

Spotlight

Strengthening parent engagement to improve student outcomes

June 2024



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The key messages in this Spotlight reveal that:

- ⚡ Teachers and school or centre leaders who build effective and collaborative partnerships with parents can significantly shape the education and wellbeing outcomes of their learners.
- ⚡ Schools and other education and care settings can support teachers in their engagement with parents by implementing procedures and guidelines for collaborating and communicating effectively with parents.
- ⚡ Teachers and school leaders can assist parents with developing actions and attitudes that progressively become more centred on their children's learning. In-school activities may represent the first steps towards getting parents engaged with learning.
- ⚡ Consistent and genuine communication with parents, particularly small moments of connection, can help to build mutually beneficial partnerships between parents and teachers.

- ⚡ The challenge for schools and children’s education and care settings is to improve parental engagement by prioritising ongoing, contextualised support interventions and programs that address the distinct needs of their diverse parental community.

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The term ‘parent’ is used throughout this Spotlight to refer to any family member, caregiver or guardian who acts as a parent to a child, acknowledging the diverse family structures and caregiving arrangements that exist. The terms ‘parent’, ‘parental’ and ‘family’ are used interchangeably.

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Introduction

An important part of the teacher and school leader role is engaging with parents. In turn, parents play a key role in the education of their children (Figure 1). Decades of research has shown that when parents engage in their child’s learning, both at home and at school, student achievement and wellbeing are increased (Hattie, 2023; Kim, 2022; Sengonul, 2022; T. E. Smith et al., 2020). Schools that prioritise parental engagement can form a positive, collaborative culture that values input from both parents and teachers, and ultimately benefits students.

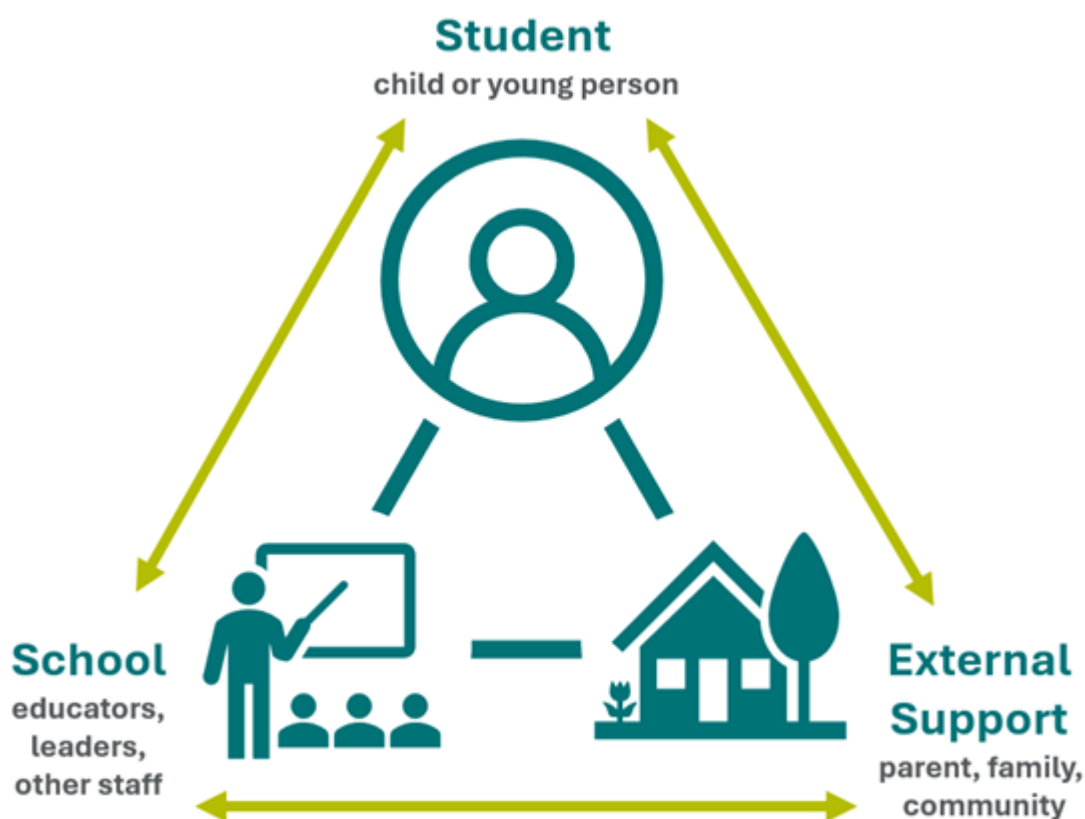
For the most part, it appears that in Australia parents and teachers are relatively content with the level of parent-teacher engagement in schools. A 2023 Queensland-based survey, completed by over 96,000 parents and over 50,000 school staff, found that the vast majority of parents felt supported by the school to help their child with their learning (89%), were able to talk to their child’s teachers about their concerns (93%), and that their opinions were taken seriously (81%) (Department of Education Qld, 2023). Teacher respondents also overwhelmingly believed that parental engagement was supported in their school, with 92% noting that parents were encouraged to be active partners in educating their child (Department of Education Qld, 2023).

Engaging with parents is, however, at times a cause of stress for teachers and leaders. In terms of the time demands, in 2022 most teachers (88%) reported spending 0-4 hours engaging with parents per week, with 9% spending 5-9 hours per week on parental engagement tasks (AITSL, 2023). Senior leaders in schools and early childhood education settings report spending more time engaging with parents, with 59% of leaders reporting that 5 or more hours per week were spent on parental engagement tasks in 2022 (AITSL, 2023). A 2023 nationwide principal survey found that school leaders report “parent-related issues” as a cause of substantial stress, though several other issues were reported as more stressful (Dicke et al., 2023).

This Spotlight summarises research on the impact of different types of engagement, and points to resources to assist teachers and leaders to constructively engage with parents. The Spotlight focuses on school-based engagement as well as how school-based engagement can enable

parents to engage with students' learning at home. Accordingly, "engagement" is discussed in terms of teachers and leaders engaging with parents and building teacher-parent relationships, as well as parental engagement with their child's learning.

Figure 1. The parental engagement triangle (adapted from Barker & Harris, 2020, p. 12) shows the shared responsibility between families and schools in order to best support student education.



When teachers and school leaders engage with parents to provide a positive, collaborative environment, this can help parents engage with their child's learning, and help teachers better understand the needs of their students. Parental engagement in learning means parents undertake an active, meaningful, and sustained sharing of their child's education. Such engagement can provide additional months of academic progress over the course of a year (EFL, 2023; Hattie, 2023). The impact on learning can be even greater for children with low prior achievement (EFL, 2021; Jordan et al., 2000). To maximise the positive impacts of parental engagement, schools need to consider how best to tailor parent-school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning. Maintaining this tailored communication strategy as children get older may also encourage parents to continue engaging with the school.

In addition to academic progress, parental engagement positively affects children's classroom behaviour, school attendance, completion and socioemotional development (ARACY, 2016; Axford et al., 2019; Department for Education SA, 2021; Jennings & Bosch, 2011). Teachers and school leaders support parental engagement through strategies that connect learning with home, and by building partnerships with parents to enhance their educational roles and impact. Effective parental engagement is responsive and adaptable to the family's specific needs and contexts,

and teachers may need to undertake different engagement strategies over time depending on parent response. Whole-school approaches to parental engagement can be highly effective at encouraging involvement, however less intensive strategies, such as sending personalised communications, encouraging shared book reading, and providing parents with resources and support for parent-child conversations about learning, are also beneficial (EFL, 2019).

“Involving parents and families is an important and valuable endeavour in and of itself, because of the ways in which it can help parents and families build a sense of belonging to their school community, which in turn can demonstrate to a student that their family values and supports their education.”

–Barker & Harris, 2020, p15.

The importance of parental engagement is echoed in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (Principal Standard), the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Teacher Standards), and in the Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures for the preparation of Graduate teachers (AITSL, 2011, 2014, 2019). At the forefront of Principal Standard Practice 5 (Engaging and working with the community) is ‘promoting parental and carer engagement as a key aspect of raising the achievement of all students’ (AITSL, 2014). Principals develop and maintain positive partnerships with parents and the wider school community to help build a culture of high expectations and shared involvement. Several Teacher Standards also focus on parental engagement (Figure 2) (AITSL, 2011). Teachers develop skills and strategies for engaging parents in the educational process to continually grow and deepen respectful collaborative relationships for improving education and wellbeing outcomes (AITSL, 2019).

Figure 2. Australian Professional Standards for Teachers applicable to parental engagement. Source: (AITSL, 2011)

3.7 Engage parents/carers in the educative process

Graduate	Proficient	Highly Accomplished	Lead
Describe a broad range of strategies for involving parents/carers in the educative process.	Plan for appropriate and contextually relevant opportunities for parents/carers to be involved in their children's learning.	Work with colleagues to provide appropriate and contextually relevant opportunities for parents/carers to be involved in their children's learning.	Initiate contextually relevant processes to establish programs that involve parents/carers in the education of their children and broader school priorities and activities.

5.5 Report on student achievement

Graduate	Proficient	Highly Accomplished	Lead
Demonstrate understanding of a range of strategies for reporting to students and parents/carers and the purpose of keeping accurate and reliable records of student achievement.	Report clearly, accurately and respectfully to students and parents/carers about student achievement, making use of accurate and reliable records.	Work with colleagues to construct accurate, informative and timely reports to students and parents/carers about student learning and achievement.	Evaluate and revise reporting and accountability mechanisms in the school to meet the needs of students, parents/carers and colleagues.

7.3 Engage with parents/carers

Graduate	Proficient	Highly Accomplished	Lead
Understand strategies for working effectively, sensitively and confidentially with parents/carers.	Establish and maintain respectful collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing.	Demonstrate responsiveness in all communications with parents/carers about their children's learning and wellbeing.	Identify, initiate and build on opportunities that engage parents/carers in both the progress of their children's learning and in the educational priorities of the school.

Parental engagement involves partnerships between schools and parents, recognising shared responsibilities, and can be divided into two core domains (Fox & Olsen, 2014):

- **Family-led learning** focuses on high aspirations for children, shared reading, a positive environment for homework, parent-child conversation, a cognitively stimulating home environment and support for social and emotional wellbeing. This is also referred to as “at-home” engagement in this Spotlight.
- **Family-school partnerships** that encourage positive parent-teacher relationships, communication about children’s progress, and engagement in the school community, while equipping parents to effectively support and encourage their children’s learning and wellbeing. This is also referred to as “school-based” engagement in this Spotlight.

Ideally, strong family-school partnerships will enable family-led learning that includes active, meaningful, and sustained actions and attitudes centred on learning (Goodall, 2017).

There are many ways in which parents can engage with their child's learning both at school and at home. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in partnership with the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government and local schools (across the government, Catholic and independent sectors) developed a conceptual model outlining specific actions and attitudes central to parental engagement (Figure 3). This conceptual model provides the types of parental engagement that are most effective (Barker & Harris, 2020).

Figure 3. Parental engagement conceptual model. Source: (Fox & Olsen, 2014).

	What aspects of family engagement matter most for children's outcomes	Short term outcomes for the child	Longer term outcomes for the child
Family-led learning	High expectations Shared reading Parent/child conversation, especially around learning, social issues, family stories Homework support that provides an appropriate environment, rules that are consistent with school expectations, that encourages autonomous learning and fosters positive parent-child interactions Cognitively stimulating environment Support for social and emotional wellbeing, peer relationships, teacher relationships	Belief in the importance of education Self-efficacy Academic competence/confidence Motivation and engagement in learning Persistence Skills for learning Social and emotional wellbeing	Academic achievement • literacy • numeracy Mental health and wellbeing Mitigating the impacts of disadvantage on educational outcomes
Family-school partnership	Communication about children's wellbeing and progress Communication about what children are learning and specific information about what families can do to help Engagement in the school community and positive attitudes to school		

Parental engagement at school

Research affirms that parental engagement in learning matters across all school levels. Children have different cognitive and socioemotional needs depending on their educational level. Thus, changes in the type of engagement provided by parents are required over time to meet student needs (Garvis et al., 2019). Effective ways for parents to engage with learning typically shift from school-based activities (e.g. classroom volunteering) to mostly at-home activities (such as family discussions about expectations and aspirations) as children mature and gain greater self-regulation and autonomy in their education (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). For some parents, physically attending the school may not be possible, in which case it may be important for teachers to provide alternative communication methods (e.g., online, phone calls, and occasional after-hours events) to help ensure all parents have the opportunity to participate in a version of “school-based” engagement.

School-based engagement builds family-school partnerships by creating opportunities for collaboration, communication and shared decision-making between parents, teachers, and school leaders. School-based engagement can involve communicating with parents about information on educational expectations and student requirements, parents attending assemblies and events or volunteering in classroom activities, and conversations between teachers and parents about students’ progress or challenges. These types of engagement activities may be particularly important when supporting children with learning, behaviour or socialisation difficulties (Castro et al., 2015). Family-school partnerships are integral for parental engagement in learning, and partnerships should ideally be “co-constructed by both parties, not once but many times, on a continuing basis” (Goodall, 2018, p.617). Teachers and parents can be perceived as experts within different spheres of the student’s educational and personal development, and the “interdisciplinary co-work between experts and the level of collaboration is the most promising level with respect to effective student learning support” (Gerdes et al., 2022, p. 820). Both school-based engagement and family-school partnerships have been shown to positively affect students’ educational outcomes, from early childhood to adolescence (X. Ma et al., 2016; Barger et al., 2019; Gerdes et al., 2022).

Resource List 1

Frameworks and guidance on parental engagement for Australian schools

This Spotlight offers a curated selection of resources to assist teachers and school leaders to support continued parental engagement in their schools. This resource list highlights a series of frameworks and guidance on parental engagement in Australian schools, with particular emphasis on practical advice and a range of case studies to support student learning.

Family-School Partnerships Framework

The [Family-School Partnerships Framework](#) contains a series of supporting materials, offers research insights, practical advice and a range of resources including fact sheets and case studies (last updated 2022).

Parent and family engagement: An implementation guide for school communities

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, ARACY has developed [practical guidelines for teachers and school leaders](#) for implementing successful parental engagement practices. The guidelines detail evidence and practical examples for engaging with families from early childhood through to secondary school, and aim to help school leaders consider, plan, measure and evaluate school progress.

Guidance report: Working with parents to support children's learning

Evidence for Learning (EFL) produced a [guidance report with an accompanying poster](#) outlining evidence-informed recommendations designed to support primary and secondary teachers and leaders to engage parents (EFL, 2019). These resources draw on evidence obtained by EFL's United Kingdom partner, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and have been modified where appropriate for the Australian context.

Engaging with families to support student learning

In 2022, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) released a practice guide on family engagement in [early childhood education settings](#), [primary schools](#), and [secondary schools](#). These evidence-supported guides provide recommendations on the ways in which early childhood educators, teachers and school leaders can engage with families to support student learning outcomes.

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) resources

As part of the National Quality Framework, the [Early Years Learning Framework](#) and [My Time Our Place](#) supports the objectives and principles of the National Law and Regulations including the National Quality Standard. The Early Years Learning Framework has been designed for use by early childhood educators, early childhood teachers, and approved providers working in partnership with children, families, other professionals, schools and community members to inform educational programs and practices that are place-based and relevant to that community. My Time Our Place aims to extend and enrich children and young people's wellbeing, learning and development in school age care settings, specifically emphasising play and leisure.

Parental engagement in children's education and care settings

Consulting and engaging closely with parents of young children is highly important in children's education and care settings. The partnership between parents and teachers or educators can enhance teachers' or educators' knowledge about the specific needs of the children they care for, as well as ensuring that quality education continues at home. While research indicates that sharing information regarding a child's daily activities at their children's education and care setting is common practice, specifically working to engage parents with their child's development

is not (OECD, 2019, 2020). To mitigate this, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) suggests that it may be useful for children's education and care settings to prioritise implementing professional development for their staff in this area, as well as providing educational resources to parents and carers on child rearing and development (OECD, 2020). Community engagement in early childhood education is also important, and can connect families and children's education and care settings in valuable ways (OECD, 2011). Developing respectful and responsive connections with the wider community can contribute to further enriching the educational program for all children (ACECQA, 2024). Further, the wellbeing, learning and development of young children is nurtured when educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and share their aspirations for their children (ACECQA, 2022a, 2022b).

Collaborative partnerships between parents and early childhood educators enables effective monitoring of learning and development, and integrating multiple perspectives (Lagioia, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2018). Approaches to support collaboration between parents and educators have been informed by the seminal theory that positions "mutuality, reciprocity and shared decision-making" at the forefront of planning for the learning and development of young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p46). Parental engagement is furthered in children's education and care services via accessible and understandable communications that detail a child's progress against the approved framework's learning outcomes, and how educators have supported and guided that child during their day. The Guide to the National Quality Framework notes that educational leaders "support educators to share information safely, sensitively and respectfully", with importance placed upon the child and their family's right to confidentiality (ACECQA, 2024, p. 149).

"When practice is shaped by meaningful engagement with children, families and the community...it fosters a culture of inclusiveness and belonging that reflects the unique cultural and community context. "

–ACECQA (2024, p. 103)

Parental engagement in primary schools

The primary school years offer many opportunities for teachers to engage with parents. Parent attendance at events such as assemblies, school fetes, and other school-based activities is one type of opportunity. As well as providing chances for parent-teacher interactions that can build trusting and considerate relationships, this type of involvement allows parents to demonstrate to their child the importance they place on education and attending school. Even this relatively shallow form of parent engagement has been shown to positively impact learning outcomes (Barger et al., 2019; X. Ma et al., 2016). Teachers and leaders can encourage this type of engagement through the use of clear, timely invitations that are personalised where possible, and through ensuring that parents know they are welcome to participate no matter their background, and no matter if they cannot attend every event.

For parents who are not seen at school events, it may be useful for teachers to tactfully enquire why this is. For some parents, attending the school may be impractical given other commitments, in which case building relationships through emails, phone calls, or notes sent home may be beneficial. Parents have suggested that "more information, rather than less" (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022, p. 153), is most useful, and teachers personally "touching-base" can address information deficits that may occur if teachers assume that parents are up-to-date with more general school communication platforms (such as Facebook) (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022).

Another type of engagement in primary schools involves parents more deeply in aspects of learning. This includes activities such as participating in open classrooms (i.e., classrooms that encourage parental drop-in sessions, or other in-person engagement), or taking part in sessions or conversations about the curriculum and strategies for assisting with learning. While this type of engagement can be logistically difficult for some parents, it is useful for parents to see what their child is learning and observe the teacher's strategies that may be emulated by parents at home. Either face-to-face at school, or via emails, letters, phone calls, or other messages as required, teachers can also provide parents with tips and resources to make home reading more effective, such as prompts for parents to have longer and more frequent conversations with their child about the shared reading material (Merga & Mat Roni, 2018; Townsend & Bayetto, 2022; van Poortvliet et al., 2022). Indeed, furthering learning at home through activities such as shared reading, as well as more general conversations about the learning content and parents' expectations of students, have been shown to substantially impact on students' achievement (Jeynes, 2005; van Poortvliet et al., 2022).

Teachers can facilitate this type of engagement by ensuring invitations to classrooms are clear and welcoming, providing alternative arrangements where possible for those parents who cannot attend the school, varying times for parent classroom activities across the year, being clear about the expectations of parents, and looking for opportunities for parents to participate in classroom activities in a way that can be beneficial to students and teachers. Inviting parents into the classroom also presents further opportunities for teacher-parent connection. Early in a student's education, parents may be anxious about how to support their learning, and one-on-one conversations can be a good opportunity for teachers to boost a parent's confidence in their ability and to build the foundations for a collaborative partnership. These one-on-one conversations can also be useful for teachers to learn about the student's strengths and development goals from the family's perspective.

Parental engagement in secondary schools

Students become more autonomous as they progress through secondary school. Across this period, parents may respond to their adolescent's independence by reducing their own engagement in school-based activities, in part due to the parallel reduction in invitations for attendance from the school, thus encouraging the growth of their child's autonomy and development of their own identity (Daniel, 2015). Secondary school students, too, may begin to question their parents' involvement in their education. Students may respond negatively to perceived parental over-involvement in their schooling, particularly if parent-teacher conversations predominantly occur in instances of student misbehaviour or underachievement (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

Even in the secondary school context, parent attendance at school events can be important. For example, in a large (~15,000 students and ~13,000 parents) study in the United States, it was found that after controlling for background variables such as socioeconomic status (SES), parent participation in school functions was strongly related to the likelihood of a Year 10 student going on to complete high school (Ross, 2016). In another study of Year 10 students in the US, it was found that parent attendance at school predicted lower depressive symptoms and stronger feelings of interest, enjoyment, and value of learning in students (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Thus, as in the primary school years, it may be that parent attendance at school events conveys

the message that they place importance on schooling, as well as value their child's progress and overall wellbeing. This in turn leads students to feel more supported and connected, and themselves place more value on their education.

For secondary school students, discussions with parents about complex topics is an effective type of engagement. The OECD reports that, even after controlling for SES, 15-year-old students who discuss social and political issues with their parents perform better on tests of reading proficiency than those who do not have such conversations (OECD, 2012). Conversations that link schoolwork to current events, and that discuss the value of schooling, future plans and expectations also relate to academic achievement across the secondary school period (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). In one study it was shown that these conversations influence academic achievement both directly, as well as indirectly through increased student interest and compliance with school and homework rules (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). While teachers might encourage discussions between parents and students, their influence over these conversations taking place is, of course, limited. However, schools can engage with parents to ensure they have the information to confidently discuss topics such as future plans.

Fostering a safe school culture

School leaders set the school's culture, and as such must lead by example. As the shapers of school policies and expectations, school leaders can support teachers in developing their parental engagement strategies (Yulianti et al., 2022). School leaders may establish professional learning opportunities for teachers, for example, as well as introduce programs aimed at encouraging parental attendance in the classroom. School leaders can also work with teachers to establish best practice guidelines or suggestions to manage parents' communication expectations and teacher workload. For example, the Department of Education in New South Wales recently implemented the [Expectations for digital communication procedure](#), which aims to limit non-emergency communications, between colleagues or with parents, that teachers and leaders take part in outside work hours. While the Department recognises that some families may be unable to communicate with teachers during school hours, for teachers this means that "communications with colleagues outside of school hours be by agreement and that teachers not be compelled to answer non-urgent queries during that time, including from parents" (Department of Education NSW, 2024).

Sometimes, engaging with parents can be challenging, and may become hostile. In 2023, 65.6% of school leaders surveyed in the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey reported experiencing threats of violence, with 53.9% of those threats coming from parents (Dicke et al., 2023). Australian state and territory governments have their own policies for supporting schools in maintaining a safe working environment. For example, the Victorian Department of Education has developed a list of resources with regards to the [School Community Safety Order Scheme](#). This resource page hosts information videos and templates for issuing a community safety warning, issuing warnings to parents and carers, and printable 'safety at work' posters.

Further, in partnership with the broader education profession, AITSL has developed a [National Strategy](#) to prevent and mitigate the abuse of teachers, school leaders and other school staff (the Strategy) (AITSL, 2020). The Strategy was produced in response to evidence of increasing

negative behaviours between parents, students and school staff. The Strategy outlines “what can and should be done nationally to support teachers, school leaders, teaching assistants, administration staff, and other school staff to respond to and reduce incidents of abuse” (AITSL, 2020, p6), and suggests five key priority areas that continue to require attention in order to reduce school staff abuse in Australia. These priorities are:

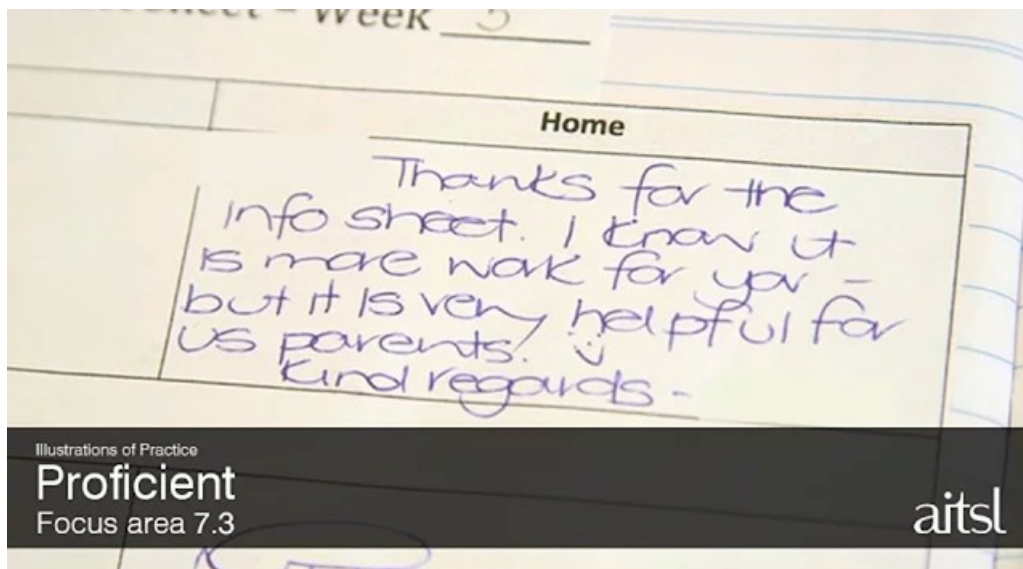
- **Building the evidence base** with further reporting, evaluation and monitoring to develop a comprehensive national picture.
- **Responding to future challenges** such as the role of technology in online abuse.
- Maintaining a safe workplace through staff **wellbeing** support and resilience.
- **Strengthening school communities**, including leadership, school culture and community engagement.
- **Raising the status of the teaching profession**, through advocacy, perceptions of status, and external influences.

AITSL (2020)

Connecting with parents

Families engage with schools in different ways, and so it may be useful to work with parents to develop a mutually beneficial connection strategy. Research on parental engagement has increasingly focused on the bi-directional nature of the parent-teacher relationship, and the equal contributions both parties make in service of communicating about the child’s education (M. Smith, 2022; T. E. Smith et al., 2020). A reciprocal relationship can foster a unified front in support of the student’s holistic development. This bi-directional exchange of information encourages deeper understanding of the child’s needs, strengths and challenges, which may lead to the development of more effective strategies for learning and growth both at home and in the classroom. Supporting children through their transition from the early childhood education setting into primary school, and then into secondary school, helps them to feel secure, confident and connected (Department of Education ACT, 2022). It is important that parents, early childhood education and care settings, schools, and the wider community work cohesively together to make the transition as easy as possible. Connecting with parents can involve reporting on student progress and achievement, parent-teacher conferencing, and developing agile and adaptable communication methods.

AITSL has developed a number of resources for teachers at all career stages to progress and lead parental engagement initiatives at their school. The [Two-way communication](#) resource pack and case study illustrates how effective bi-directional communication between parents and teachers can be established and achieved in schools (AITSL, 2017b). In this case study, a teacher at Ross Park Primary School shows how the daily diary entries she writes for her students build trust and effective communication between herself and her students’ parents.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08NS3ppMBDo>

Communicating with parents

The cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity of Australia's population is reflected in its education and care services, and teachers may need to exercise proactive and flexible approaches to finding different communication strategies to suit the needs of their students' families. In all cases, genuine, two-way, respectful communication is required to build a trusting and beneficial relationship. Actively listening to parents, and nurturing a collaborative relationship through language that includes parents (e.g., "What are we going to do about this?", "What do you think?") can smooth interactions (Mann et al., 2023). Such a collaborative relationship may be especially important for parents of children with disability, given that parents often have deep knowledge of their child's learning and social needs, and can help a teacher's understanding of the student (Wurf, 2023). While structured school-wide programs can improve parent engagement (Jeynes, 2012), teachers can make smaller efforts to build rapport with parents and establish positive relationships.

"Our school has high level communication with the parents, and I think it's really important for the parents to see you're available... I try to be really proactive in my communication with parents. Information is power, and often parents, once they get the full picture, feel a lot easier about certain situations. "

–Teacher, Brighton Primary School (SA). AITSL (2017a)

The Engaging parents and carers resource pack and case study illustrates the importance of engaging with parents/carers in and demonstrates how this can be achieved responsively and respectfully (AITSL, 2017a). In this case study, a teacher at Brighton Primary School shows how her proactive communication methods contribute to increased parental engagement and the building of parent trust.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8m3EGJtKuc>

Creating a school culture that welcomes parents, and makes expectations of parents clear, is an important first step to successful parent engagement. In addition to competing work, caring, and other commitments making school attendance difficult, for some parents, attendance at school can be unappealing. For example, parents may feel judged for their home situation or parenting skills, or self-conscious about their English skills or poor knowledge of the Australian school system, or may have had negative experiences during their own time at school (Rogers et al., 2022; Sianturi et al., 2022; Woodrow et al., 2016). Thus, ensuring the front office is inviting and inclusive can be the first point to improve engagement for some families (Woodrow et al., 2016). Invitations to school events may need to be personalised or repeated for those who do not often attend. Parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may feel further welcomed if cultural or religious events are included in classroom calendars, and if a short welcome message is sent to them in their dominant language (Woodrow et al., 2016). Providing parents with information about relevant community services may be particularly appreciated in low-SES areas, and supporting school-wide programs that encourage parents to attend the school for informal events such as morning teas and student presentations can also help to create a welcoming and positive school culture and foster teacher-parent relationships (Woodrow et al., 2016).

For some families, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, it may be important to offer informal, non-Westernised meeting opportunities (Muller, 2012). Meeting outside of school grounds, for example, or in such a way that parents can access a school room without needing to enter through the front gates, can alleviate parental anxieties about engaging with unfamiliar school staff (Muller, 2012). Furthermore, in some schools a specific staff member may be allocated to parent outreach. For example, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, a dedicated community liaison, such as an Aboriginal Education Officer, can be valuable for building and strengthening ties between families and schools. Being a first point of contact for parents, such educators can help to build trust, advocate for families and the school, and facilitate further relationships with teachers (Woodrow et al., 2016). However, direct contact from teachers is also necessary. Teachers “have a responsibility to create culturally safe places, working in intercultural ways through pedagogy and practice” (ACECQA, 2022a, p. 16). Teachers

can work on building their cultural responsiveness and understand that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may engage with students' learning not only through activities such as homework-checking and shared reading, but also through teaching their children to understand and respect their culture, land, and history (Rogers et al., 2022; Woodrow et al., 2016).

“Students with engaged parents – no matter what their income or background– are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education. ”

–ARACY (2016, p.9)

The type and frequency of communication should also be considered when promoting engagement with parents. Generally, using multiple methods of communication is preferable, to ensure equity (e.g., in terms of internet access, or paper-based information reaching parents), and to make it easier for parents to know where to go for which type of information (e.g., a Learning Management System for information about student grades, or a social media site for reminders about school community events. Some schools have found that surveying parents about communication preferences assists in choosing which methods to focus on (Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2022).

Ensuring that information is clear and concise, and personalised where possible, can help parents to focus on the most relevant information. While information may cover school-wide or classroom-based events and requirements, short and regular communication specifically about students is also beneficial. For parents who attend the school, this might be as simple as a brief conversation during drop-off (Leenders et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2023). For other parents, phone calls, emails, or text messages may be appropriate. Some research suggests that short, daily phone calls or text messages can be effective in increasing parent engagement, which in turn improves student attendance, engagement, and homework completion (Heppen et al., 2020; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). While daily communication may be impractical, some degree of short, regular updates may benefit the teacher-parent relationship. It is also important for teachers to provide positive updates about their students, as parents' perception that they only hear from the school when there is a problem can lead to avoidance or abrasive parent-teacher relationships (Woodrow et al., 2016).

“It's understanding the aspirations of our community and restructuring our commitments as a school to meet the changing context of our community. So, we need to be adaptable. We need to be as a school an ongoing learning institution. ”

–Woodrow et al. (2016, p. 72)

It is important to recognise that parents may not attend school for a variety of reasons. While this may sometimes lead teachers to consider these parents as uninterested or unengaged with their child's learning, often this is not truly the case (Woodrow et al., 2016). It can be helpful for teachers to acknowledge that at-home engagement can take many forms, with activities such as attending community events, meal preparation and grocery shopping, and family games or conversations all providing opportunities for students to apply learning, particularly during the early years. When this type of contribution is validated and highlighted by teachers, it has been found that parents can be “quite transformed by feelings of being valued and being a good parent which then seem to be motivating greater engagement” (Woodrow et al., 2016, p. 50).

Teachers may also benefit from thoughtful consideration of different types of engagement. For example, in a small, intensive study in an Australian primary school, teachers were encouraged to deeply reflect on what constitutes engagement (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Through the year-long study, teachers shifted from perceiving missing parents as disengaged, or parents who were illiterate in English as unable to support their child's learning, to appreciating and facilitating learning at home (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). For example, to encourage learning conversations at home, teachers began to assign experiential tasks as homework (such as cooking as a family, telling stories, gardening, etc.) that required students to interact with their families. These experiences could then be shared by students in the classroom to impact broader cultural learning.

Resource List 2

Guidelines on supporting parents from vulnerable communities

There are many resources available to assist teachers and schools in supporting low-SES families and families from vulnerable communities with engaging in their child's education.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education

The '[Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education](#)' resource sheet identifies some key practices for early childhood education and schools that successfully engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents with their children's education. This resource sheet additionally showcases seven case studies showing programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parental engagement.

ACT Government: Fact sheets

The '[Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian families](#)' fact sheet outlines challenges and provides advice on how schools can create a working partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to assist parental engagement.

The '[Engaging with families for whom English is an additional language or dialect](#)' fact sheet outlines challenges and provides advice on how schools can create a working partnership with EAL/D families to assist parental engagement through developing a sense of belonging.

Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau: Parents as partners in Indigenous children's learning

This [research project](#) reports on effective partnerships between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in Australia. The project examined eight case study partnerships between these families, their communities and their schools, in order to better understand the critical elements that support successful parental engagement.

Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) – National Voice for our Children: Children have a strong sense of identity

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children have produced a [fact sheet](#) detailing how children's education and care settings can respectfully engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities and develop cultural responsiveness.

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth: Resource sheets

The '[Enhancing parent engagement to help close the gap in high Aboriginal enrolment schools](#)' resource describes the background and challenges to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parental engagement.

The '[Parent engagement in communities with low socioeconomic status](#)' resource describes findings from Western Sydney University (WSU) research that investigated barriers and enablers to parental engagement.

Australian Education Research Organisation: Practice guides

To support students with disability in primary and secondary schools, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) developed 'Engaging with families of children with disability', [a guide of promising approaches](#) for teachers and school leaders. This resource provides parental engagement strategies through a lens of social and human rights models of disability.

The '[Engaging with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds](#)' practice guide outlines strategies schools can implement to engage families from CaLD backgrounds. This resource provides considerations, strategies, and reflection questions for teachers and school leaders on a range of topics with regards to supporting CaLD families.

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership: Spotlight

The Spotlight, '[Inclusive education: Teaching students with disability](#)', details strategies that teachers and schools can use in service of supporting students with disability, as well as ways to work in partnership with parents of these students.

Australian Institute of Family Studies: Key organisations for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families

In collaboration with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) has developed a [comprehensive directory of resources](#) to assist organisations and individuals in working with families and children from CaLD backgrounds. Noting that this list is not specific to education, the resources outlined in the directory may be useful for teachers and schools to better understand their students' backgrounds and family contexts.

Reporting student progress and achievement

Traditionally, schools provide student progress reports at the end of each semester – a practice which largely remains today. More recently, however, the rise in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) reporting systems has allowed schools the ability to establish a continual reporting cycle, providing parents with more frequent communication about their child's progress and achievements. Continuous reporting may include the uploading of teacher comments on student assignments, feedback on in-class behaviour, and task rubrics (Hollingsworth et al., 2019). Offering parents the opportunity to view their child's progress continually throughout the school year may also contribute to improved parent-teacher communication.

While continuous reporting is valuable for students and parents, it may contribute to increased workload for teachers. In the long term, however, providing 'real time' student progress updates to parents throughout the semester may decrease the time spent on compiling end-of-semester reports. In secondary schools where continuous reporting was widely practised, Hollingsworth et al. found that end-of-semester reports were 'leaner' and often referred the parent to the school's Learning Management System (LMS) portal for more rigorous student feedback compiled throughout the semester (Hollingsworth et al., 2019). Revising end-of-semester reporting practices to track a student's progress rather than simply their performance during assessments may give teachers a more holistic overview of a student's progress, and parents a clearer understanding of how their child learns (Hollingsworth et al., 2019). Ensuring that communication about student learning not only conveys what the student has achieved, but also what they have not achieved, or with which tasks they have experienced difficulties, is also important for parents to have a clear understanding of student progress (Hollingsworth et al., 2019).

"To communicate student learning progress requires not simply a measure of performance at a point in time, but tracking a student's increasing skills, knowledge and understandings within an area of learning over time."

–Hollingsworth et al. (2019, p. 6)

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) publication *Communicating Student Learning Progress: A Review of Student Reporting in Australia* provides, to date, the most comprehensive research into reporting on student progress in Australia. The report suggests the following key recommendations for reporting student learning:

- Schools and systems should use consistent terminology to communicate student learning.
- Student reporting should be continuous and aligned to the assessment cycle.
- Student reporting should explicitly represent and communicate learning progress.
- Student reporting should explicitly communicate student learning against expectations.
- Student reporting should clearly articulate how performance ratings are defined.
- Student reporting should present information that is accessible and provides different levels of detail.
- Student reporting should include specific directions for future learning.
- Methods used to communicate student learning should have distinct but complementary purposes.

Hollingsworth et al. (2019, pp. 7–8)

Parent-teacher conferencing

For effective parent-teacher conferences, preparation is necessary, as is consultation and consistency (e.g., Department of Education VIC, 2020). It is standard practice to ensure that parent-teacher conferences are held at least once per semester, and that the processes and protocols of the conferences are developed in consultation with the school community. Teachers and school leaders can encourage parental engagement in this reporting and consultation process by ensuring that clear communication is consistent, so that parents are aware of the dates and times of the conferences, and providing opportunities for families to schedule their conferences remotely. School leaders can support teachers in their facilitation of parent-teacher conferences by developing and adhering to guidance and follow-up processes.

Student-led conferences offer an alternative to the traditional parent-teacher conference, and these encourage students to take charge of their own progress reporting by leading their parents through a portfolio of their work over the course of the study period. Unfortunately, there is a lack of recent research into student-led conferences, particularly in Australia. However, the available research does indicate promising parental engagement opportunities. For example, single-school case studies in the US and Australia have found that parents responded very favourably to their child explaining coursework, academic and social achievements, and behaviour (Goodman, 2008; McCarthy, 2015). Attendance at student-led conferences was also found to be higher than for traditional parent-teacher conferences (Goodman, 2008; McCarthy, 2015). Student-led conferences are valuable for parents to gain an understanding of their child's effort, study skills, goals, and behaviour. They are also valuable and rewarding for teachers to see students take charge of their learning, and hear what the students believe they need to work on (McCarthy, 2015).

The case studies also identified some disadvantages or challenges in student-led conferences. For example, the format can be difficult for parents and teachers to discuss sensitive or confidential information, and some parents expect parent-teacher discussions to occur in addition to the student-led conference (Goodman, 2008; McCarthy, 2015). While this expectation may be mitigated by clear communication of the format, parent-teacher discussions are likely to be required in some situations. Student-led conferences also require substantial teacher-guided preparation to collect pieces for the portfolio, reflect on achievement, goals, and difficulties, and develop the presentations (McCarthy, 2015). The time commitment may decline, though, as school procedures for student-led conferences are developed and parents and students become more familiar with the expectations of this format. In introducing student-led conferencing, schools may be able to shape the format of the conferences to better suit institutional and parental needs. A single teacher may be able to support the conferencing of several students allocated to them, which could mitigate the need for separate conferences with all of the student's teachers individually. For parents who live in remote areas, or who are unable to physically attend the conferencing sessions, the student may be able to present their work in an online format with the teacher.

“Student-led conferences provide the opportunity for middle school students to take the lead, ‘own’ their work and be a part of authentic, reflective assessment. They improve the quality of communication between home and school, and encourage parental involvement in student learning. ”

–McCarthy (2015, p. 70)

The Leading parental engagement initiatives resource pack and case study shows a strong emphasis on “connecting learning at home with learning at school” (AITSL, 2017). In this case study, teachers at St. Gabriel’s Primary School show the ways in which they work to develop strong relationships with their students’ parents. Parents are involved in assessment, and are shown literacy and numeracy education strategies.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5jBCRrPcao>

Parental complaints and concerns

While there is limited research on the effects of complaint handling by schools on parental engagement levels, evidence shows that inconsistent or poor communication between parents and their child’s school is a frequent barrier to engagement (Baker et al., 2016). Depending on school and education system policies, Australian schools are able to develop internal guidance and frameworks for handling parental complaints and concerns about the school or their child’s education. Typically, complaints and concerns are handled at the school level, before further escalation, if the parent is not satisfied with the outcome of their complaint (Department of Education Qld, 2024; Department of Education VIC, 2024). Education departments may provide further information on handling parental complaints within their respective school systems. For example, the Victorian Department of Education has developed a guideline on Addressing parents’ concerns and complaints effectively: Policy and guides to support Victorian schools in creating their own policies and procedures on how to effectively handle parental complaints. Most often, however, individual schools will have developed their own processes and procedures for handling complaints internally. Nationally, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) has developed Policy and Procedure Guidelines for Dealing with Complaints in Australian children’s education and care settings. The guidelines provide information and a range of resources to assist Australian education and care settings in developing their own policies and procedures with regards to complaint handling.

Resource List 3

Professional learning on parental engagement

Numerous professional learning resources have been developed to assist Australian teachers and school leaders in planning, implementing, and maintaining inclusive, goal-oriented parental engagement programs. These resources may also assist teachers in communicating effectively with parents.

Evidence for Learning webinars

Evidence for Learning has produced webinars to support teachers and school leaders professional learning on parental engagement.

Webinar 1: What does the evidence say about engaging parents in children's learning?

This webinar provides professional learning for teachers and school leaders by exploring the Guidance report: Working with parents to support children's learning and its recommendations (see Resource List 1). This webinar showcases practical examples of parental engagement from Australian schools.

Webinar 2: Evidence into action: Parental engagement and social and emotional learning.

This webinar provides professional learning for teachers and school leaders based on the Teaching and Learning Toolkit developed by Evidence for Learning. It explores relationships between parental engagement and socioemotional learning and focuses on programs encouraging parents to support their children's learning and intensive programs for families in crisis.

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth webinars

ARACY has produced 'Lunchtime Learnings', a series of webinars on parental engagement. These webinars explore various themes related to parental engagement to assist teachers and school leaders with professional learning. The series of webinars can be found on the ARACY [Publications and Resources website](#).

Webinar 1

 [Family Engagement and Teacher Practice – Building teacher confidence through action research](#)

Webinar 2

 [A community-led approach to empowering parents to be their child's first educators](#)

Webinar 3

 [The critical use of parent knowledge to improve learning outcomes](#)

Webinar 4

[☑ Parents as contributors to service design](#)

Webinar 5

[☑ The nature of relationships](#)

Webinar 6

[☑ Supporting our children](#)

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) resources

ACECQA have produced videos to support educators in early childhood education and care settings develop their skills in quality early learning.

Video 1

[☑ Children and families are the centre of early learning services](#)

Video 2

[☑ How does quality early learning reflect the values of families?](#)

[National Quality Standard: Quality Area 6, Building Partnerships with Families: Information Sheet](#).

This resource sheet (2018) contains links to the National Quality Standard, defining partnerships in practice with practical suggestions for educators to consider when building connections with families in early childhood settings.

Commercial professional learning services

Online professional learning workshops and courses that are aligned to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers are available from various commercial providers. For example, Teacher Professional Development Services provides a self-paced course ([Engaging Parents in Learning](#)) of 6 hours of professional learning, and addresses the Teacher Standards 3.5, 3.7, 5.5 and 7.3. Schools are advised to shop around and ensure that any selected courses are recognised by their teacher regulatory authority.

Gearing up for Parent Engagement in Student Learning toolkit

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA), funded by the Australian Government, undertook cross-sectoral research to develop a [toolkit to assist schools and parents](#) with establishing meaningful partnerships for student learning and wellbeing (Catholic School Parents Australia, 2023). The toolkit contains modules and case studies that assist primary and secondary school principals with 'whole school professional learning' and 'developing and maintaining relationships' for supporting parental engagement. Modules and case studies were also developed for parents. Each module contains practical ideas that can be implemented at school or at home.

Departments of Education

Departments of Education across Australia's states and territories provide resources to support teachers and school leaders with parental engagement in their school.

Please engage with the map by hovering over and clicking on each state.



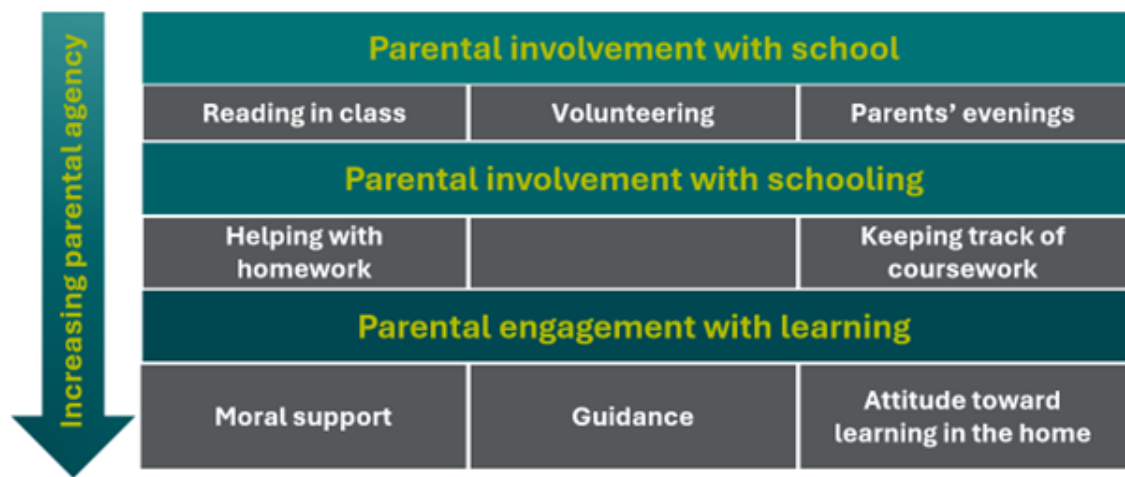
Supporting parental engagement at home

Some parents may not be seen often at the school for a wide range of reasons. However, this does not mean that they cannot effectively engage with student learning at home. In terms of student achievement, parent engagement in learning at home typically has a larger direct impact than attending school functions (Boonk et al., 2018; Cosso et al., 2022; Jaynes, 2007, 2012; X. Ma et al., 2016). Teachers can help facilitate at-home engagement, and many of the at-school strategies discussed in this Spotlight will have flow on effects to at-home engagement. For instance, if parents discuss and observe what their child is learning at school, what their strengths and learning needs are, and possible strategies for improving progress or demonstrating links between curriculum content and family life or world events, conversations that reinforce learning are more likely to occur at home.

Indeed, parental engagement can be represented on a continuum, where parents move from primarily having in-school involvement to also include actions and attitudes that progressively become more centred on learning (Goodall, 2017) (Figure 4). The continuum recognises that ‘traditional involvement’, such as volunteering at their child’s school, or attending assemblies and other events, may represent the first steps towards parental engagement with learning. Making families feel welcome by inviting their input into their child’s learning can be a good first step in deepening their engagement.

There are three continuum levels, where the first level serves to strengthen family-school partnerships through traditional in-school activities (Goodall, 2017). The second level progresses to family-led schooling, where activities such as instruction and assessment are still overseen by teachers and school leaders (Goodall, 2017). Finally, the third level represents parental actions and attitudes that focus on children's learning in the home and community, shifting the emphasis from being school-centric to being centred on sustained family-led learning (Goodall, 2017).

Figure 4. Parental Engagement Continuum (adapted from Goodall, 2017, p.93)



Recent research suggests that high levels of **parenting self-efficacy** have been associated with positive child development and parent-child relationships (Matthews et al., 2022), and may positively influence parent-teacher and student-teacher relationships (T. Ma et al., 2024). Higher levels of parenting self-efficacy have been associated with lower levels of externalising problems at school or at home and increased social skills, from preschool age through to adolescence (Glatz et al., 2024; Glatz & Buchanan, 2015; Seabra-Santos et al., 2016). Higher parenting self-efficacy also relates to more positive, confident, and satisfying parent-teacher relationships (Matthews et al., 2022; Minke et al., 2014).

Schools are able to support parents in building their parenting self-efficacy in a number of ways, however research recommends that these interventions be low-intensity, be run by school psychologists, and are carefully framed so that parents feel empowered by them (T. Ma et al., 2024). Opportunities for parents to build their parenting self-efficacy can include take-home resource packages, and low-intensity programs with low demand for attendance (T. Ma et al., 2024). In addition, ensuring these resources and programs are positioned as being universally beneficial to parents with all levels of parenting self-efficacy may encourage the creation of a

neutral, destigmatised learning environment for parents (T. Ma et al., 2024). Schools can assist in this destigmatisation work by carefully considering the way this support is framed in parent communications (T. Ma et al., 2024).

Conclusion

A collaborative relationship between parents, teachers and educators is vital to student progress and success, and can be promoted through teacher-supported guidance on how parents can support their child's specific academic needs. By creating an open dialogue of communication through consistent and structured reporting, parent-teacher conferencing, and maintaining accessible platforms for sharing learning resources and school information, teachers can provide parents with the tools needed to support and participate in their child's education. When schools actively and successfully engage parents in learning activities, a powerful partnership is created, strengthening support systems essential for positive educational outcomes. An additional emphasis should be placed on engaging parents from vulnerable communities, and recognising the diverse engagement needs of these families. By prioritising programs and interventions designed to tackle the specific challenges faced by these groups, schools can strive for equitable and meaningful parental engagement, ensuring that every child receives the support needed for their educational success and wellbeing.

Schools can support teachers to work collaboratively and effectively with parents. The challenge for schools is prioritising and investing in ongoing programs that cultivate cumulative improvement in parental engagement. Schools should adopt contextualised approaches that promote inclusivity and effectively address the distinct needs of their diverse parental communities. Importantly, schools need to consider inclusive strategies that engage all parents to prevent the widening of achievement gaps. Targeted investment in parental engagement programs not only enhances students' educational outcomes but also contributes to the overall wellbeing and cohesion of the wider school community.

Footnotes

1. Parenting self-efficacy is defined as "caregivers' beliefs in their capabilities to influence their child and the environment, to promote child development and other desirable outcomes" (Ma, 2024), p. 1).

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