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Meditation and Teacher Stress

Early childhood teachers can be relaxed and peaceful as they create playful and harmonious classrooms, even if they work in stressful contexts. Effective teachers sustain respectful and caring relationships with children and adults (Cooper, 2003; Essa, Taylor, Pratt, & Roberts, 2012; Ray, Lambie & Curry, 2007). However, the stressors faced by teachers may lead to negative consequences that can undermine their ability to sustain personal health and positive interactions. Meditation is a tool that can mitigate teacher stress, promote emotional well-being, and contribute to affirming exchanges between teachers and students.

Stress is the relationship between the person and environment.

Stress is an ordinary part of everyday life for all individuals. Selye in his epic book *The Stress of Life* (1984) explains that stress is a condition that forces physiological and or psychological burden(s) on a person. Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman, defined stress as: “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (1984, p. 19). Although these definitions are over 30 years old, they still hold true today, particularly as it relates to teachers. Teachers are prone to enormous stress as they face the demands and expectations of students, parents, administrators, local communities and society. Some stressors from a typical day include facilitating appropriate individual student conduct, developing effective individualized curriculum and learning activities that meet the learning needs of children, and amplified workloads associated with increased demands for accountability including high stakes testing. In the absence of positive coping strategies, stress may lead to increasingly negative outcomes; specifically, stress experienced by teachers may lead to emotional exhaustion, a precursor to burnout.

**The Practice of Meditation**

One approach teachers can use to mitigate stress is the holistic wellness practice of meditation. The practice of meditation offers a promising approach to promoting teacher wellness while developing empathy and compassion. Walsh and Shapiro (2006) define meditation as “a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration” (pp. 228-229). The practice of meditation may be traced back to ancient times as an active element of spiritual practice by many religious groups, including Christianity (Shear, 2006). Meditation is a personal and internal activity with the aim of facilitating mental clarity.

In the last several decades the practice of meditation has become prevalent in Western culture and many contemporary health providers include meditation as part of their alternative strategy to combat a multitude of health related difficulties their patients may face (i.e., neurological issues, digestive and metabolic concerns, pain, insomnia, depression, stress) (Ospina, Bond, Karkhaneh, Tjosvold, Vandermeer, Liang, Bialy, Hooton, Buscemi, Dryden, Klassen, 2007). According to the National Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) *National Health Statistics Report #12*, in 2007 there were more than 20 million adults in the U.S. practicing meditation, which translated to closely 9.4 % of the adult population at that time (National Institutes of Health, 2010).
One of the benefits of meditation is that it promotes holistic wellness, particularly in the area of emotional and spiritual wellness. An overwhelming body of evidence from research shows that meditation can reduce and alleviate stress, fatigue, and physical illnesses (Carlson, Ursuliak, Goodey, Angen, & Speca, 2001; Goleman & Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Ospina et al., 2007). While many practical forms of meditation exist (e.g., tai chi, yoga, structured and guided meditations), a potentially useful form that can be used to help alleviate educator stress is a simple practice called “mindfulness” (Curry & O’Brien, 2012).

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness as a concept has received increasing attention in recent years as providing an alternative technique to address negative thoughts and emotions and to assist people who experience physiological and/or emotional challenges (Stewart, 2004). In the United States, Jon Kabat-Zinn was the forerunner of the mindfulness movement, establishing the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program in 1979. He has defined mindfulness as a “moment to moment non-judgmental awareness” (p. 626). The main goals of practicing mindfulness are 1) to be in and accept the present moment as well as 2) to engage in nonjudgmental observation of self and others (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

There are numerous ways to practice mindfulness that include deep breath work and various forms of yoga. The goal of mindfulness is to clear the mind of thought, judgments about self and others, and to enter a state of advanced relaxation that allows the body to decompress. Meditation can be done while listening to music or no music, with or without structure and guidance. Meditation should be done in a quiet, clean space. Noteworthy, new practitioners don’t have to purchase books or expensive programs, clothes or gear of any type to get started. There are many places for beginners to find free, structured, guided meditations including the health site run by University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). (see Table 1) These guided meditations provide instructions and take varying amounts of time (3 minutes to 19 minutes).

One specific type of meditation that has been useful to teachers and other helping professionals is called “loving-kindness meditation” (Csaszar, 2013; Leppma, 2012).

**Loving-Kindness Meditation**

Loving-kindness meditation is a type of mindfulness meditation with roots that can be traced back to the positive psychology movement. However, loving-kindness meditation advances mindfulness by cultivating positive emotions and by introducing the practice of compassion and empathy toward self and others (Fredrickson, 2002). This is particularly important for teachers who may suffer from emotional exhaustion which can lead to decreases in empathy and compassion and can impact teachers’ relationships with their colleagues and students (Crippen, 2010).

### Table 1. Meditation Resources

**Websites**


**Books**


The steps of loving-kindness are very simple. First, the practitioner finds a comfortable place to sit in a relaxing position. (It is important to not lie down.) After closing her eyes, the meditator begins by deep breathing and thinking, “May I be healthy and strong. May I be happy. May I be filled with ease.” Some find it helpful to draw an imaginary circle on the ground around oneself. After doing this for at least three repetitions, the next step is to think of someone the meditator loves deeply (e.g., spouse, children, parent, pet) and to focus on that person while repeating at least three times, “May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be filled with ease.” Again, some people find it helpful to imagine that loved one joining the meditator in the circle. Third, this process is repeated for a person the meditator feels neutral about, a person she neither likes nor dislikes (e.g., cashier at the grocery, postal worker), and imagining that person joining the meditator and loved-one in the circle. Fourth, the meditator considers a person she dislikes, focusing on the person, possibly imagining that person in the circle with the meditator, and repeating at least three times, “May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be filled with ease.” This is generally the most difficult step for beginners. Finally, the meditator imagines everyone in the universe while repeating the same phrases. There are many free audio resources available that can be a great help when beginning a practice like this. Evidence suggests that teachers who do this every day show significant increases in empathy and decreased stress after only six weeks (Csaszar, 2013). It is a simple thing to do in the morning before school or in the evenings before school.
Meditation and Teacher Stress

Teachers face extreme stress and may feel overwhelmed by assessment demands, accountability, teaching loads and classroom management. Some educators may not have positive coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies to handle these stressors appropriately. Over time the stress may build, exacerbate the level of emotional exhaustion one may experience and lead to burnout and eventual impairment. Teachers inadequately dealing with their stress levels may also be less effective professionally (e.g., student outcomes, professional relationships). Some may choose to leave the profession due to their inability to cope with the difficulties they may face.

Meditation can contribute to affirming exchanges between teachers and students.

Conclusion

Although there are many things individuals can do to improve wellness (e.g., eating nutritious food, getting adequate sleep and rest, balancing work and social time, exercising), one potential wellness practice that can promote empathy and compassion is meditation. Further, this approach may help teachers mitigate stress and prevent burnout and promote emotional wellness. This approach may be implicated in assisting teachers to establish and gain the emotional resources they need in order to meet the developmental and social concerns of children.

References


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Social/emotional learning (SEL) focuses on helping children gain knowledge about feelings and getting along with others (Marion, 2011). SEL is the process in which children are able to acknowledge and recognize the emotions of others, develop empathy, make good decisions, establish friendships, and handle challenges and situations effectively. Children with social and emotional challenges may exhibit difficulty connecting with teachers and classmates, develop internalizing behavior problems, or use of physical aggression to convey their needs (Campos, Mumme, & Saarni, 1998). Early childhood teachers have a strong impact on guiding children’s social and emotional development by creating a safe and supportive environment, focusing on the child’s feelings, helping children develop language, and discussing the topics of how children develop SEL.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Early Childhood Environment

Preschool children flourish in a positive, trusting building environment (Day & Kunz, 2009). A positive, trusting environment includes:

- a daily schedule
- an orderly classroom arrangement
- respect between both teacher and students, and
- clear open communication between the student, parent, and teacher.

It is a safe place where children are protected from the elements and easily supervised, and it’s where important activities of the day take place such as eating, sleeping, washing hands, and going to the bathroom. It is an environment for young children to learn and explore through developmentally appropriate hands-on activities.

A suitable daily schedule for an early childhood classroom should include a balance between active and quiet activities, as well as a balance between teacher initiated and child-initiated activities. There should be expanded periods of the day for interacting with their peers. It is through this balance of scheduled activities that a child will begin to correlate the concept of continuity, time, and clear expectations of the teacher.

The physical aspect of an early childhood classroom allows for active learning where children interact with each other and make choices. Classrooms for young children are clean, in good repair, and provide child-size equipment for comfort and safety. Adequate lighting and/or natural lighting are important components as well. Early childhood classrooms ideally are arranged with clear paths, labeled centers, a management system, and areas for both quiet and active play. Such classrooms allow children to move freely throughout the space without interrupting another child’s play.

The stability and security of the teacher student relationship directly influences social and emotional learning. Effective teachers encourage children to participate in classroom activities, listen to what children say and expand upon their language, building vocabulary and knowledge. Since children think concretely rather than in abstract terms, they understand and learn when...
they take part in hands-on learning experiences and can actively participate in the lessons (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Teachers who provide stability and security plan activities that have a purpose and challenge the children. Teachers also encourage children to respect each other and their surroundings.

Student-teacher relationships foster a sense of well being in children, and a belief that they are safe and worthy (Hyson, 2004). Daily positive and caring communication about and with the child helps build the child’s sense of self-worth. Open communication should also occur daily between the parents and the teachers. Communication with a parent may consist of a daily conversation, phone call, or a note home. An open dialogue with parents provides the child the consistency and support needed for the transition from home to school.

Focus on Feelings

Early childhood is an important period in the social and emotional development of young children. At this age, children are learning about feelings and emotions and how to express and recognize those feelings. As children learn to distinguish between positive and negative feelings, they are also learning to regulate those feelings (Izard, King, Mostow, & Trentacosta, 2004).

It is through repeated experiences and exposure to SEL that children can learn techniques to manage their emotions and get along better with their peers. SEL helps children recognize emotions first in themselves and then in others so that they can develop empathy. An early childhood environment in which the children express healthy emotions, regulate them, and understand the emotion of self and others, creates a successful school experience (Bassett, Denham, & Zinsser, 2012).

The Development of Social and Emotional Learning

Children observe and model the emotions of other people in their environment. Adult emotions give children information about which situations evoke certain emotions. Children learn from observing the adult behavior that accompanies the emotion (Bassett et al., 2012). Peer groups also teach children how to express feelings. Children learn how to use language and express their feelings by interacting with adults and peers. Children have a much easier time learning to talk about emotions if they have good language development (Marion, 2011). Young children often do not understand their feelings so they look to the adult and

Activities that require collaboration help support social/emotional learning.

Keep an open dialogue with parents.
Intensely involved in the kindergarten block center, Adam, Colton and Connor were conversing enthusiastically as they changed the structure they were building. I overheard phrases such as “Try this,” “Wait, too low,” and “That won’t be strong enough.” When I sat down close to the boys, Connor invited me to observe what they were attempting. He said, “Look at the car ramp we’re building.” The other boys (who were playing nearby) chimed in to explain that they were having trouble getting the ramp tall enough without collapsing so their car could run down it and reach a place about three feet away. They told me that when they put the car on top of the ramp, the structure kept toppling down as shown in the following excerpt.

“The car is too heavy,” said Adam.

“And we don’t have blocks with curves,” continued Colton.

Connor added, “The ramp has to be tall to get the car running fast enough to go where we want it to go. We’ve been trying to build this ramp for days without any luck.”

What I realized was that kindergarten boys were problem solving, using critical thinking skills, exploring and experimenting with physics, and using language as well as social skills during their play. This block play episode combined elements of math, science, social skills, and language and contained learning far beyond the kindergarten standards.

Problem Solving and Critical Thinking

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) includes problem solving as one of the five process standards necessary in which all children from prekindergarten to grade 12 should be involved. Problem solving involves children attempting to obtain a goal not readily within reach (NCTM, 2000). Children should regularly be supported to solve problems as they arise whether in mathematics or a different context (NCTM). Clements and Sarama (2009) state that children benefit from many opportunities to solve problems and explain their thinking while discussing solutions.

The three boys had the goals of building a car ramp that would not collapse and that would be fast enough for the car to reach an end point. They used a variety of strategies, trying to reach this goal. The critical thinking was evident in talking to the boys. They understood that their failed attempts showed them what to change. For example, Adam said, “Using too many small blocks makes the ramp fall apart. That’s why I decided to use larger blocks that are the same amount as those little ones.” In this example, Adam shared his experiences and explained his thoughts and ultimately, the solution. Adam was critically considering what went wrong and also demonstrating geometric understanding that the larger blocks have the same measurement as multiple smaller blocks. The boys were demonstrating critical thinking skills when they concluded that previous attempts at building the ramp produced a ramp that was “too low” and would not allow the car to reach their destination.

Exploring and Experimenting with Physics

Could kindergartners actually experiment with physics? Adam, Colton, and Conner proved to me that they could on a basic level. The boys were experiencing difficulty with the ramp collapsing when they placed one of the larger cars on the top of the ramp. Colton
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explained, “We need a ramp as heavy as the car so it won’t let the car break it up.” Through this play episode, Colton was beginning to understand the basics of force between objects. He was describing the need for an equal force from the ramp pushing against the car (force). Additionally, the boys desired their car to have greater velocity when they realized that the ramp was too low to allow it to reach the end destination (motion). The boys concluded that raising the inclination of the ramp achieved this goal. The concepts of motion and force these students naturally experienced are taught later in physical science (National Research Council, 1996).

**Language**

Oral language skills were strongly present during Adam, Colton and Connor’s block building. The boys were not only communicating their ideas and thoughts, but they were also listening, an important component of language skills and a part of the Common Core Standards for Literacy (CCSS.ELA-Literacy SL.K.1a) developed by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (n.d.). The boys demonstrated the ability to express their opinions, explaining their thinking clearly such as when Colton suggested, “Make the bottom part taller so it will go faster” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.K.6). Additionally, the boys demonstrated language skills when they elaborated on one another’s ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.K.3).

**Social Skills**

At the age where egocentric behavior and perspectives have diminished for the most part, these boys showed the ability to fully cooperate and share during block play. Researchers have varied in the number of categories defining prosocial behaviors, but one behavior, cooperation, is consistently listed as an important action (Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman, Stein & Whiren, 2012; Marion, 2003). The boys were sharing ideas and attempting or discussing all options. At one point, Adam stated, “Let’s at least try it,” demonstrating the ability to negotiate with the other boys.

**Social Play**

Using Parten’s (1933) epic work on social play, I noticed that these three boys were clearly demonstrating cooperative play as revealed in their agreeing on tasks for each other while reaching for the common goal of building a car ramp. Colton busied himself with retrieving the car they used in the demonstration, while Adam and Connor attempted to straighten their collapsed ramp. Previously, I noted that the block center afforded itself a variety of social play opportunities, generally associative or cooperative play with the occasional student at the beginning of the year having solitary or parallel play. After reflecting on Adam, Colton and Connor’s play episode, I recognized opportunities to provide activities to students leading toward more cooperative play.

**Learning without a Plan**

Looking back at the boys’ play episode, I realized that the learning that took place was not something planned for that week. A physics lesson was not planned. Was this learning worthwhile? After thinking about the learning that had taken place, I would answer, “Yes”. These boys taught ME that following developmentally appropriate practice, such as giving time for exploration and play, allows for rich learning in multiple content areas.

Could I have planned learning experiences for all students in the class and still have developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom? A common misconception with early childhood teachers is that developmentally appropriate practice, especially during center time, requires the teacher to take on the role of passive observer, allowing the students to construct meaning on their own. While free exploration does produce opportunities for children to construct some meaning (Piaget, 1983), as demonstrated by...
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the play episode of Adam, Connor and Colton, it does not allow children to construct meaning about all learning objectives. Teachers should intentionally plan activities and organize the classroom environment in such a way that all learning objectives are met while remaining developmentally appropriate and giving children time to explore alone, with a group or with teacher involvement. This supports Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 2009) of “scaffolding” which provides the teacher opportunities to further support learning observed during free exploration.

Building Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests guidelines that teachers should consider while constructing appropriate curriculum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Integration between subjects is one guideline a teacher would attempt to incorporate while planning appropriate curriculum. From our block episode example, math, language and science were all involved during the boys’ play.

Furthermore, block play for young children considers multiple areas of child development. As noted, the three boys were using social skills by cooperating on a goal, using linguistic skills to effectively communicate and using physical skills to build their ramp. The goal of their building was relevant and personally meaningful to the boys, which accounts for another guideline. Without purposeful planning, the curriculum guidelines were already met through block play.

So, how can a teacher then purposefully plan, while incorporating the appropriate curriculum guidelines and content standards needed to develop appropriate curriculum? Let your students be the guide! Let’s take a look again at the block play episode.

Before I introduced the “building” activity, I decided on learning objectives (intellectual integrity) in various areas (mathematics and literacy) that I wanted to integrate into a learning experience. My objectives for mathematics were for the students to recognize the shapes needed to draw their buildings. I also considered having students use a specific number of blocks or having students build a building as tall as something in the classroom, such as the height of the block shelf. Students were encouraged to work in teams (social skills) to complete their project. I called them “architect firms.” Also, clipboards with paper were included for students to draw their “blueprints” and describe with labels the shapes in their final buildings (literacy and mathematics).

We also had a brainstorming session that allowed children to design something of their choice based on structures they remembered from their community such as playgrounds, amusement parks, a new McDonald’s to replace the one that caught on fire (personally relevant to community), a house and a ramp.

Finally, I incorporated the use of a digital camera for photographs from all perspectives of the buildings (technology integration). These pictures were downloaded onto a computer into students’ electronic portfolio and developed into a classroom book of “blueprints.” This activity concluded with the various “architecture firms” presenting their developments. The excitement in the room resembled that of the three boys building their car ramp!

Whole Class or Individual Activity

Building tasks can be given to the class as a whole or to individuals. In planning building activities for the whole class, the teacher decides the types of tasks that should be given
to the children. The tasks can be related to specific math skills such as numeracy and geometry. A math lesson could challenge students to build a structure with only 7 rectangular prisms or be connected to a community lesson on the local rodeo such as building a structure to house two stuffed horses side-by-side with a roof to protect them from rain and including a gate that can be opened.

Students can also be given different tasks based on observations made by the teacher while observing previous building. If a teacher notices that a specific group of students all continue to build structures that are tall, but without enclosed spaces, a lower level block stage (Johnson, Christie & Wardle, 2004), the teacher can provide support to increase their thinking by giving a building challenge similar to the one suggested previously with the horses. By having the teacher provide an actual object such as a horse during their building, the students can visually understand the need to provide an enclosure instead of possibly considering that the thickness of the block provided an “interior” for an object such as a horse. Instead, the student would begin treating the block as an outer structure such as a wall and use additional blocks to provide an enclosed space for the given object.

Assessing Playful Learning

As with any activity, teachers can assess the learning occurring during block building activities, spontaneous or planned. When a teacher plans a specific learning activity or challenge, the teacher first develops a set of learning objectives. From these objectives, assessments are planned. Assessments can take the form of checklists listing all objectives, thus allowing the teacher to quickly check each learning objective a student demonstrates. Anecdotal records can also be kept on the learning activity to document and support learning taking place. Recording children’s words provides support of learning and also provides a helpful way to explain to parents the learning that takes place in the building (block) center.

When first introducing this activity, I decided that I would assess via anecdotal records using a form I created for groups titled, “What Learning I Saw Today.” This allowed me to capture various types of learning from social behaviors to language and mathematics. When we repeated this activity, I decided on learning objectives as mentioned. For specific objectives such as students recognizing the shapes needed to draw their buildings, I developed a checklist, which listed the shapes covered in class lessons, a space to check if the shape was used in their structures and another space to check if the child could correctly identify by name the shapes used. I used these assessments to determine if some of the students needed further help with shape identification and for planning individualized lessons for these students.

Reluctant Builders

If students are reluctant to participate in block building, the teacher can suggest other lessons while still exercising their problem solving. One such way is to provide other materials. For example, observing in a classroom, I noticed a teacher providing a crate of various boxes (cereal, macaroni, rice, etc.) and cans. She also provided several colors of construction paper the students used to cover these objects. In my mind, these objects were similar
to blocks, but students were able to decorate them and creatively manipulate them into new items. With these items, the teacher challenged students to create cities or new inventions. Additionally, students who are not interested in the block building process could also take the same challenge and write or draw a solution to a specific posed problem. Luckily during our building project, reluctant builders did not appear. It could’ve been the chance to wear a hardhat or opportunity to “play” architect.

This one activity is just an example of how a child-centered curriculum allows students to help their teachers build the curriculum. While planning remains the main ingredient, children directing the curriculum allows for more incidental cooperative learning experiences. Amazing how observing our students during block play can spark a plethora of ideas!

Note: Pseudonyms were used in this article to protect the children’s privacy.

References


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Accessible Family Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

What strategies enable families to be full and active participants in their young children’s educations? This practical framework can be implemented in classrooms serving today’s diverse families.

Johnetta W. Morrison, Pamela Storey, and Chenyi Zhang

Denise Hampton works an 8 to 5 job that leaves almost no time to spend in her daughter’s early childhood classroom. The teacher, Ms. Pam, sends home a weekly newsletter describing the group’s accomplishments. Ms. Pam also occasionally distributes information about the class via e-mail. She feels she is doing a better than average job in communicating with families about their children’s education.

Denise appreciates this information, but would like to genuinely participate in her child’s learning, so she expresses her wishes to Ms. Pam. Their discussion alerts Ms. Pam to the fact that she could provide a range of opportunities for working families to become more fully engaged in their children’s learning experiences.

Family involvement in early childhood classrooms benefits children, school staff, and families (Bradley & Kibera, 2006; Epstein, 2001). The development of a strong relationship between early childhood programs and families is a critical component of developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

The work of Epstein (2001), Swap (1993), and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 2004) serve as a foundation for the description of family involvement in early education upon which this article is based. Family involvement encompasses the participation of the parent (or any family member or fictive kin) in the child’s education. This participation occurs in and outside the school, including two-way communication that involves child learning. The activities family members are involved in

• support the child’s learning process (at home, in the classroom, and within the community),
• exchange information about the child’s learning process (child’s progress, early childhood curriculum, developmental and cultural activities in the community),
• offer opportunities to participate in school decision-making leadership regarding the child’s education, and
• enable families to support children as learners in their homes.

In developing a plan for partnering with families, there is no one blueprint or single set of practices that define a family-school partnership (Decker, Decker, & Brown (2007).

Benefits and Challenges of Family Involvement

Several researchers pinpoint a positive correlation between family involvement in their children’s education and children’s achievement (see Epstein, 2001; Fan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Redding, 2006). Positive family involvement leads to better

• social,
• behavioral, and
• academic outcomes

for children from all ethnic and economic backgrounds (Ball, 2006; Marcon 1999).

Family participation in their children’s educations can be critical because it nurtures cognitive and emotional resilience, especially in the face of life stressors such as poverty and neighborhoods with few resources (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Low-income families’ ongoing participation in preschool and kindergarten activities has been associated with children’s higher reading achievement, lower rates of grade retention,
and fewer years in special education when children were in eighth grade (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

Families who are involved in their children’s early learning classrooms have a better understanding of their children’s education (DiNatale, 2002). Families and teachers who regularly learn about one another’s interests and cultures can develop a richer and more varied early childhood curriculum.

When teachers establish a liaison with children’s families, they feel more rewarded in their roles as teachers (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2006). The most experienced teachers, working in high-quality early childhood classrooms, had more family volunteers (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004). Family participation is certainly an excellent way to improve the quality of early childhood programs.

Respect for family traditions and cultures is essential to assure that they feel welcome and honored by all program staff.

Time also impinges on families’ abilities to be involved (Becker & Epstein, 1982). The typical 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday does not easily give some family members much flexible time to participate in classrooms.

Fortunately, family involvement in education is much broader than being present during the school day. Teachers and schools can encourage and support family participation with a variety of strategies such as those recommended here.

### Framework for Accessible Family Involvement

One comprehensive perspective on family involvement evolved from a review of studies from preschool through high school that included educators and families (Epstein, 2001). Epstein’s framework includes six types of involvement:

1. **Parenting**—home environments that support achievement
2. **Communicating**—two-way information sharing between school and home
3. **Volunteering**—helping with planned activities in and outside the classroom
4. **Learning at home**—parents assisting children in the learning process at home
5. **Decision making**—parent involvement in school decisions
6. **Collaborating with the community**—use of local services and resources to help children learn

The early childhood family involvement model presented here has at its heart Epstein’s research-based work, grouped into four components:

- Staff and Family Communication
- Parental Involvement
- Family Participation
- Community Collaboration

A number of factors affect families’ abilities to be actively involved in their children’s education. In the past, parents were encouraged to be little more than passive participants in children’s education (Ranson, Martin, & Vincent, 2004). This is no longer true in high-quality programs.

Awareness of cultural differences and expectations can also improve levels of participation. Asian and Latino families, for example, may feel excluded from participating in schools because some professionals may have been trained to believe that they knew what was best for children (Tozer, et al., 2006).
Effective teachers will use features from all four components of this model, selecting strategies that enable family members and any other person interested in supporting the child to decide how they wish to be involved.

**Components of Accessible Family Involvement**

- Staff and Family Communication
- Family-Child Collaborations
- Teacher-Family Relationship Building
- Community Connections

**Staff and Family Communication**

Teachers can implement a number of initiatives such as the following to support

- school and family communication exchanges,
- family decision making roles,
- meaningful volunteer opportunities, and a
- positive parenting process.

**Family center.** If space is available, create a homey space with comfortable furniture that invites families to talk informally with each other and their children’s teachers. Place a Family Notebook in a convenient spot where families can write comments and questions for teachers. Set up a computer with Internet access for families to use. Offer take-home activities such as bags with children’s books and games to explore together, articles on child development and parenting issues, and other information of interest to families.

**Family bulletin board.** In a visible area in the Family Center, classroom, or hallway, post daily information about children, their learning experiences, and school events. The board might include volunteer request sign-up lists for activities such as playground cleanup day and extended family visits. Ask for recommendations about what families would most like to see and encourage them to contribute resources as well.

**Family-teacher conferences.** Flexibility is essential when scheduling conferences with families. Factors to keep in mind include transportation needs, child care arrangements, availability of interpreters (Cellitti, 2010), and scheduling convenient times.

At the beginning of the school year, families can be encouraged to share information with teachers about their children, such as food allergies, family traditions, and their expectations for children’s learning. A packet of information for families is generally given upon enrollment in the program, so questions can be discussed early.

Teachers are encouraged to hold at least two more family conferences each year, plus being available at any time to communicate with families.
in person, by phone, or through e-mail. Face-to-face conferences, conducted in the family’s home language, are by far the most effective. Teachers can share children’s portfolios, ask for family insights about children’s experiences, and encourage families to become more familiar with and involved in classroom learning opportunities.

Newsletters. Either on paper, DVDs, or electronically, provide weekly information about children’s learning, community resources, and school events such as parent advisory meetings (Sanchez, Walsh, & Rose, 2011). Offer newsletters in multiple languages as needed. Find creative ways to involve families in writing, photography, and producing the newsletters.

Web site. A school Web site is ideal to communicate detailed information about the classroom and school. Upload photos of children’s learning experiences (obtain releases first) to more fully share daily events with families. Offer parenting/child development informational videos and other resources. Provide links to community resources and events. Families may be eager to assist with photography, sharing event information, and even designing and updating the site.

Program events. Early childhood programs often encourage family members to take an active role in classroom activities such as breakfasts with featured guests, field trip planning and travel, community-worker visits, and traditional holiday celebrations. Ask families for ideas about events that appeal to them, and encourage them to take leadership roles in their planning and implementation.

Time and Technology Issues
When teachers offer a variety of ways for families to actively communicate with them, including electronically, family time constraints on participation become less of a factor. Communicating electronically on blogs and social networking sites must be done in a professional manner and confidentiality is essential (Harte, 2011).

A limited-access class Web site is suggested because user-friendly layouts make it easier for family members to browse and search for information. The site must be password secured to assure there is no public access to it. Even so, specific information about students, their families, and/or teachers is not appropriate on a class Web site.

Whenever possible for meetings, conferences, and school events, arrange for child care to help assure that families who wish to participate may do so.

Family-Child Collaborations
Early childhood teachers are in an ideal position to encourage families to nurture their children’s academic growth and value learning. Children benefit from their family’s emotional and social development support. Families believe their efforts help their children and that they are expected to do so by the educational system (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2001).

These are some at-home learning experiences from which families and their children can benefit. Be sure to share information about these activities, and their importance, in the family’s first language. Ask families for ideas about other ways they enjoy learning together.

- Family learning opportunities that build on classroom learning experiences such as observing nature together, children interviewing family members, or joint art explorations
- Hands-on take-home kits selected by the child to complete with a family member at home. Activities elaborate on the curriculum
- Early reading, math, writing, and other academic explorations that children do with family members
- Assignments in which children present information researched with their families to their classmates

Teacher-Family Relationship Building
Communication is at the heart of the third component of this family involvement framework as well. Solid collaborative relationships are built during these and other direct interactions among families and teachers.

- Home visits
- Parent-teacher conferences
- E-mail list serve from teacher to families
- Daily updates for families at drop-off and pick-up times

Regular opportunities for direct communication with family members are essential for accurate and timely exchanges of information. Licensed and certified interpreters are preferred when working with families who speak languages other than English (Cellitti, 2010). Interpreters are essential, particularly when
dealing with sensitive issues. Be sure to consider factors such as the level of information to be presented, the interpreter’s relationship to the family, and cultural issues.

Families’ perceptions of the school staff, and any barriers they experience in trying to establish contact with their children’s schools, can influence families’ decisions to get involved in their children’s school experience (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Faculty and administrative commitment—and a welcoming school climate—are imperative to a successful family involvement process (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

Community Connections

Links to community resources and activities that enhance children’s learning are readily available to families in high-quality early childhood programs. Disseminate the information in various formats to assure that all families have access, and can add to it.

Community involvement by children and their families can strengthen children’s learning, while positively influencing the family and the school. Teachers who tie community-based participation into the curriculum extend children’s learning far beyond the classroom. These are some types of community activities that may appeal to families as volunteers and/or participants:

- Education and information fairs
- Health and fitness resources
- Sports events that appeal to or engage young children
- Cultural events such as children’s concerts and plays
- Public library services
- Community center events
- Organizations that provide activities and services for children and their families

Summary

The family involvement strategies that Ms. Pam implemented resulted in a more comprehensive effort to increase access of families to her classroom. Families, teachers, and children can expect to experience different positive results from each type of involvement (Epstein, 2001).

Early childhood teachers are urged to implement strategies from all four components of this framework during the course of the school year. Selecting more than half of the suggested strategies from each of the four components would likely ensure a stronger partnership between teachers and families. Implementing all identified strategies is far more likely to lead to genuine family involvement.

Family participation in children’s early care and education enhances children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development while augmenting teacher/family relationships that reinforce mutual beliefs and practices. Family involvement can be a positive experience for everyone involved.

References

Accessible for Family Involvement


If you’re a SECA member, you’ll find more resources and information about this topic in Dimensions Extra. Go to the “members-only” page of the SECA website to get the latest issue.

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