**Bridging the Home/Community and School Gap**

In order to promote parental involvement, you can do the following:

- communicate with the parents in the form of conferences and written information.
- assist the parents with ideas and suggestions on how to create a positive learning environment in the home;
- create opportunities for parents to work with students in the schools as volunteers;
- provide the parents with suggestions for activities that the parents can do at home to help their children;
- encourage parents to participate in a variety of parent organizations such as P.T.A., advisory council, school committees, etc.

Research has shown the following to be true:

- Educators and parents are more similar than different. They share common goals that can be attained through effective communication and alliances.
- Parent involvement is just as important during later years of schooling as it is during early childhood.
- Schools must do all they can to involve all parents, regardless of their education or income levels.
- Parents need to feel welcome at school. An “open door policy” is one that invites parents to come together and discuss ideas with educators and other parents.
- Much can be done to help families work at home with their children to improve schoolwork.

According to Joyce Epstein, there are **five types** of parent involvement as follows:

**Type 1 - Parenting**
The school assists parents in the development of appropriate home conditions that foster learning.

**Type 2 - Communication**
Communication is fostered through regular parent teacher conferences, translation of all written notices into the native languages of parents, and the sending of student work to the home, periodically, for parental review and comment.

**Type 3 - Volunteering**
The school encourages the parents to become actively involved in their child’s school and support school efforts.

**Type 4 - Learning at Home**
The school provides information to parents on skills in each subject area at each grade level. The school can provide parents with a schedule of homework that requires the students to discuss their schoolwork at home. Parents can be encouraged to structure time for the students to do homework, supervise that time, and see that there is a working space to complete the homework.
Type 5 - Representing Other Parents
Parents are encouraged to become active in the PTA\PTO, advisory councils or other parent organizations (Epstein, 1991)

A SUCCESSFUL MODEL OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

A highly successful parental involvement program was developed in 1983 to serve all children in the school district of McAllen, Texas. The community is primarily Hispanic and many immigrants and migrant families have little or no proficiency in English. Each school agreed to become directly involved in parent activities. Each school has a community partner that provides resources such as donations or volunteers to support school programs. More than 200 businesses are involved in the program. The school personnel are bilingual or learning the native language of the parents in order to communicate better. The parent/student handbook is available in both English and the native language of the parents.

Families benefit from community aides, home, visits, family study centers, computer assisted language programs and programs designed to develop parenting skills as well as other areas of concern. Each principal is responsible for parental involvement at his or her particular school.

Several schools have set aside space for parent volunteers to meet. The meetings are held in schools, community buildings and family homes. Parents are provided with transportation and child-care in order to attend meetings. While school personnel make some home visits, “parent liaisons” visit families new to the district who have not come to school or have not responded. The parent liaisons speak the native language of the parents. It is estimated that 99% of parents have some productive contact with their children’s schools. The district staff is working to reach the other 1%. Comprehensive programs to involve parents require long term leadership and resources.

The following are requirements concerning parent communication:

- Communication with parents must be translated into the native language of the parents to meet the needs of the parents who do not speak English.

- The written communication with parents must reach them. (Some schools send parent notices on brightly colored paper or on specific days of the week.)

Additional suggestions:

- Parent meetings are most successful when there is food, family and fun. Transportation and child care may be provided to ensure attendance. Parent input into the choice of topics for the workshops in recommended. Pictures of classroom activities that show the parents, children, and activities with the children also promote parent attendance.

- Parents should receive written and verbal communication when there is positive information to convey. This sets the tone for ongoing communication. (Epstein. 1991).
Parents’ attitudes about education can have a powerful effect on student success in school (Clark 1985), and the teacher can help to influence these attitudes. Just influencing a parent to read aloud to students daily (in any language) has a powerful effect on children’s literacy learning. In Becoming a Nation of Readers (1985), the National Academy of Education stated that “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.” (1985:23). Although parents are powerful teachers, we do not limit our view of parent involvement to a one-directional “let’s straighten those parents out” approach. This is a form of blaming the victim. Schlossman warns against such blame-assignment in these words: “it is fruitless to try to isolate the impact of individual educational institutions-whether the family, the school or the television-and assign them full responsibility for educational outcomes. The incredible variety of institutions that socialize children and the complex manner in which they touch, overlap and interact, demands that we exercise considerable caution in parceling out blame for educational failures” (1978:807-808).

You can undertake educating the parent about activities that can promote student learning. However, you must also be educated by the parent to better educate the child. Au and Jordan (1981), Jordan (1983), and Hansen (1986) have discussed the problem of the “interaction rule mismatch” and “cultural incompatibility.” Students’ home interaction rules are often quite different from school interaction rules. A mismatch between the two can lead to learning and social problems in the classroom. Closer communication and frequent interactions between you and your students’ parents centering on mutually purposeful activities (i.e., the education of the children), along with considerable openness and sensitivity on your part, can lead to better understanding of cultural differences, including those in communication patterns. This communication will also assist you in fulfilling your role as a student of your students’ cultures...

You can serve as a bridge between home learning and school learning in several ways. Regarding home/school interactions with the families of second language learners, who are often hesitant to initiate contacts with the school because of cultural differences, difficult work situations, difficulties with the language, or a combination of these, you should be willing to take the initiative. Previously, we have discussed ways to study home culture and ways to carry out interviews to get information from family members. Two other ways in which you can initiate contact between families, student and school are bringing families into the classroom and “homeFUN.”

**Bringing the Family to School:** Parent participation in your classroom and schools presents its challenges. Parents often lack time, confidence or both. Each party fears being examined too closely by the other; management and scheduling are difficult. But the rewards are increased richness and variety in the learning environment, greater classroom enthusiasm, parents understanding the learning process better and thus being more capable of helping their students with academics, and greater support for the school from parents (Johnston and Slotnick, 1985). Rich (1985) of the Home and School Institute offers a rule that is most relevant to teachers who seek to bring parents into the classroom: “link parents’ involvement directly to the learning of their own children.” (1985:80).
When developing activities to bring parents into your classroom, remember that rule. The experience in your integrated classroom should be as meaningful and real for the students’ families as it is for the students themselves. The activities we have selected respect and take advantage of the rich resources parents have to offer and provide the flexibility that parents with busy schedules need. You may want your first parent involvement to be with a parent volunteer from your class or with someone from the school parent-teacher organization. Such a person might be willing to call other parents to help you to solicit assistance from parents with the events described in the sections that follow.

**Bring Parents in for special celebrations:** The easiest way for parents to find their way into your classroom is to help you celebrate something. Plays and programs always provide a good draw; parents enjoy seeing their own children perform. When you plan performances for parents, you can maximize student participation and minimize preparation by using a chorus or by having a number of small parts or several small skits rather than one long play. In the latter case, each student has a role and the language demands of the role are not overwhelming for language learners. Instead of giving students long parts to memorize, have a narrator read parts while other students pantomime and say a few short lines that can easily be remembered (or ad-libbed). Other celebrations that would lure parents into your classroom include a publication party for a book...or an opening of a show of student artists’ work. Special relationships can also be featured. We observed one class celebrating Grandparents’ Day, to which students invited their grandparents and grandparent-figures. The students prepared refreshments, recited original poems, and sang for their guests. One family was represented by four generations.

**Bring Parents in as resources, to share special knowledge and skills:** Now that your parents know the way to your classroom, find ways to involve them in your curriculum as participants, not just spectators. Invite parents in to give talks and answer questions about their native countries, their occupations, their hobbies, and their favorite stories. A resourceful teacher we know had a yearlong integrated thematic unit about careers. He invited the parents of every student in the class to come in at some time during the year to share what they did for a living, and to bring in some representative tools of their trade or hobby. One father played the guitar and helped the students compose original songs; a sheep-shearer sheared a sheep; a mother brought in her word processor and helped students write stories; another parent came in with a collection of toys and clothing from South America; still another came in to show the students how to make spring rolls.

Parents who are able and willing can participate by helping you to read aloud to small groups in school. If you have several students from the same language group, find a parent who will read or tell stories to them in their native language. We know that native language development can contribute to English language development. A great deal of background information, paralinguistic learning, and story knowledge can be transferred from one language to another (Cummins. 1981; Walters and Gunderson, 1985)

**Bring parents in to help with small groups and individuals:** Parents can provide a valuable extra pair of hands in many activities that are used in the integrated classroom. Carefully plan your activity ahead of time, and spend a few minutes explaining the ground rules of the activity to the parent. Your time and thought will be rewarded by a successful experience for both
students and parents. Parents can help to supervise small teams of students on a field trip or assist students at the learning center...Parents may be willing to return often to your classroom to assist you. Some of the most successful parent volunteer programs, which we have seen operate, are in multilingual schools where second language learner’s parents (who often are also still learning the new language and culture) help out in the classrooms, cafeteria, library, and playground. By doing so, they help both their children and themselves.

Source:
HomeFUN: Making a Connection with the Home Culture

Homework is another area in which parent involvement has been shown effective (Paschal, Weinstein, and Walberg, 1985). Homework has mixed potential, however. Ways in which it is organized by teachers and dealt with by families can make it have positive or negative effects (McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne, 1984). Families of second language learners are particularly prone to problems surrounding homework because often parents don’t speak, read, or write the language of the assignment. We propose an alternative to homework. This alternative enables parents and students to work together on meaningful academic tasks and turns language and cultural differences into resources. We call our proposal homeFUN.

HomeFUN is a teaching strategy that helps you to promote family involvement in students' language and literacy learning. Some suggestions for its effective use are:

Choose activities that are engaging and fun: HomeFUN is not a time for language drill and practice, but a time for meaningful language play and discovery. Devise activities that children and family members enjoy and look forward to. For example, to help students practice and improve spelling skills, don’t give them an assignment to copy and memorize spelling words. Children can improve these skills as they increase their awareness of functional print in their environment and learn how advertisers and others change spellings to get attention. Encourage students and parents to hunt for words that appear in the print environment intentionally misspelled....

Choose activities that Integrate language: Instead of choosing activities from one compartment of language, such as reading, spelling, grammar or handwriting, choose activities that include more than one medium and that encourage children and family members to use higher-level skills, such as summarizing, organizing, and synthesizing information. For example, you might ask family members and students to do a set of Kitchen chemistry experiments to find out what happens when certain cooking ingredients are combined and heated. Students could describe the reaction that occurs when baking soda and vinegar are combined (wild bubbling) or their own reactions when eating the product of a “sugar inversion” experiment (fudge). Depending on their level of proficiency, students can describe these experiments by drawing pictures of results, dictate to family members about results in English or their native language, filling out a chart summarizing results or telling about results in class.

Make sure that the activities necessitate both parent (or other older person) and child participation: To make sure that parents become involved, assign activities that a student cannot do alone. You might ask students to interview parents or other older family members about what school was like when they were children. Students could then draw comparisons between the schools of yesterday and their own school. It is important to adapt the activities to students’ home situations. If no one in a student’s home can read English, as another parent, an older sibling, or a paraprofessional to...
translate the assignment. If translation is not possible, explain and demonstrate the activities thoroughly to the students so that they can explain them to their parents. If, after a number of tries, you are sure that no one in a family is willing or able to help a student in your class with homeFUN activities, find an older student or adult volunteer to work with that student.

**Respect and utilize home language:** As we have stated, “school talk” and “home talk” are not the same for students from various ethnic and native language backgrounds; in the classroom you have many opportunities to teach standard English forms, but the sharing of homeFUN projects is not an appropriate time for correcting grammar. HomeFUN activities, if they are to help to bridge a home-school language gap, should not “put down” language and dialect differences but should celebrate and incorporate them. If children are not helped to feel proud of the communication that takes place in their homes, they will not want to share it with teachers and peers at school. Assign activities that develop this pride. For example...you could ask students to tape interviews with family members about their memories of persons they had known whom they consider heroes. These tapes could be shared with the class, and students could discuss the language use of the individuals interviewed as well as the content of the interviews. Heath (1983) and Moll (1987) describe a number of similar activities. These kinds of homeFUN activities have a double value: they celebrate students’ home language and they help you to learn more about the language so that you can use this knowledge throughout your curriculum.

**Give families adequate time for completion of the HomeFUN activity:** Rather than giving an assignment one day and expecting it to completed by the next, allow families several days or a week to fit these activities into their busy schedules. Assigning the activities regularly will help family members and students learn to expect them and to plan ahead for them. Plan to educate parents about the homeFUN activities at Open House at the beginning of the school year and through class newsletters (translated when necessary) and conferences.

**Present the activities with both preparation and follow-up.** Motivate students through your enthusiasm and give them prerequisite skills. For example, introduce the elements of a fairy tale, including the characters (protagonists, evil person, magical person), setting (far away and long age place), and plot (problem, complication, resolution involving magic) before asking students to collect such stories from their parents or other older family members. Plan time to share and respond to the homeFUN activities. For example, help students write down, illustrate, and bind together their fairy tales in a book.

**Provide variations based on students’ language levels.** The homeFUN activities that you provide for your students should challenge them without frustrating them. Offer parents ways to adjust the activities to their children’s proficiency levels. This will help them learn about their children’s capabilities. For example, some family members and children might search kitchen shelves or road signs for symbols or letters that the students could recognize while others might search for words or phrases that the student could
read by sight. Parents of younger students could take dictation for the children, while parents of older students could expect students to copy the words themselves.

**Work with other teachers to develop and exchange activities.** Bouncing ideas off your peers can spark your creativity and decrease your workload.

HomeFUN activities should be a part of the ongoing curriculum. Every integrated unit that you plan for your students can and should have a homeFUN activity or two to extend your students language and content learning to their homes. Following is a small selection of sample homeFUN activities to get you started... We encourage you to go on to create your own.

Assign students, with family members to:

- Make a person time line of the student’s life.
- Make a map of family or ancestral migrations.
- Collect insults, jokes, or riddles.
- Make a family tree.
- Study how family members use reading or writing: list the many ways in which a family member uses print in one day.
- Sketch bedrooms, houses, blocks.
- Make maps of routes commonly traveled, for example, to school.
- Get a library card and learn how to use it.
- Write down an unwritten family recipe as family member prepares the dish.
- Collect family stories in a certain category—humor, superstitions, ghost stories.
- Collect funny stories about the student’s childhood.
- Study a particular aspect of parents’ childhood: work, housing, television, radio, segregation.
- Make lists and sketches of wildlife near the home in a certain category, for example, insects, mammals, birds.
- Collaborate on a cooking activity.

Involving parents in your classroom and incorporating home involvement into your curriculum can help teachers to know the parents better and to value their involvement (Epstein, 1985), and it can help students academically (Combs, 1979; Becker and Epstein, 1982; Walters and Gunderson, 1985). Involving parents in your classroom will also have a self-perpetuating effect—once the process has begun. Both parents and teachers are likely to want more of the same (Becker and Epstein, 1982).

Source: