



NeMTSS
FRAMEWORK



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Fostering Family–School Connections

Roshawn Hollie and Amanda L. Witte, Ph.D.

Adapted from “Parent and Family Involvement,” by J. Strawhun, A. Olson, L. Kane, & R. L. Peterson, 2014, *The Student Engagement Project* (<https://k12engagement.unl.edu/>)



**NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS**

Fostering Family–School Connections: An NeMTSS Research Brief

Key Points:

- Teacher-family collaboration, relationship building, and supporting student behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health can be promoted by imbedding family-school connections into a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) tiered framework.
- Consistent two-way communication is an important component for strong family-school connections to allow for family input related to student learning and rapport building.
- Common barriers to family-school connections are related to modality and perceptions of opportunities for engagement, poor communication, relationships between educators and families, scheduling, and limited community support.

Introduction

The most accurate predictor of student achievement in school is family-school connections (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2022). Family-school connections embrace an expansive view of ways for families to get involved (Baker, et al., 2016). These connections also see caregivers or other critical adults as equal partners in the success of students (Baker et al., 2016). Effective two-way communication and tiered frameworks that prioritize structure and relationships between families and educators can break down barriers to family-school connections.

How to Facilitate Family-School Connections

A model of family-school connections enveloped within a partnership framework can be used to integrate structural and relational elements into a school's family engagement program, initiative, or intervention (Kim & Sheridan, 2015). Encompassing structural and relational aspects of family-school connections with an integrated partnership allows for intentionality between teachers and families. This collaboration may establish mutual goals between families and teachers that reflect cultural sensitivity, are developmentally appropriate, and can be accountable at school and home. Specifically, family-school connections can be imbedded into the PBIS tiered framework to support student's behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health (Weist et al., 2017). Foundational elements of including families in PBIS include the following (Weist et al., 2017):

- **Building positive relationships.** Recognize families' needs and cultural differences to greater understanding and respect among all involved. Schools should make proactive efforts to build and maintain positive, trusting relationships with families.
- **Engaging in two-way communication.** Multiple avenues should be used to design systems to support on-going, two-way communication with families that communicate student data and input from educators and families. Offering calls, emails, different

meeting times, or sending notes home consistently gives families an opportunity to communicate their needs, preferences, and feedback.

- **Ensuring equitable family representation.** Schools should actively seek input and feedback from a variety of families in proportion to student enrollment demographics to support information sharing and access to resources. Educators should encourage and support all families' knowledge, skills, and efficacy to ensure families have equitable access to appropriate and accessible student learning supports.
- **Making meaningful data-driven decisions.** Provide a broad range of opportunities for families to learn about and provide input on school practices and participate in Tier 2 and Tier 3 decision making processes that support their students.

PBIS support and family-school connections can be fostered differently across tiers. Families can also be included in the PBIS tiered framework through two-way communication in the following ways (Center on PBIS, 2025):

- At the Tier 1 level, teachers and families should co-create expectations and approaches to supporting student behavior throughout the year. Check-ins between teachers and families should occur to share positive experiences and concerns regarding classroom behavior management.
- At the Tier 2 level, communication should include information about targeted supports students receive, the purpose of those targeted supports, and how families play a role in those supports (e.g., clarifying how and when progress data is shared).
- At the Tier 3 level, frequent communication should be focused on the individual student's plan (i.e., purpose, approach, and family roles in the plan).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) suggest foundational action steps to establish effective family-school connections:

1. Recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children's education and want their children to do well in school.
2. Link family and community engagement efforts to student learning.
3. Create initiatives that will support families to guide their children's learning, from preschool through high school.
4. Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families.
5. Focus efforts to engage families in developing trusting and respectful relationships.
6. Embrace a philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families. Make sure that caregivers and school staff understand that the responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise (Mapp, 2004).

McWayne et al. (2019) emphasize that educators should approach family-school connections with humility. Implementing any program or initiative that prioritizes family engagement should be grounded in theories or practices that respect families and their

communications. When educators approach families humbly, speak *with* instead of *at* them, listen, and invite them in shared activities and conversations to share ideas and provide expertise about their children, family, and community, strong family-school connections can be cultivated to provide the most benefits to children (McWayne et al., 2019).

Barriers of Family-School Connections

Engagement happens through communication. This occurs when teachers share information with families, when families talk with their children about school, and when families and schools exchange knowledge and create shared goals that support their children. Engagement is more than families having a physical presence in schools. Emphasizing various modalities of engagement (e.g. communicating with schools, assisting with homework, expanding learning opportunities at home, or participating in decision-making at school) and continued collaboration can further strengthen family-school connections (Baker et al., 2016). Studies have found that families and educators typically agree on barriers to promoting family-school connections (Baker et al., 2016). Family-school connections have traditionally been understood as time for a parent or family member of a student to volunteer and be physically present in the school's activities. This can be difficult for families with multiple children, caregivers who work multiple jobs, or a work a night shift job. It is important for educators and families to remember that engagement can take place far beyond school. Research identified the following themes for barriers to parent and family engagement (Baker et al., 2016; Wilt & Morningstar, 2018):

- **Modality and perceptions of opportunities for engagement.** Families may feel pressured to be physically present in their child's school building. Engagement can occur outside of the classroom.
- **Poor communication.** Communication may include untimely notifications of school activities, use of unclear language, and inconsistent communication via email or phone call.
- **Access to information.** Families may not be given information regarding legal processes for children with disabilities and information about services provided in schools.
- **Sense of belonging.** Families may feel unwelcome in the school building or classroom.
- **Time.** Meetings, conferences, or other school events may conflict with family schedules.
- **Staff perceptions.** Educators may feel that some parents do not want to be involved in their child's education and reach out to families less. Negative attitudes from educators towards families with differences in culture and language can also create barriers to family-school connections.
- **Negative school experiences.** Past negative experiences may deter parents from wanting to further their school/family relationships.

- **Limited community support.** Lack of culturally responsive practices for multi-cultural families may hinder family perceptions of their children's school.

There may be additional barriers for families related to financial hardship, transportation, and the need for additional support (Baker et al., 2016).

Solutions to Barriers

Responses collected from a focus group of families and educators identified the following solutions to barriers of family-school connections (Baker et al., 2016):

- **Provide opportunities for involvement.** Providing childcare, having weekend activities, and collaborating with other grade level schools to host events at different times may allow families opportunities to participate in school activities.
- **Improve communication.** Communicate with families in a timely manner, frequently, and consistently. Using multiple modalities such as online parent portals, phone, text, or email to increase communication. Offering and providing language services may aid communication with diverse families.
- **Welcome families into the building.** Invite caregivers into the classroom to observe everyday functions of the classroom when appropriate.
- **Making time.** Offer alternative days, start times, and food for families to remedy time constraints.
- **Prioritize engagement.** Prioritize additional ways families can be engaged in their child's schooling outside of school by providing activities to do at home, offer instructions for caregivers to help children with more advanced subjects, encourage families to use community resources such as the YMCA or library, and offering behavioral charts to implement at home when appropriate.
- **Overcoming negative school experiences.** Educators should recognize families may be disengaged because of previous experiences.
- **Breaking down barriers to access.** Some families may have transportation issues, financial hardship, or need other support in their homes.

Conclusion

Family-school connections are a key predictor of student success. When schools prioritize all components of family-school connections (e.g., two-way communication, relationship building, cultural responsiveness, and shared decision-making) they create space for all families to be engaged and support student behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health. Barriers can be addressed through intentional efforts and inclusive strategies by schools. For more information on family-school connections, child outcomes, and interventions, see related strategy briefs on family-school connections.

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Updated Authorship Information:

Roshawn Hollie, M.A.

School Psychology Doctoral Student

Graduate Research Assistant

Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

rhollie2@unl.edu

Amanda Witte, Ph.D.

Research Associate Professor

Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

awitte2@unl.edu