

Family engagement

Engage with families to invite communication and collaboration for successful learning

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Establishing and maintaining trusting and respectful partnerships with families – including biological parents, legal guardians, adoptive parents, kin carers and out-of-home (foster) carers – can reinforce effective teaching, and has a positive impact on student learning.

This practice guide will help you understand how to:

- engage with families to support student learning
- support families to participate in their child's education
- evaluate your approach to family engagement
- access a range of Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) guidance materials on the topic of [family engagement](#).

Engage with families to invite communication and collaboration (*Family engagement*) is one of 18 interconnected practices in our [Teaching for How Students Learn model of learning and teaching](#). This practice sits in the **Enabling** phase, which focuses on authentic, responsive, respectful relationships in a culturally safe, learning-focused environment. Family engagement is interconnected with:

- **Planning**, which focuses on developing and using a sequenced and structured plan for the knowledge and skills students will acquire
- **Instruction**, which focuses on managing students' cognitive load as they process and acquire new learning
- **Gradual release**, which focuses on maximising students' opportunities to retain, consolidate and apply their learning.

All of these areas of practice may be better informed and supported with family engagement.

Enabling

Planning

Instruction

Gradual release

Understanding this practice

These lists demonstrate what family engagement for successful learning might look like, and potential misapplications in practice.



What it is

- Establishing and maintaining relationships with families to support students and their learning.
- Providing safe spaces and events, both on- and off-site, where families and school staff can meet.
- Acknowledging the value of students learning at home and in their communities and supporting this.
- Being ready to share relevant examples of how parents can support students' learning outside of school.
- Fostering two-way, positive communication between schools and families, including light-touch updates that are personalised, positive, concise and focused on learning, and enable families to respond if required.
- Providing regular opportunities for parents to share knowledge of their children's learning needs, aspirations and achievements and allowing this information to inform teaching plans.



What it isn't

- A 'one-size-fits-all' model – every student and their family will bring their own perspectives and experiences and these will influence their engagement with you.
- Limiting engagement to families who initiate contact or participate in school events, such as fundraisers and parent committees.
- Communication that's initiated by families and not responded to or acted on by you or other school staff.
- Creating engagement opportunities that are transactional and beneficial to you or the school only.
- Expecting families to use complex instructional strategies at home.
- Assuming that all families are equipped and available to engage to the same degree.

The importance of family engagement

Key points from the research

- Fostering family engagement and working in partnership with families and communities can:
 - support students in developing positive dispositions towards learning
 - encourage engagement
 - increase attendance
 - improve learning behaviours.^{1,2}
- Family and community involvement can stimulate reflections and discussions about the broader relevance of what students are learning at school. This can help students better understand what they're learning, why it's important and the context it applies to.^{3,4}
- Teachers and families may have different expectations about appropriate behaviour to support learning. This mismatch can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties. Through attentive listening and development of meaningful relationships, schools can work in partnership with families and the community, so they're actively involved in shaping and understanding the school's expectations for learning and behaviour.⁵
- As part of our own culture, environment or upbringing, we may hold certain biases or assumptions that influence the way we approach other individuals or groups. This means that work to build partnerships involves being open to learning about the values, strengths and aspirations families bring and using these to inform your practice.^{6,7}

AERO's guidance on family engagement

Draw on promising approaches to family engagement

You can strengthen your family engagement by drawing on the 4 most promising approaches from research in [primary](#)⁸ and [secondary](#)⁹ schools.

- Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home
- Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light-touch updates about learning
- Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home
- Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families.

Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Students develop knowledge from multiple sources – not only from school. Recognise families' role in learning at home and value families as trusted, respected partners who influence a student's learning. Provide opportunities for families to get to know you and [learn from families about their perspectives](#) as you develop partnerships.

For there to be genuine recognition and support of families' role in learning at home, families and school staff need to be seen as equal, trusted partners who both influence a student's learning. Understanding may be supported by conversations with families about:

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

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

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

Effective two-way communication involves drawing on families' knowledge and expertise about students' learning needs and achievements, including through light-touch updates. Updates are more effective when schools ask families how often and at what time of day they prefer to receive messages.

Light-touch updates could involve texts, emails or phone calls to:

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

Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

A literacy-rich environment may include language in various forms (such as talking, listening, reading, storytelling, singing, drawing and painting), including in students' first languages, as well as oral and other non-text-based literacy. This type of environment allows children to practise their literacy skills often, in functional ways. One specific way schools can support a literacy-rich environment at home is by promoting shared reading. There are many forms of shared reading, including dialogic reading (where the family member interacts with the child by asking questions or having a conversation about the book).

Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

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

Collaborative problem-solving could include:

- asking students and their families about questions they have when reviewing a student's progress
- actively discussing learning opportunities for students.

Tailor your engagement to meet the needs of students and their families

Every family has different needs, backgrounds, experiences and educational goals. AERO's practice on [building positive connections](#) includes practical advice on developing relationships with families. AERO also offers tailored guidance to support your work on each of the promising approaches when working with [families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds](#), [families of children with disability](#) and [families of children in out-of-home care](#).

The following case studies show family engagement practice in action:

- **[Supporting Linguistically Diverse Families Through English Classes](#)**

This case study from Queensland focuses on Darling Heights State School's literacy support program. It shows how it has helped foster family engagement in their diverse school community.

- **[Supporting Complex Learners Through Family Engagement](#)**

This case study from New South Wales focuses on Clarke Road School's learning and assessment framework. It discusses how the staff have supported complex learning needs through partnerships with families.

Adopt a whole-school approach to family engagement

A whole-school approach to family engagement ensures consistency, effective communication and a culture where families and school staff are equal, trusted partners in students' learning.

Working with families and communities helps:

- school leaders to establish a shared understanding of the whole-school approach
- teachers to adapt engagement practice to suit their context
- schools to learn what's working most effectively and what they could do differently by seeking feedback from families, communities, students and colleagues.

Leaders and teachers can continually and [critically appraise](#) approaches and practices. Tools that can help you do this include AERO's:

- **reflection questions** in family engagement practice guides for [primary](#) and [secondary](#) teachers and leaders
- family engagement **audit tools** for [primary](#) and [secondary](#) schools
- **implementation checklists** for [primary](#) and [secondary](#) schools.

Developing your practice*

Consider what's informing your current practices, expectations and beliefs. As a school, use these questions to reflect, make a plan to develop your approach and practices, and seek feedback to monitor the impact for your students and families.

What family engagement techniques do you use to build relationships of trust; encourage respectful, two-way communication; and facilitate collaborative planning and problem-solving?

Review AERO's family engagement promising approaches audit tool for [primary](#) and [secondary](#) school teachers. Consider how your practice is positioned in relation to each promising approach:

- What area might be an important focus for your next professional learning or school improvement goal?
- What would others (e.g., families, students, colleagues) notice about your approach to family engagement? How could you invite and use feedback to strengthen your approach? Are your relationships with students and their families authentic and trusting to facilitate open feedback?
- How might you adapt your practices and thinking to strengthen your approach to family engagement?

*Reflexive practice (reflexivity) is a process that critically examines personal attitudes, values and biases, with a view to becoming a more self-aware and effective teacher. Through reflexive practice, teachers, educators and school leaders can appraise and evaluate how their behaviours and ideas influence their teaching and learning.¹⁰

Further reading

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2024). *Spotlight: Strengthening parent engagement to improve student outcomes*. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/strengthening-parent-engagement-to-improve-student-outcomes>

This Spotlight summarises research on the impact of different types of engagement and provides resources to support teachers and leaders in constructively engaging with parents. It focuses on school-based engagement and how this can enable parents to engage with students' learning at home.

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2020). *Parent and family engagement: An implementation guide for school communities*. <https://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/647>

ARACY developed this guide to assist school leaders and teachers with better engaging with parents and families in their school communities to support students' learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Department of Education. (2022). *Family-school partnerships framework*. Australian Government. <https://www.education.gov.au/supporting-family-school-community-partnerships-learning/family-school-partnerships>

This webpage provides information for supporting parent engagement through family-school and community partnerships, including key dimensions of family-school partnerships, strategies for building family-school partnerships and an overview of the [Family-School Partnerships Framework](#).

Education Endowment Foundation. (2021). *Teaching and learning toolkit: Parental Engagement*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/parental-engagement>

EEF tested a number of interventions designed to improve students' outcomes by engaging parents in their children's literacy and numeracy skills development. This toolkit summarises the findings, including the average impact of these approaches and programs.

Evidence for Learning. (2022). *Working with parents to support children's learning: Guidance report*. <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-evidence/guidance-reports/working-with-parents-to-support-childrens-learning>

E4L's guidance report is designed to support primary and secondary school leaders with an evidence-informed approach to working with parents. It reviews the best available research to offer schools and teachers clear and actionable recommendations for supporting parental engagement in children's learning.

Endnotes

- 1 Sheridan, S. M., Smith, T. E., Moorman Kim, E., Beretvas, S. N., & Park, S. (2019). A meta-analysis of family-school interventions and children's social-emotional functioning: Moderators and components of efficacy. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(2), 296–332. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318825437>
- 2 Smith, T. E., Sheridan, S. M., Kim, E. M., Park, S., & Beretvas, S. N. (2020). The effects of family-school partnership interventions on academic and social-emotional functioning: A meta-analysis exploring what works for whom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 32(2), 511–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09509-w>
- 3 Kirschner, P. A., & Hendrick, C. (2020). *How learning happens: Seminal works in educational psychology and what they mean in practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429061523>
- 4 Reigeluth, C. M., Merrill, M. D., Wilson, B. G., & Spiller, Reginald, T. (1980). The elaboration theory of instruction: A model for sequencing and synthesizing instruction. *Instructional Science*, 9, 195–219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00177327>
- 5 Llewellyn, L. L., Boon, H. J., & Lewthwaite, B. E. (2018). Effective behaviour management strategies for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: A literature Review. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43n1.1>
- 6 Australian Education Research Organisation. (2024). *Cultural responsiveness in education*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/summaries-explainers/research-summaries/cultural-responsiveness-education>

- 7 Kilcullen, M., Swinbourne, A., & Cadet-James, Y. (2018). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing: Social, emotional wellbeing and strengths-based psychology. *The Clinical Psychologist*, 22(1), 16–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cp.12112>
- 8 Australian Education Research Organisation. (2021). *Engaging with families to support student learning in primary school*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/engaging-families-support-student-learning-primary-school>
- 9 Australian Education Research Organisation. (2021). *Engaging with families to support student learning in secondary school*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/engaging-families-support-student-learning-secondary-school>
- 10 AERO (2024)