



**NeMTSS**  
FRAMEWORK



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# Family-School Connections— Definitions and Descriptors

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

# Family-School Connections—Definitions and Descriptors: An NeMTSS Research Brief

## Key Points:

- We use *family-school connections* as a general term that encompasses all types of interactions and relationships between schools and the community members they serve, including students' parents/guardians, siblings, extended family, friends, and advocates.
- Family-school connections include the following terms: family-school partnerships, family engagement, parent involvement, and home-school connections.
- Relationship building, collaborating, and shared responsibility are positive components of family-school connections that enhance student achievement.

## Introduction

The most accurate predictor of a student's achievement is family engagement (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2022). Family engagement involves collaboration between families and educators to enhance opportunities and promote students' academic success and social, emotional, and behavioral functioning (Sheridan & Brower, 2023; Sheridan et al., 2014). Strong engagement can foster positive familial attitudes that promote learning at home (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). These attitudes help create a home environment that encourages learning and communicates high, yet reasonable, expectations for their student's education at home, at school, and in the community, which can support their child's academic success (Schargel & Smink, 2001).

## What are Family-School Connections?

The concept of parent engagement in schools has expanded from a focus of parental presence in schools to a broader understanding grounded in ecological and sociocultural theories that emphasize home-based learning and parent-child relationships (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Educational research has expanded to include culturally responsive and partnership-based models that value diverse family practices and redefine caregivers and family members as co-educators (Epstein, 2001). We use the term *family-school connections* to encompass related but different terms that frame family engagement as a dynamic, equitable, and collaborative process that promotes student success. Various terminology has been used to describe different interactions between schools and families (e.g., family-school partnerships, parent/family engagement, parent/family involvement, and home-school partnerships).

## Definitions

*Family-school partnerships* are “bidirectional, emphasizing the relationships between those who are primarily responsible for student development—adult family members (e.g., parents, guardians, primary caregivers) and teachers” (Witte et al., 2021). Family-school partnerships emphasize collaborative relationships with mutually determined goals shared

between families and schools that impact student learning (Witte et al., 2021; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008). Further, *home–school partnerships* focus on “improving experiences and outcomes for students, including those that are academic, social, emotional, and behavioral in nature” (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008). Home–school partnerships are collaborative, interdependent, and emphasize shared responsibilities between families and teachers to educate and socialize students in their physical learning environments at home, school, and community (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008; Head Start, 2024).

Family engagement is a bi-directional relationship that highlights the intentional involvement of caregivers, families, and schools to promote both family well-being and children’s healthy development (Iruka et al., 2022). The relationship between educators and families encourages family involvement in a child’s learning at home and in school. Within this relationship, teachers play a key role in intentionally and consistently inviting and encouraging families to become meaningfully involved (Iruka et al., 2014). Epstein et al. (2018) provide a framework describing six types of involvement that improve school climate and increase student success: **Parenting, Communication, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision-Making, and Collaborating with the Community**.

- **Parenting** involvement occurs when schools work to increase families’ understanding of child and adolescent development, allowing the home environment to support children as students.
- **Communicating** involvement occurs when educators, students, and families design effective forms of two-way connections about school programs and students’ progress. Educators, students, and families
- **Volunteering** occurs when the talents and time of families are recruited to help and support the school, teachers, and student activities.
- **Learning at Home** involvement occurs when families are provided with information and ideas about their students’ academic work, how to help at home with homework, and other curriculum-related activities and decisions.
- **Decision-Making** occurs when families are included to participate in decisions about school policies, programs, and practices that impact their own and other children.
- **Collaborating with the Community** involves two-way connections between community groups, organizations, agencies, and individuals with schools and families to assist and enrich both the school and local community.

### Family-School Connections

According to Goodall and Montgomery (2014), parent involvement exists on a continuum from low connections (less involvement) to high connections (greater involvement). Lesser connections occur when families and schools work in isolation. In these cases, teachers are fully responsible for students’ education, families’ roles are limited to the home setting, communication between schools and families is minimal or absent, and cultural backgrounds and strengths are ignored or seen as challenges (Sheridan, 2014). When families are more connected with schools, they may attend school events (e.g., conferences or special events), educators may invite families to help with classroom activities and have some communication to

discuss academic or behavioral concerns of students. When high connections occur, consistent bidirectional and responsive interactions between home and school emphasize shared responsibility, proactively building relationships with each other, and responsively and collaboratively problem solving to address student needs (Sheridan, 2014). When families are engaged in their child's learning, learning opportunities for students increase (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Kim and Sheridan (2015) view family-school connections as having two core features: (1) families and educators are mutually engaged in the educational process, and (2) efforts are aimed at supporting students' learning and positive development. When engaged in the educational and learning process, families may become engaged by attending school activities like parent-teacher conferences, working on homework with students, and initiating conversations with students about school. These shared activities between families and their students allow for opportunities in the home to share and express beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Shared relationships between teachers and parents are also considered engagement. Teachers can enhance their students' educational experience by sending their students' families invitations to visit the classroom, talking with parents in-person, sending messages electronically or through notes, and encouraging family participation in school activities like parent-teacher conferences. Teacher attitudes can aid in the development of teacher-parent relationships and fidelity of parental involvement activities by fostering trust and collaboration with families in a supportive climate (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Parent and family involvement may include the following common characteristics (Blondal & Adalbjarnardotr, 2009; Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; IES, 2021):

- **Relationship Building:** Educators should make families feel welcomed, ask for their input and expertise, and respect diverse family structures, cultures, and values.
- **Collaboration:** On-going collaboration between families and educators promotes academic and social development of students in joint problem-solving, goal development, and accountability of expectations. True collaboration involves two-way communication with opportunities to solicit feedback and provide clarity for families to understand the school community.
- **Community Collaborating:** Collaborating with businesses and community agency partners helps give families information about additional support and services, recreational programs, and educational opportunities. Family-to-family relationships can also be fostered by providing more opportunities for families to interact and build a wider community.
- **Collaborative Decision-Making:** Schools should encourage family participation in decision-making processes on district-level committees and parent-teacher organizations.
- **Parenting:** Parenting elements may include encouraging families to learn about and engage in learning opportunities at home by developing a parent resource library or holding parent workshops. Parents may support and supervise homework and develop educational goals for their students.
- **School-based Activities:** Family engagement may occur in school clubs, events, and volunteering by inviting parents to assist in classrooms, organizing a school activity, or participating in field trips.

- **Shared Responsibility:** Families and schools have mutual goals for student success, collaborate, and include each other in supporting family and teacher expectations academically, and behaviorally at home and school.

## Conclusion

Positive relationships and collaboration between educators and families are key components for strong family-school connections. Family-school connections are essential for academic achievement. Family-school connections take place at home and school. For more information on fostering family-school connections, child outcomes, and interventions, see related strategy briefs.

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