



**Family and Caregiver Engagement
Research Brief
DISES Professional Learning Gallery Module**

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Family members are a child's first teachers. Family members may have raised a child with disabilities for several years before the individual enters school. In the event family members are unable to fully look after a child with disabilities, caregivers may be appointed, hired or volunteer to assist in the upbringing of the child. Families and caregivers are exceptionally important partners with school personnel to educate and realize the potential of the child.

Effective family engagement requires the adults in the home and school to form an alliance for the best interest of the child. The concept can be challenging to achieve and yet easy to recognize in action. The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) defines the term in this way:

Family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and in which families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development.

Family engagement is continuous across a child's life and entails enduring commitment but changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood.

Effective family engagement cuts across and reinforces learning in the multiple settings where children learn- at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in the community (2010, para. 2).

On the school personnel's part, engaging the family means sending messages about the child's progress and inviting families to attend special events at school. On the family's part, parent engagement means helping the child with homework, attending events to show support, and asking questions to better understand how to help the child at home.

Extensive research over the last 50 years has shown that family engagement is a powerful influence on a child's academic success (Kim, 2022). Park and Holloway (2017) and Jeynes (2005) found that when family members are involved in the child's education, the student's achievement increases. Smith et al. (2019) learned school attendance and behavior improved when families were engaged with school personnel. Smith et al. (2020) demonstrated that when families are engaged, the child's social and emotional skills can grow. Ross (2016) showed students whose families are engaged in their schooling are more likely to graduate from high school.

This level of success does not happen overnight. Building a trusting relationship with families and caregivers takes extensive planning, dedicated time, and intentional effort to

develop and sustain. Educators must take the time to get to know the child and their family or caregiver in terms of culture, language, experience with school settings, challenges, and home life. Showing respect to the family is integral for creating a school and home partnership. Family members and caregivers are more likely to become and remain involved in the child's education if they feel their input is valued and the opportunities for engagement are meaningful.

If the child experiences difficulties at home or school, effective communication between families and school personnel can help rectify the situation more quickly. When the child experiences a measure of academic or behavioral success, the family and school partnership can help celebrate and encourage the student. When the lines of communication are open between home and school, the continuity of care is seamless, united, and proactive. If the student with disabilities is able to witness a beneficial home and school partnership, the message centers and demonstrates the child's needs and importance.

Definition of Terms

Caregiver - A *caregiver* “is a person who tends to the needs or concerns of a person with short- or long-term limitations due to illness, injury or disability” (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2025, para 2). Caregivers may look after individuals with disabilities in tandem with family members or in place of family members.

Comprehensible Input - “Comprehensible input is language input that can be understood by listeners despite them not understanding all the words and structures in it” (British Council, n.d., para 1).

Family - In this research brief we define *family* as a “group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption” (Barnard, 2025, para 1), who reside within a single household. Families may include spouses, parents, and children.

Family Engagement - *Family Engagement* “is a practice in which families and school personnel collaborate to support and improve the learning and development of children. Sometimes, this practice is referred to as *parent engagement*, *parent involvement*, or *family-school partnership*” (The Iris Center, 2025, para 1). Also referred to as Home and School Partnership.

Barriers and Challenges Impacting Family and Caregiver Engagement

Barriers and challenges may manifest that prevent effective family and caregiver engagement, though most are not insurmountable. Not all families and caregivers have access to attend school events or funds for additional resources, specialized programs, and services for the child. Caring for a child with disabilities can be physically, emotionally, and financially challenging. School personnel should do whatever is possible within their means to help secure necessary resources and support for families.

Communication can be difficult if the school personnel and family do not speak the same language. It is advised to secure adult interpreters for meetings and translated documents for distribution, if possible. It is important that school personnel communicate with family members using jargon-free language and provide comprehensible input.

School personnel may be more knowledgeable about the students' rights as dictated by the country or local jurisdiction and how to advocate for those rights. School personnel should do their best to relay those rights to help families and caregivers comprehend what is entitled to

their students. Sharing printed versions of the rights and applicable laws in the family's home language would be helpful. The rights may also need further repeated explanation due to the complexity and lengthiness.

Not all family members and caregivers have had the best school experiences in their childhoods. In this case, it is important to help dispel any misconceptions and myths about school, and special education, for that matter. This can be achieved through opportunities to share their stories and experiences in their schooling without invalidating their lived experiences.

Raising a child with special needs can be physically, cognitively, emotionally, and financially exhausting. It is important for school personnel to respect the extraordinary responsibility it is for family members and caregivers to support the child at home, often for that child's lifetime.

Promising Practices Related to Family and Caregiver Engagement

An abundance of evidence shows families and caregivers deserve to be and can be effective partners in home and school engagement (Mapp, 2022; Ross, 2023). In this section, we provide information about creating needs assessments and planning family engagement activities.

Needs Assessments

There are several ways to engage families and caregivers in an effort to build a strong home and school partnership. The first step is to complete a needs assessment. A needs assessment is a "... a process that can help educators at all levels successfully identify, understand, and better address education challenges" (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018, p 1). Needs assessments can be used for the individual student, the school, and the community. For the purposes of this module, we have focused on the person-family-centered needs assessment (Achola & Greene, 2016) and the parent aspirational meeting (Matute-Charvarria, 2021).

Person-Family-Centered Needs Assessment

The person-family-centered needs assessment is used to approach devising an individualized learning plan by first focusing on the collective perspectives of the student and family members. Person-family-centered (Achola & Greene, 2016) needs assessments systematically identify the gaps that exist between the student's current academic and functional levels and the desired goals for the future. A needs assessment about a student includes getting to know the child and the family first. Collecting informal and formal data about the student's life is a crucial step that can lead to better educational outcomes. Students are multidimensional and the data we collect should be as well. Some suggested domains of data collection are health, academic, social, emotional, communication, physical, functional, home or environment, and family (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). The areas of career and spirituality needs may also be added depending on the age of the student and their culture. It is especially inclusive and considerate to include the student's voice or perspective when possible. The data collected about the student should focus on needs, deficits, and strengths. Scheduling a parent aspirational meeting (Matute-Charvarria, 2021) to become more aware of the aspirations parents have for their child so that the school can create partnerships to meet these goals can be helpful as well. Matute-Chavarria recommends the following steps: (1) ensuring relevant, consistent, and frequent communication that acknowledges cultural differences and empower families to build relationships, (2) providing invitations to the meeting with an agenda and explicit topics of conversations, (3) facilitating critical dialogue about values, goals, aspirations, and challenges (she provides example guiding questions), (4) developing a visionary

plan with an explicit timeline and steps to complete and/or check on at the next meeting, and (5) implementing the visionary plan. See additional resources for needs assessments below.

Plan an Activity

Inviting families and caregivers to events in school or the community is exceptionally important. Some parents might feel reluctant to visit school (Comuntzis-Page, 1996). It behooves teachers to do whatever they can to make parents feel valued, welcome, and comfortable at the school for meetings and events.

Followup

After an activity for families and caregivers, teachers should also plan to followup with the participants. Gathering information on the experience from the family members' and caregivers' perspective helps assess the effectiveness or impact of the activity and to plan future events.

Additional Resources for Needs Assessments

- <https://praedfoundation.org/tcom/tcom-tools/the-child-and-adolescent-needs-and-strengths-cans/>
- https://www.cdss.ca.gov/Portals/9/ISU/CANS/CA_CANS_IP%20Rating%20Sheet_1.0_CW_ENGLISH.pdf
- https://www.health.ny.gov/health_care/medicaid/program/medicaid_health_homes/hh_children/docs/cansny_ref_guide_0-5.pdf
- <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/foster-care/cans/the-cans-tool/cans-resources>
- https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2020/10/needsassessmentguidebook-508_003.pdf

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