



Improve Family Engagement in After-School Programs

by Ellen Mayer and Holly M. Kreider

Research shows not only that parent involvement in schools contributes to children's academic success, but also that parent involvement in after-school programs makes a difference in children's lives. Children and youth spend most of their waking hours outside of school, and as they get older, they spend more and more of those hours in structured programs and activities. Growing research evidence reveals that students' participation in after-school activities can help them succeed in school and can stimulate their educational aspirations. When parents get involved in their children's after-school activities, these benefits can be even greater.

Connections between families and after-school programs are an integral part of the network of learning supports that Harvard Family Research Project calls *complementary learning*. For children and youth to be successful from birth through adolescence, they must be surrounded by an array of learning supports, such as families, after-school programs, libraries, museums, and health and social service agencies. These learning supports should connect with each other and with schools to form a network around children and youth.

Families are a critical component of this network, but engaging families in after-school programs can be challenging. Busy parents and overtaxed after-school program staffs both lack time. Some staff members don't recognize just how much families have to offer, and not all staff members know how to create a collaborative environment when interacting with families. What's more, most after-school programs today simply don't have a family engagement component.

Engaging families is worth the effort, though. When after-school programs build relationships with families and engage parents in their children's learning, everyone—children, families, schools, and after-school programs—stands to benefit.

The benefits of engagement

When teachers and after-school program providers think about family engagement, they often think only about activities that parents can do at the program site, such as volunteering in the classroom. But there are also activities that can take place in families' homes or in the community that can give parents the chance to become leaders and engage with their children's after-school activities. For example, after-school programs can provide opportunities for parents to read with their children or to participate in program decisions.

Recent research and evaluations suggest that family engagement in after-school time is associated with

- * **Increased family involvement in a child's education and school.** For example, family involvement in school events (such as parent-teacher conferences), school volunteering, and helping children with their homework has been shown to increase when families are involved in after-school programs.
- * **Improved parent-child relationships.** One study, for example, found that parents and children argued less and had more trust in one another when they spent more time together after school.
- * **Better after-school programs.** Specifically, programs run more smoothly and may show improved program outcomes when a family engagement or communication component is present.

Four strategies for engaging families

Parent leaders often participate in creating new after-school programs or building the networks of existing programs. Some parent leaders run after-school programs; others help focus attention on, improve access to, and foster support for programs. Whatever their

roles, parent leaders should keep in mind the importance of engaging families in after-school programs.

Research by Harvard Family Research Project revealed four strategies that after-school programs can use to engage families. The four strategies are described below, each with an example of a promising practice.

1. Support families

Healthy child development requires strong nurturing families that, in turn, are nurtured and supported by individuals and institutions within the community, such as after-school programs. After-school programs truly support families when they focus on what families have to offer, respond to families' needs and interests, and empower parents to act on their children's and their own behalf.

Harvard Family Research Project's research found that after-school programs can support families by

- * Focusing on assets—what families can do and can share with children and programs—rather than shortcomings.
- * Considering the concerns and needs of the families and children served by the program.
- * Soliciting families' feedback on current programming and implementing families' ideas for new programming.

The **Greenwood Shalom After-School Program** in Dorchester, Massachusetts, serves African-American, West Indian, Cape Verdean, and Latino families. The program provides homework support, computer instruction, arts and crafts, and literacy lessons for children, as well as one-on-one help for parents whose children are struggling in school. The program offers trips to museums and theaters to appeal to parents seeking enrichment opportunities for their children, and math and literacy workshops for parents who want guidance in helping their children with homework. Parents come to staff members to discuss a variety of personal matters, including immigration, relationship troubles, child custody, and finances. In addition, the program recognizes that many parents often do not understand the school district's policies and, therefore, offers parents assistance in this area.

2. Communicate, and build trusting relationships

The success of family engagement efforts depends in part on the level of trust families feel for program staff. Communication is a building block of family involvement partly because it can help staff build trust with families. Letting families know that they are welcome and keeping two-way lines of communication open are fundamental activities. Using a variety of communication strategies can help program staff reach as many parents as possible and can provide parents with opportunities to discuss topics of concern in an open manner.

Once staff members establish basic communication and trust with families, they can begin to foster deeper family engagement and parent leadership. For example, they can solicit families' input about program governance and leadership.

After-school programs can build strong relationships with families by

- * Communicating frequently and in positive ways.
- * Being there for families.
- * Providing leadership opportunities for parents.

At the **Hyde Square Task Force's Kennedy After-School Program**, a program at Kennedy Elementary School in Boston that serves primarily Latino families, staff members talk to parents about children's progress at parent meetings, at pick-up time, and over the phone. Speaking to parents on a daily basis makes for a warm, welcoming environment. In addition, the program finds that having informal conversations with parents and sharing good news about their children makes parents feel valued and connected. Staff members also share with parents detailed information about program operations and listen to parents' input about the program.

3. Hire and develop a family-focused staff

Staffing is a critical component of any program. Without positive family-staff relationships, even the best-intentioned program will not succeed. Increased engagement of families depends on the initiative and approach of staff. Welcoming families requires staff sensitivity toward families, usually developed through staff members' prior experience or professional development, and the willingness of staff to make a deliberate effort to connect with families.

After-school programs can build a family-focused staff by

- * Designating a staff member who is responsible for engaging families in the program.
- * Hiring staff with family engagement experience.
- * Hiring staff who share parents' perspectives and backgrounds.

The **child development program of Somali Community Services of Seattle** is an after-school and weekend tutoring and family support program specifically targeting children and families from Somalia. Although recruiting teachers from the community is a challenge, Somali teachers are central to the program's strength. Parents feel that the Somali staff members understand the challenges Somali children face in a new education system. In addition, program staff members serve as a primary source of information about children's school performance for some parents, especially when language barriers exist. During Saturday education classes, parents learn how to use resources, such as counselors and health care, provided by schools. The program also brings in speakers to talk about immigration services and other relevant topics.

Learn More

This article is adapted from *Focus on Families! How to Build and Support Family-Centered Practices in After School*, a guide for after-school program providers and leaders, local decision makers, funders, and others interested in promoting good family-engagement practices in many different settings. The guide, funded in part by the Wallace Foundation, is a joint publication of Harvard Family Research Project, Build the Out-of-School Time Network, and United Way of Massachusetts Bay. The guide is available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/families/index.html.

Harvard Family Research Project's **Family Involvement Network of Educators** was established to strengthen family and community engagement in children's education. Membership is free, and all are welcome to join. Members get the latest information about family involvement (including teaching tools, training materials, assessment methods, and research reports), receive monthly notices about new resources, and exchange ideas and insights with a diverse group of higher-education faculty, school personnel, researchers, and community and parent leaders. For more information, visit www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html.

4. Build connections with individuals and organizations

Partnering with community organizations and working with schools benefits after-school programs' relationships with families and fosters meaningful engagement. Programs can connect with community organizations to get resources and needed ideas about engaging families and to build a strong network of community supports for children and families.

When after-school program coordinators regularly meet with school staff, they can better express school concerns and children's academic needs to parents. Program coordinators can also accompany families to school meetings to serve as advocates, mediators, or translators. Because after-school program staff may see parents more often than classroom teachers do and, as a result, develop close relationships with parents, after-school programs are in a unique position to help parents navigate schools and develop self-advocacy skills. In addition, after-school programs can serve as a neutral ground where families can learn how to deal with the problems they encounter in school systems.

After-school program staff can strengthen the connections between home, school, and program by

- * Collaborating with local organizations to boost family engagement.
- * Acting as liaisons between families and schools.
- * Helping parents develop skills to advocate for themselves and their children at school.

The **Transition to Success Pilot Project** provides after-school programming for elementary and middle school students in Boston who did not perform well on standardized tests, and emphasizes family involvement in education. Most of the students served are African-American or Asian. The program coordinator facilitates communication among each child's teachers, parents, and after-school program staff. A large majority of the parents feel that the program improves their children's schoolwork and understanding of basic skills. Parents report greater involvement in their children's schools, increased communication with teachers, and better understanding of their children's schoolwork due to the program.


Family-focused after-school programming

Parents and parent leaders can use the results of Harvard Family Research Project's research to understand, choose, work with, or even design after-school programs that meet their needs or the needs of their communities' families and schools.

Some implications for parents

- * When parents search for after-school programs for their children, they should consider the extent to which the program is family-focused, in addition to other factors.
- * Parents should think of after-school programs not just as places that can supervise and provide support for their children, but also as places that can support their own needs and interests as parents.
- * Parents should see after-school staff members as resources for connecting them to schools and helping them become more involved in their children's education.

Some implications for parent leaders

- * Parent leaders can learn from after-school programs with close ties to the community how best to reach out to various groups in the school—for example, to ethnically diverse families. In some cases, parent leaders can draw upon after-school programs' assistance in connecting with families.
- * As family-involvement experts who know their schools well, parent leaders can support after-school programs by helping them design parent leadership components and training.
- * Parent leaders can help strengthen connections between schools and after-school programs by visiting after-school program sites and by inviting after-school program providers to present information about their programs at PTA meetings. 

Ellen Mayer, MPhil, is senior research analyst and Holly M. Kreider, EdD, is a research associate at Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts. PTA and HFRP are partners in efforts to increase family involvement in education.