Young learners’ academic success begins at home with strong parent engagement.

By Searetha Smith-Collins

Closing learning and achievement gaps has been an elusive target, perhaps because we haven’t been using the right ingredients. When considering how to ensure that every child has a fair chance to succeed, the “secret sauce” is to create and guide seamless conditions between the worlds of birth to age 5 and grades K-3, so that there is a successful continuum of development in school and home as early as possible.

Practical Implementation

More focus must be made on engaging parents in the deliberate stimulation and direction of their child’s development, as well as on home-school collaborative decisions that foster intellectual, social, and emotional development. Here are four ways to accomplish this.

1. Provide parenting information—early. Brain research reveals the importance of interacting differently and responding positively to a child’s cooing, cries, and babbling as foundational to developing a child’s emotional well-being at an early age. Explain to parents the importance of consistent, reliable, and responsive care, relationships, and interactions as critical factors to their child’s development. Parents might not know or understand how to cultivate their children from birth to age 5. Poll parents to identify their specific questions and concerns about their preschoolers’ learning and development. Help them understand “root causes” of children’s developmental challenges, such as unreliable and inconsistent responsiveness to a baby can result in developmental delays.

2. Modify engagement with your community. Not all parents are comfortable engaging in school, so approaches to traditional parental engagement and involvement must be more pointed, collaborative, creative, and culturally sensitive. For example, encourage all parent perspectives and elicit ideas from parents about ways to support their child.
3. Take advantage of strengths. There are nuanced strengths and weaknesses to child-rearing practices—based on culture, socioeconomic class, and generational trend. For example, many economically advantaged parents are very nurturing, but sometimes over-schedule their children. Many economically disadvantaged parents under-schedule activities, but instill resourcefulness and other independence-building skills that benefit them in the broader context of their lives. There are dual roles and expectations that some children play at home, in the community, and in school. It is all a matter of shifting mindsets and attitudes. Explore and provide ways to identify strengths as well as challenges of students who struggle to learn.

Preconditions for Success
In his seminal work, *Developing Talent in Young People*, Benjamin Bloom identifies three preconditions for creating successful chances in life. Understanding these preconditions can help parents and guardians strengthen early learning preparation and eliminate the root causes of gaps in experience, knowledge, and student readiness for learning. This is what can be gleaned from Bloom’s preconditions:

1. The quality of one’s experiences makes a difference in school and life success, beginning in the earliest years of life.
2. The quality use of time at home and in school, or the quality of how one spends his or her time, makes a significant difference in mastery or proficiency.
3. The use of quality resources determines children’s chances for development and success.

I am adding a fourth precondition related to school and family partnerships that must be set starting in the early years: Healthy development in the early years calls for paying attention to strong, positive early learning experiences that involve developing a young child’s social and emotional health. Parents are a child’s first teachers; they can guide home education to assist their child’s transition into preschool and kindergarten.

Parents are critical ingredients in every child’s home, school, and life success. Every child deserves a chance, both at home and at school, starting from the earliest point. Our role is to help develop children and unleash greatness at home and in school.

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