.au/about/>

Community Services, New South Wales Government. Active engagement: Strategies to increase service participation by vulnerable families. http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/DOCSWR/_assets/main/documents/research_active_engagement.pdf

Appendix B

Getting to Know the Community



If you are not familiar with the community in which your Prekindergarten families live, play and work, the following ideas may help you become better acquainted.

- Access the demographics for the community through the village or city offices or websites. Statistics Canada also has demographics for each community.
- Call the community association and find out what services and programs are offered.
- Visit the local library and find out about the programs that are offered for families and young children.
- Watch for bulletin boards that include information regarding community events and features.
- Attend cultural events in the community of the Prekindergarten.
- Volunteer at a local community organization or event.
- Speak to the public health nurse who may have information about the community.
- Attend a seniors' event and learn the history of the community.
- Stop in at the corner store, the local bakery or hardware store.
- Start a project with the children about discovering the community: go for walks; take pictures; make maps; speak to local business owners. As the children become better acquainted with the neighbourhood, so will you.
- Look for information from community agencies, early childhood services and service groups that serve the area in order to build partnerships.
- Visit the local parks, rinks and paths.

Appendix C

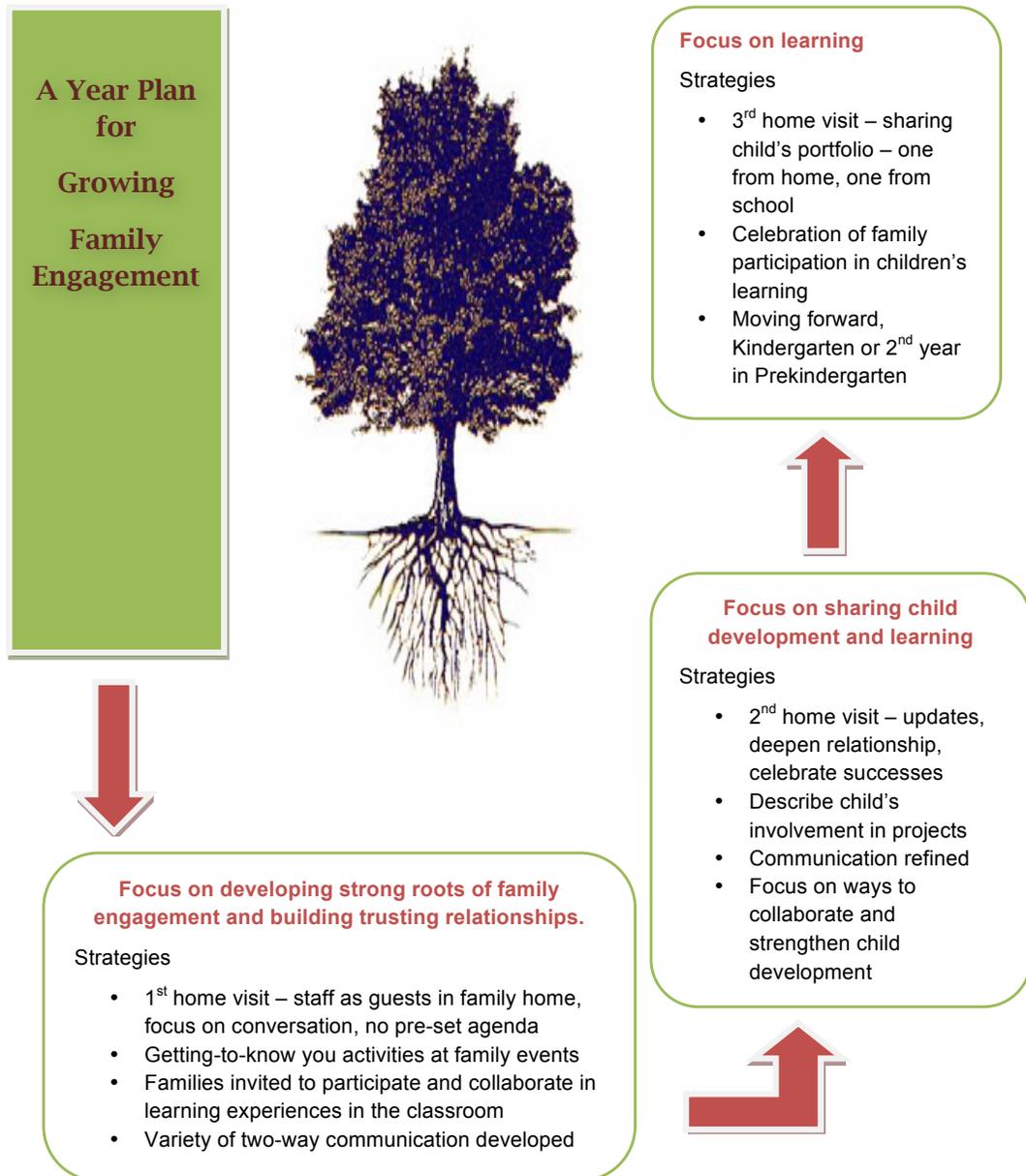
Connecting with Family Education Programs in the Community

As trusting relationships between families and Prekindergarten staff develop, families may feel safe approaching the staff with their concerns and needs for assistance. Be attentive and sensitive to what families disclose. Families living in vulnerable circumstances may have multiple needs for support and learning – needs that extend beyond what can be offered through the Prekindergarten program. To serve families, Prekindergarten staff and administration must be aware of and able to facilitate access to community resources and supports whether these services are in the community or school-linked. Cultivating relationships with, and becoming knowledgeable about, community services assist staff to respond to needs by referring families to agencies that can support them.

The following list of services, learning opportunities and resource persons provides some examples of connections that can be made with family education programs in the community to support families in need.

- family literacy initiatives and programs – the Literacy Network www.sk.literacy.ca; initiatives at public libraries such as Growing with Stories; Come Read with Me; Reading Wednesdays; story bag-making sessions
- Families and Schools Together Program (FAST™) <http://www.familyservicecanada.org/programs-events/former-fast/>
- speech and language development – with the assistance of speech and language pathologists
- sensory and motor skills development – public health professional support services
- supports for children with intensive needs or those requiring additional supports – support in the Prekindergarten classroom is provided by the school division, support for younger children in the home may be accessed through health professionals and/or Early Childhood Intervention Programs (ECIPs) where consultants offer support at home
- nutrition, cooking and physical activity – in conjunction with cooking experiences, collective kitchens, InMotion and others
- gardening tips contributing to food security – city landscape planners, horticultural groups, local gardening experts
- addictions counselling (self-regulation, building positive memories, caring for self and others, prevention) – public health professionals trained in mental health and addictions
- dental health – public health professional support
- hand washing and immunization information – public health professional support

Appendix D



Appendix E

Family Engagement Strategy Planning and Evaluation Template

Title of Event or Activity _____

Date _____

PLANNING

What is the purpose of this event or activity?

What are you planning to do?

What are the connections with learning in the classroom?

How will the learning objectives be explained to families?

How will family perspectives be solicited and integrated into the development of learning objectives?

What are the roles for family members? How are these roles determined?
Do families have an opportunity to identify the roles for themselves?

EVALUATION

Did families find their role(s) meaningful? How do you know?

Was the intended purpose accomplished? Why/why not?

How were connections made with learning in the classroom?

Do families think the learning objectives were accomplished?

Would you recommend this engagement strategy to your colleagues? Why/why not?

What was the most important aspect of this event or activity? Include Prekindergarten staff perspective, child perspective and family perspective.

Were there any unexpected benefits? What about aspects you would change?

