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# The Importance of Family Engagement

Find out more about family engagement and how our research supports this key element of high-quality early education.

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The importance of early childhood education and its impact on a child's life is supported by decades of research in developmental science. Here at Start Early, rigorous research and science informs all our efforts in providing and advocating for quality early education.

Recently we spoke to Mallery Swartz, former director of family engagement research at Start Early, to find out more about the subject of family engagement and how our research supports this key element of quality early education.

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Family engagement during the earliest years of a child's life is one of the most powerful predictors of a child's development. Families are children's first teachers and it is the quality of parent-child relationships and interactions that create the foundational skills that children need to be successful in school and in life.

Family engagement in early education is particularly important for children in low-income families in that it helps create consistency between the home and school environments. The positive outcomes of engaged parents are powerful: increased support for children's learning at home, empowered parents, and improved family well-being. Children see benefits like improved cognitive development and academic performance, better social-emotional development, and improved health.

It is no surprise, then, that family engagement is an essential component of high-quality early childhood care and education.

Engaging families as partners early in the educational journey allows parents to establish strong home-school connections that support their children's achievement long-term.

## What Do We Mean by 'Family Engagement'?

The definition of family engagement can vary, depending on whom you ask in early education circles. But generally, family engagement focuses on the

importance of positive, interactive relationships between program staff and parents – relationships that enhance and support children’s learning.

More recently, family engagement efforts are being co-designed along with families to promote equity and parent leadership, which is in line with how we at Start Early approach and define the concept.

At Start Early, we define family engagement as “partnering with families to build mutually respectful, goal-oriented relationships that support strong parent-child relationships, family well-being and ongoing learning and development for both parents and children.”

Our approach to family engagement involves a new way of thinking for families, staff, and program leaders. In other words, we support methods that see parents as partners, along with program staff, in creating nurturing and supportive learning environments for young children.

**“ Family engagement is about seeing families as an inextricable part of their child’s early childhood education and treating them as partners and experts in their child’s learning and wellbeing. Years of research show that engaging families goes far beyond raising test scores – it is about preparing children and families for success in life. ”**

**MALLARY I. SWARTZ, FORMER DIRECTOR OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH**

## **Our Family Engagement Research: What Do We Do?**

All of our research integrates science, program and policy – it is truly applied (and applicable) research. Our team evaluates, tests, and pilots [innovative family engagement strategies](#) for both early education programs and parents.

Start Early's research process is unique in that it involves co-creation and co-design — including family and staff feedback— throughout our work. We do this by holding focus groups and interviews, testing prototypes with families and staff, and having parents, program leaders, and staff serve as advisors.

One innovative outcome of this work is our digital parent self-reflection tool called *Growing Together*. Our team is in the initial phase of developing this tool for center-based early learning settings, like Early Head Start and Head Start programs.

*Growing Together* aims to help parents reflect on their parenting, identify their strengths and needs, and communicate those insights with their early childhood provider. Accompanying this work will be a provider interface and training for early education providers to further support them in building quality relationships with families.

Ultimately, our research around family engagement, as with our other areas of focus, is meant to help families and program staff create a nurturing environment where young children can learn and thrive.

**Our work also empowers parents to serve as leaders in their families, schools, and communities, and ultimately, to successfully advocate for their children's education and promote their success in school and life.**