

# HACK EARLY LEARNING WITH PARENTS' HELP

## Build connections between school and home to win cooperation and engagement from a child's first teachers

*By Jessica Cabeen*

**O**ne of the things I'm passionate about in schools is making meaningful connections with families. Parents are a child's first teacher, and a strong bridge between school and home makes everyone's experience more positive and successful.

We have many strategies and tools we can use to engage students, but we must also involve the caregivers our students go home to at the end of the day. Finding ways to ensure that families feel valued and appreciated goes a long way toward building trusting relationships now and in the future.

Too often, when a child enters the K–12 system, we shut the door on experiences that have occurred at home with the child's family. If you call a parent only when there is a problem, in other words, that *is* the problem.

How can we better involve parents, and when can we find the time? And how can we ensure that even though students entering kindergarten come into school with the widest range of skills of any grade level, we can have meaningful, focused conversations with their families about the essential targets we are using to prepare them for first grade?

### **Step One: Find the Right Platforms**

More parents reach for their smartphones these days than a school folder when it comes to engaging with schools. Tools such as blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Remind offer parents a real-time window into their child's instructional day, and offer them opportunities to respond, engage, and interact—even from miles away.

At the Woodson Kindergarten Center, we use Facebook Live posts for special events during the instructional day. The amount of likes, tags, shares, and reposts of these events is usually larger than the audience present in person. I often receive thanks and other positive comments from family members who are unable to take the day off work or who live miles away.



### Step Two: Be Present

Conferences, parent meet-and-greets, and even just saying “hi” in the hallways goes a long way toward building solid school-home relationships. These opportunities don’t have to be formal or lengthy to be effective; they just have to be genuine.

At the end of each day, every teacher walks their students to the bus and gives them a hug or handshake. Those 10 minutes show every waiting parent, bus driver, and neighbor that we value connecting with students from the beginning of the day to the end.

### Step Three: Be Honest


As educators, we try to share positive news with families. While this is essential to maintaining a growth mindset, “nice” isn’t always what’s needed. Too often, families come into the K–12 system and are surprised when teachers see behaviors they have never witnessed from their child. Parents want the best for their students, and they want to know the full story, even if it’s hard to hear. Building trust with families demands truthful answers to the questions they ask.

As a school principal, I sit in on fall conferences of students whose learning is already showing gaps due to inconsistent attendance. As I meet with families, I’m armed with attendance data, district policies, and their child’s academic data. We review the information, and I ask what might be preventing attendance—a

death in the family that required travel, missing the bus without alternative transportation, or an unreported illness?

I recap the conversation to ensure understanding, stressing the importance of school attendance, problem-solving any circumstances that are preventing consistent attendance, and thanking the family for engaging in a tough conversation that will help us ensure that their child has a fun, safe, and successful school year.

Some schools try a different route. They wait until the end of the school year—once the child’s attendance concerns are beyond at-risk and it’s too late to intervene. These schools may tell parents that the child will fall behind their peers in the next school year, or worse, recommend retention. This kind of parent-school communication is one-sided, reactive, and punitive. If you really want to partner with parents, you must discuss issues early and work together to solve them.

Creating authentic parent engagement and involvement isn’t easy, but it is worth pursuing. It takes creativity, effort, and time to build relationships, but when we frame our interactions as learning from their child’s first teachers, we can start having meaningful conversations. 

**Jessica Cabeen**, a Minnesota principal, is the author of *Hacking Early Learning: 10 Building Blocks to Success in Pre-K–3 That All Teachers and School Leaders Should Know*.



Other important “hacks” Cabeen favors include being a “visible” leader and putting play back into the school day.