

# Improving Relationships & Results: Building Family School Partnerships



National Center for Special Education  
Accountability Monitoring (NCSEAM) in  
collaboration with the Future of School Psychology  
Task Force on Family School Partnerships



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## Where are we going today?

- Let's talk about family involvement
- What are some strategies to improve how we get families involved?
- Feedback & Goal Setting



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## Indicator B-8

- Percent of parents with a child receiving special education services who report that **schools** \_\_\_\_\_ as a means of **improving services and results** for children with disabilities



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**Ask yourself:**



- How do you approach & view family involvement with schools?
- What are your attitudes and beliefs about building connections between families & schools?



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**Ask yourself:**

- Is the atmosphere of your school/classroom inviting & family friendly?
- What do you do to promote communication & partnerships with families?



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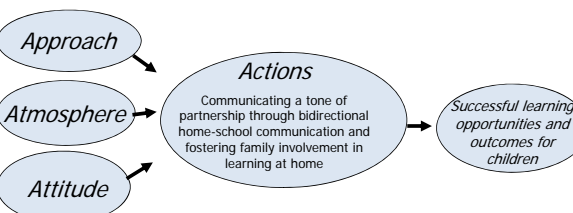
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**Developing Pathways to Partnerships**

Prerequisite Conditions: "3 A's" must be in place for Actions to be accepted and effective



(Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008)

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### Approach

- Families & \_\_\_\_\_
- Shared responsibility
- \_\_\_\_\_ vs. roles



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### Approach

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Importance
- Cooperate & \_\_\_\_\_



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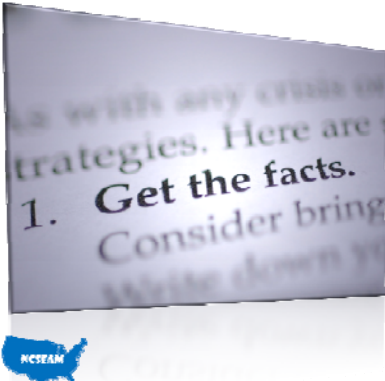
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### Approach

- Involvement
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Information & resources



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### Attitude

- Feelings about partnerships
- \_\_\_\_\_ & constructive



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### Attitude

- Strengths
- Information & \_\_\_\_\_
- Perspectives
- \_\_\_\_\_ expertise



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### Attitude

- Parent's perspective
  - Parents \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Parents as equals?
  - \_\_\_\_\_ comments?
  - Listen & attend?



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### Atmosphere

- Appreciate \_\_\_\_\_
- Difficulties & conflicts
- Support all families



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### Creating the Atmosphere:



- Open
- \_\_\_\_\_  
classroom
- Time spent
- No assumptions or \_\_\_\_\_

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### Actions

- No "one" approach
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Communication



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### Effective Communication

- Meeting times
- \_ positive: \_ negative
- Regular \_\_\_\_\_ reports



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### Effective Communication



- Tone of \_\_\_\_\_
- Helping at home
- Clear \_\_\_\_\_ & problem solving



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### Effective Communication

- \_\_\_\_\_ expressions
- Goal achievement
- \_\_\_\_\_
- Check understanding



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### Administrative Support

- \_\_\_\_\_ for partnership
- Low literacy
- Non-English speakers



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### Administrative Support

- \_\_\_\_\_ development
- Parent opportunities



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### Key points



- \_\_\_\_\_
- Not equal
- \_\_\_\_\_



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Feedback. . .



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Questions for you. . .

- Taking local context into consideration, how might this information need to be modified?
- What are the potential barriers for using this model of communication techniques?
- How can we overcome these barriers?
- What support is necessary from administration?
- What support is necessary from other school staff?
- How will we ensure this support is offered and barriers are overcome?



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For More Information

- [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)
- [www.accountabilitydata.org](http://www.accountabilitydata.org)
- [www.rrfcnetwork.org](http://www.rrfcnetwork.org)
- [www.nectac.org](http://www.nectac.org)
- [www.fsp.unl.edu](http://www.fsp.unl.edu)

It's about Better Results



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### Acknowledgments



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- NCSEAM would also like to thank those who provided essential feedback to us throughout the development process.

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### **Personal Inventory for Educators Regarding Family-School Partnerships**

Ask yourself the following questions, and try to answer as honestly and genuinely as possible. In what ways are your attitudes about parents conveyed in your interactions and communications?

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- Have I put myself in the parent's place and mentally reversed roles to consider how I would feel as the parent of the child about whom there are concerns?
- Do I see the child/adolescent in more than one dimension, looking beyond the concern?
- Am I able to keep in mind that the child/adolescent is a person whom the parent loves?
- Do I really believe that parents are equal to me as a professional and, in fact, are experts on their child?
- Do I consistently value the comments and insights of parents and make use of their reservoir of knowledge about the child's total needs and activities?
- Do I judge the child/adolescent in terms of his or her progress and communicate hope to the parents by doing so?
- Do I listen to parents, communicating with words, eye contact and posture that I respect and value their insights?
- Do I ask questions of parents, listen to their answers and respond to them?
- Do I work to create an environment in which parents are comfortable enough to speak and interact?
- Am I informed about the individual child's case before the appointment or group session, placing equal value on the parents' time with my own time?
- Do I treat each parent I come in contact with as an adult who can understand a subject of vital concern?
- Do I speak plainly, avoiding the jargon of education, medicine, sociology, psychology or social work?
- Do I make a consistent effort to consider the child as part of a family, consulting parents about

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the important people in the child's life and how their attitudes and reactions affect the child?

- Do I distinguish between fact and opinion when I discuss a child's problems and potential with a parent?
- Do I make every effort to steer parents toward solutions and resources, providing both written and oral evaluations and explanations as well as brochures about potential services, other supportive arrangements, and financial aid?
- Do I tell each family about other families in similar situations, recognizing parents as a major source of support and information and, at the same time, respecting their right to confidentiality?
- At the request of parents, am I an active part of their information and referral network, expending time and energy to provide functional contacts to points in the service system and to parent support networks?
- Do I express hope to parents through my attitude and my words, avoiding absolutes like "always" and "never?"
- Do I see as my goal for interactions with parents the mutual understanding of a problem so that we can take action as a team to alleviate the problem?
- Do I actively involve the parents of each child in the establishment of a plan of action or treatment and continually review, evaluate and revise the plan with the parents?
- Do I make appointments at times and in places that are convenient for the family?
- When I make a commitment of action to the family, do I follow through and complete that commitment?
- Do I obtain and share information from other appropriate professionals to insure that services are not duplicated and that families do not expend unnecessary energy searching for providers and services?

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From: Vosler-Hunter, R. W. (1989). *Changing roles, changing relationships: Parent-professional collaboration on behalf of children with emotional disabilities*. Portland, OR: Portland State University, Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children's Mental Health.

## Goals and Strategies for Developing Family-School Partnerships

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Goal	Strategy
• Increase understanding of family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Identify strengths in child and family</li><li>➤ Support parents “where they are at”</li><li>➤ Elicit ideas, information, and perspectives using open-ended questions</li><li>➤ Paraphrase and validate messages from parents to check for understanding</li></ul>
• Establish home-school partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Establish relative goals for families based on current needs</li><li>➤ Provide rationales and expectations for families and schools to work together (i.e., “make process overt”)</li><li>➤ Emphasize a team concept with words such as “we,” “us,” and “together”</li><li>➤ Highlight similarities across settings</li></ul>

- Promote shared ownership for problem solution
  - Engage in shared eye contact
  - Verbally encourage and reinforce future independent conjoint problem solving among parents and teachers
  - Draw distinct similarities across settings
  - Structure interventions that require cooperation and communication, such as home-school notes
  
- Promote greater conceptualization of problems and increase perspective taking
  - Increase responsibility for successful outcomes by including all participants, including the child when appropriate
  - Describe rationale and expectations for joint home-school problem solving efforts
  - Use nonverbal listening skills that convey understanding and acceptance of various perspectives

- Strengthen relationships among participants
  - Verbally acknowledge different perspectives with statements such as “I see your point” or “I hadn’t thought of it that way before.”
  - Reframe problems into opportunities for skill development
  - Emphasize positive efforts of all parties
  - Reframe negative comments into areas of care and concern
  - Point out unique strengths of parents and teachers
  - Use physical arrangement of meeting room to encourage eye contact and dialogue between parents and teachers (e.g., remove physical barriers such as large tables, encourage parents and teachers to sit next to each other)
  - Use gestures to communicate joining of home and school parties (e.g., arm and hand movements that suggesting coming together)
  
- Recognize the need to address concerns and opportunities across, rather than within settings
  - Point out the importance of out-of-school opportunities for a student to experience success
  - Comment on the benefits of congruence and continuity of experiences for students, families, and educators

- Increase parent and teacher commitments to educational goals
  - Ask for help
  - Develop plans that are consistent across settings, and that support achievement in and out of school
  
- Increase the diversity of expertise and resources available
  - Involve students when possible
  - Invite family members beyond parents to be involved
  - Allow parents to bring additional support persons to meetings
  - Ask parents for ideas for interventions and incorporate them into plans

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Source: Adapted from Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York: Guilford Press.

## “Nuts and Bolts” of Communication with Families

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### **Attitudes:**

- **Express confidence:**
  - Consistent with solution-oriented approaches to consultation and conferencing
  - Provide an optimistic message to parents so they can be encouraging of their children
  - Provide an atmosphere of respect for children and parents
  
- **Request parental assistance:**
  - Consistent with two-way communication
  - Understand that children develop in multiple contexts (ecological orientation)
  - Create an opportunity for dialogue and empowering parents
  - Reflects that professionals can't solve many concerns alone
  
- **Encourage a role for parents:**
  - Underscores the importance of working together as well as input from both systems
  - Emphasis is on giving a coordinated message to the child and an awareness by the child that parent and service provider are communicating (i.e., sharing information and resources to solve the concern)
  
- **Engage in perspective taking:** Listen for parents' needs. Use this golden rule as a guideline: *treat parents as you would like to be treated*. For example:
  - If I had a child in this situation, what specific information would I want to hear from the service provider?
  - How and when would I want to be approached about a problem?
  - How would I want to be spoken to? Listened to?
  - Would I like to hear from the teacher when my child is doing well or only when there is a problem?

### **Behaviors:**

- **Be clear about expectations.**
  
- **Ensure that expectations reach all parents.**
  
- **Listen for roadblocks and react with sensitivity and understanding.**



- **Use statements that express concern for the child and state the problem.** These are more positive and inviting than the ones that do not. Which of these would you rather hear if you were a parent? Mrs. Smith I'm calling because:
  - I'm not at all pleased with Ted's progress.
  - Linda's behavior in class is getting worse and worse.

OR

  - I'm concerned about how little work Jess is doing.
  - I'm concerned about how Brian gets along with the other children.
  
- **Develop positive communication with parents.**
  - Positive phone calls: Describe child's positive behavior. Describe how you feel about the behavior. Ask the parent to share the content of the conversation with the child.
  - Send a before school greeting or introductory letter.
  - Open verbal communication with parents of potential problem children.
  - Communicate at the first sign of a problem (phone call) and set up a parent problem-solving conference.
  - Schedule positive communication times (i.e., specific times to call parents with positive news or information).
  - Other strategies: notes; student-written "school-to-home" journal; send student work home in a "Special Delivery to Parents" envelope; weekly classroom newsletters.
  - End the year on a positive note. Send end of year note to children; make open house a parent thank you event. Have children plan and feature what they have learned and their goals for the coming year. Call parents with whom you have worked to solve problems.

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Source: Christenson (1999); Christenson & Sheridan (2001)

### Guidelines and Practices for Effective Communication with Families

Guideline	Possible Practices
Strive for a positive orientation rather than a deficit-based or crisis orientation.	<p><i>Good news phone calls.</i></p> <p><i>Invite and incorporate parent reactions to policies and practices.</i></p> <p><i>Contact parents at the first sign of a concern.</i></p> <p><i>Communicate an “optimistic” message about the child.</i></p>
Consider tone as well as content of your communications.	<p><i>Reframe language from problems to goals for child.</i></p> <p><i>Focus on a parent’s ability to help.</i></p>
Develop and publicize regular, reliable, varied two-way communication systems.	<p><i>System-wide family-school communication/assignment notebooks.</i></p> <p><i>Shared parent-educator responsibility for contacts.</i></p> <p><i>Handbooks.</i></p> <p><i>Newsletters.</i></p> <p><i>“Thursday folders” including relevant home and school information.</i></p> <p><i>Telephone tree.</i></p> <p><i>Electronic communication technology.</i></p>
Use effective conflict management strategies.	<p><i>Discuss and focus on mutual goals and interests.</i></p> <p><i>Use words such as “we,” “us,” and “our,” vs. “you,” “I,” “yours,” and “mine.”</i></p>

Keep the focus of communication on the child's performance.

*Bi-directional communications regarding classroom activities, progress, suggested activities for parents*

*Home-school notebooks/notes.*

*Family-school meetings with children present.*

*Shared parent-educator monitoring system (e.g., educational file, contract).*

Ensure that parents have needed information to support childrens' educational progress.

*Several orientation nights with follow-up contact for nonattendees.*

*Parent support groups to disseminate information on school performance.*

*Home visits.*

*Home-school contracts with follow-up.*

*Curriculum nights.*

*Monthly meetings on topics of mutual interest.*

Create formal and informal opportunities to communicate and build trust between home and school.

*Multicultural potlucks.*

*Grade-level bagel breakfasts.*

*Family fun nights.*

*Committees designed to address home-school issues.*

*Workshops where parents and school personnel learn together.*

*Principal's hour.*

Underscore all communication with a shared responsibility between families and schools.

*Communicate the essential nature of family involvement.*

*Share information about the curriculum of the home.*

*Discuss co-roles (e.g., co-communicators) and implement shared practices (e.g., contracts, common language about conditions for children's success).*

*Back to School Night.*

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Source: Christenson & Hirsch (1998); Christenson & Sheridan (2001)

## **Actions for Establishing Family-School Partnerships**

### **Garner Administrative Support**

- Working with administrators is key
- Establish policies for partnerships
- Include policies for:
  - Participation of parents who lack literacy skills or do not speak English
  - Regular information for parents about their child's progress
  - Professional development for teachers and staff to enhance their effectiveness with parents
  - Opportunities for parents to assist in the instructional process at school and home
  - Recognition and appreciation for diverse family structures, circumstances, and responsibilities, and how they may impact roles

### **Practice Systems Advocacy**

- Commit to the “long haul”
- Promote programs based on principles, rather than procedures
- Focus on process-related actions versus targeted activities
- Build a knowledge base and skills in the school and community to support changes
- Promote, do not “sell,” changes
- Be strategic in actions; “work smarter, not harder”
- Six words: Think big, start small, go slow

### **Build Family-School Teams**

- Promote schoolwide efforts

### Increase **Effective Problem Solving** and **Solution Finding**

- Structured, joint problem solving facilitates clear communication, shared goals, congruent practices
- Conjoint behavioral consultation (CBC) is one vehicle by which to foster constructive, goal directed, solution-oriented home-school partnerships

### Keep a **Focus on Goals and Outcomes**

- Promote child learning and development across academic, social-emotional, and behavioral domains
- Obtain comprehensive and functional data across settings
- Establish consistent treatment programs
- Improve skills of all parties
- Monitor behavioral contrast effects
- Enhance generalization and maintenance
- Promote shared problem solving in future situations

### But Recognize the **Importance of Process**

- Increase understandings
- Establish partnerships
- Promote shared ownership
- Promote greater conceptualizations
- Strengthen relationships
- Recognize cross-setting needs and opportunities
- Increase shared commitments
- Increase diversity of expertise and resources

### **Foster Positive Home Learning Environments**

- Facilitate family members' efforts to establish a "curriculum of the home"
  - Standards and Expectations, Structure, Opportunity to Learn, Support for Learning, Climate/Relationships, Modeling
- Develop constructive approaches for teachers and family members to interact, and share in the responsibility for meaningful activities and interactions

**Focus on Communication** as the foundation for all family involvement; effective communication is needed to:

- Share information about children's progress, needs, interests
- Establish shared goals for education
- Inform parents of what is expected in terms of student behavior & achievement
- Inform teachers of what parents expect relative to curriculum & discipline
- Inform parents of classroom activities and events
- Avoid misunderstandings
- Help parents understand how to reinforce school instruction at home

### **Collaboration with families is key!**

From: Sheridan, S. M. (2004, September). "Family-school partnerships: Creating essential connections for student success." Keynote presented at the annual conference of the Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand.

### **Building Trust in Partnerships or How to Achieve “Engaged Partnerships”**

- Always consider parents/families as a resource and help them to recognize themselves as resources. Provide the context for them to feel “empowered.”
  - Help parents see that they have power, dignity, and authority in rearing their children.
  - “Empowering” parents is intentional and ongoing; it involves mutual respect, critical reflection, and caring so that parents gain great access to and control over resources.
- Negotiate roles and responsibilities.
  - Include parents in decision making for their child.
  - Explain to parents the importance of families on learning, right away and often.
  - Expect parents to be involved.
  - Clarify how they can help provide options.
  - Encourage parents to be assertive.
  - Develop a “parent-school agreement.”
- Reduce barriers.
  - Have contact with parents early in the school year.
  - Establish ongoing communication systems; include “good news” phone calls.
  - Use two communication formats that are both school → home and home → school.
  - Bridge the language gap – strive to have the best communication between school and home with all parents, including those who speak a language other than English.
- Create a spirit of cooperation.
  - Explore what they want school to accomplish.
  - Devise opportunities for involvement that they see as practical and meaningful.
  - Reach out to parents with warmth and sensitivity.
  - Acknowledge that sharing power with parents is not abdicating your role; rather, it provides an opportunity to understand interests and goals of parents and learn how to achieve them.



- Engage in perspective-taking.
  - Identify why parents might not be involved:
    - Diverse school experiences of families.
    - Economic and time constraints.
    - Diverse linguistic and cultural practices.
    - Different values.
  - “Resistance” is always a form of communication. Parents may be as “resistant,” or they may simply hold different perspectives. Lack of communication about what is important to each party leads to notions of some parents being “resistant” or “hard to reach.”
  
- Make the school – your classroom – welcoming and family friendly.
  - Consider physical appearance that is inviting, open to all.
  - Consider affective climate that fosters warmth, sensitivity, and trust.
  
- Other Strategies
  - Use multiple efforts – no one way will work for all families.
  - Make events fun!
  - Plan for logistical barriers and build on flexibility.
  - Invite parents to help determine the best way for them to be involved.
  - Meet parents on their turf.
  - Identify a parent who can help spread good messages.
  - Make sure roles are meaningful.
  - Identify why parents might not be involved and try to take their perspective.

## ***Evidence-Based Family-School Interventions with Family-School Partnership Communication Strategies***

### ***What we know...***

**Model:** Communication Strategies – The 4 A’s

**Goal:**

- To create conditions for family-school partnerships (actions) to be established:
  - An *approach* that conveys a belief in shared responsibility between families and schools.
  - Positive and constructive *attitudes* regarding family involvement
  - A family-friendly, inviting *atmosphere*.
- To build effective family-school relationships characterized by trust and partnership

### **Strategies to Facilitate Effective Communication and Family-School Partnerships:**

- Schedule meetings at times that are convenient for families.
- Send positive messages twice as often as negative ones.
- Provide regular information to parents about their child’s progress (e.g., “good news” phone calls; home-school notes; e-mails, weekly folders, newsletters).
- Use words that convey a partnership (e.g., “we, us, and our” versus “you, I, yours, and mine”).
- Share information about how families can help their child at home.
- Prevent communication conflicts by using clear statements and problem-solving strategies.
- Use statements that express concern for the child, not frustration, irritation, or problems that cannot be solved.
- Stay focused on the child’s goals and how you can achieve them together.
- Ask parents for ideas, information, and perspectives using open-ended questions (e.g., “How?” “When?” “Describe”).
- Check parent’s understanding (e.g., “I hear you saying...”; “You are concerned about...”).

**Results:**

- Family-school partnerships have positive benefits for children’s educational engagement, work habits, task orientation, social skills, and academic achievement.
- The effects of family-school partnerships can be lasting; continuous and consistent family-school partnerships are more likely to complete high school.
- Schools with formal family-school partnership approaches report higher academic achievement.
- Effective family-school partnerships have been linked to several short-term outcomes including changes in family environment, parent-child relationships, parenting skills, and family involvement in learning at home and school.
- Long-term outcomes for children include improved academic outcomes and social-emotional competence.
- Benefits of effective home-school communication include increased trust between parents and teachers, as well as increased parent commitment to helping their children with academics.

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***What we don’t know...***

- Effective approaches for increasing access to partnership practices for disenfranchised families
- The best method for training and encouraging teachers to adopt this framework