

Parental Involvement in Family Childcare: Does It Really Matter?

by Stephen D. Green, Ph.D.

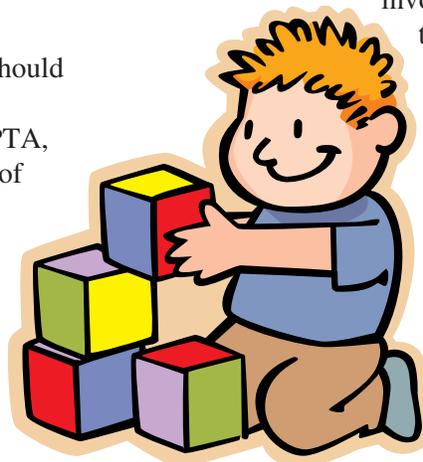
Caregivers, teachers, peers, extended family, media, heredity, and the environment all contribute to a child's development; however, parents (if present) are the most powerful influence in the lives of their children. Parental involvement not only shapes development during the initial years of life, but also during the adolescent and adult years.

Given this important role, to what extent should parents be involved in their children's development? According to the National PTA, "Parental involvement is the participation of parents in *every facet* of the education and development of children from birth to adulthood, recognizing that parents are the primary influence in their children's lives." If this statement is correct, then parents have a tremendous responsibility to be involved with their children both inside and outside the home, including their children's non-parental childcare arrangements.

Decades of research have demonstrated that the more involved parents are in their children's development, the greater chance children have to succeed, particularly in their academic performance. Consistently, researchers have discovered that greater parental involvement in a child's education is associated with:

- higher student grades and test scores,
- better attendance,
- higher rates of homework completion,
- more positive student attitudes and behavior,
- higher graduation rates, and
- greater enrollment rates in post-secondary education.

The same researchers also noted that when parents are involved, children achieve more regardless of their socioeconomic level, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' educational level (Henderson & Berla, 1994).



As recent research on early brain development has shown, positive parental involvement needs to begin long before children enter into formal schooling arrangements. The early years of a child's life are critically important for healthy brain development, attachment formation, and language acquisition.

Prime opportunities for learning exist during the first few years of life that may not be recovered at a later stage. At the same time, today's children are spending more and more time in non-parental childcare arrangements. As a childcare provider, you may spend more waking hours with a child than his or her parents. Therefore, it is important for childcare providers and parents to work together as a team to promote as much parental involvement as possible.

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Parental involvement in childcare not only benefits children, but also parents and childcare providers. In interviews with parents and childcare providers, Preston Britner discovered that parental involvement was one of the key factors in how satisfied parents were with their children's care arrangements. The greater their involvement, the more satisfied they were with their children's care. Other surveys indicate that childcare providers are overwhelmingly in favor of parental involvement from both mothers and fathers. What is less clear for some, however, is what childcare providers can do to encourage greater parental involvement in the childcare setting and at home. Following are some suggestions for improving the level of parental involvement in your family day home.

Conduct a parental involvement assessment:

- In what ways do the parents involve themselves?
- Are there areas in which they can become more involved?
- What are some of the barriers preventing parents from being involved?
- What efforts have been effective or ineffective in the past?
- Are parents satisfied or dissatisfied with their level of involvement?
- In what capacity would they like to become more involved?
- What attitudes toward parental involvement do the staff have?

Create an environment that welcomes and encourages parental involvement. Do parents feel welcome to visit their children while in your care? Are there special opportunities for them to come to your home when their children are present? Do mothers as well as fathers feel comfortable being involved? In other words, is your family day home family friendly? Some parents may be reluctant to get involved unless you make special efforts to let them know that their involvement is welcomed and extremely important.

Expect parents to be involved. Dr. James Levine and his colleagues at the Families and Work Institute conducted a nationwide study of early childhood programs that were successful at involving fathers. Staff in nearly all of the programs expected that parents would be involved. A director at one of the centers commented that



when staff have no expectations for involvement, that is exactly what they will get. Therefore, it is important to let parents know from the day their children enroll that their involvement is expected and valued.

Communicate regularly with parents. Communication is a two-way street. Parents need to be informed about what is going on with regard to their children's care. Likewise, childcare providers need to have an idea of what is going on in the home environment of the children in their care. The only way this will happen is if both parent and provider make a regular effort to keep each other informed. This is true for positive developments (e.g., a child learning the alphabet; a child learning to walk) as well as negative developments (e.g., a child hitting or biting another child; a child not respecting a teacher). Communication can take place in a variety of ways (i.e., by phone, in writing, face-to-face, etc.) as long as it occurs.

Hold special events specifically designed to involve parents. Space limitations in your home may impact what type of special activities you can do to involve parents. For example, you may not have adequate space to invite every parent to attend at the same time. Possible activities include:

- one-on-one parent-provider meetings;
- career days, when a parent comes to talk about his or her job with the children;
- educational events, such as a parent coming to read a book to the children;
- field trips, such as a trip to the children's museum;
- recreational activities led by parents at a local park; and
- opportunities to eat meals together.

There are many options available to you as a childcare provider, so be creative and have fun as you seek to involve parents in positive ways.

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Dr. Stephen Green is an Assistant Professor and Child Development Specialist with Texas Cooperative Extension. His areas of speciality include child development, child care, and father-child relationships.

Are You Open to Involving Parents in Your Family Childcare Home?

by Dorothy E. James, Ph.D., CFCS

How do you involve parents in your family childcare home? Parents who bring their child to someone else to care for them for the first time have many concerns and questions. They are concerned most about their child's safety and ability to succeed in the new environment. Parents "check out" the center to try to get a feel for how they can contribute to the best outcome for their child. Parents often appreciate knowing ways in which they can participate in their child's care.

Results when family childcare homes and parents work together include:

- Parents are better able to understand and support what the home is doing.
- Staff are better able to understand the needs and concerns of parents.
- Children's self-esteem improves.
- Programs are adjusted to meet the needs of children more fully.
- Parent-child relationships improve.
- Neighbors, who otherwise might not meet, begin relationships, and the community is strengthened.
- Children believe that their "work" is important to their parents and other adults.
- One long-term effect on children is that they receive higher grades and scores in school later on.



How can parents be involved?

- **Reading.** Nothing promotes brain development and language skill like spending time with children reading age-appropriate books.
- **Take children on field trips.** If given enough notice, many parents can take off work to help chaperone a field trip. This provides a relaxed atmosphere for staff and parents to visit and for the parents to see their child in the group.
- **Demonstrate a skill or talent.** Some parents may have a hobby, such as bird watching or gardening, that they could talk to the children about. Other parents may have

exciting occupations, such as fireman or policeman, in which the children would be interested. The learning activities will be new each year, dependent upon parents' skills and talents.

How can you help the parents?

- **Provide age-level parent fact sheets.** The state departments of health and your county Extension office offer free materials on numerous parenting topics. It is extremely important for parents and caregivers to know what behaviors to expect at certain ages in a child's growth and development. Parents who have realistic expectations of their baby's growth and development are less apt to practice unsafe behaviors with their baby.
- **Teach parenting skills.** Serve refreshments, and let the parents come in for a brief parenting and sharing class.
- **Video Recommendations:**
 - I Am Your Child: The First Years Last Forever.* Outlines the importance of early parental attachment for enhanced infant brain development. \$5.00 at www.iamyourchild.org.
 - Never Shake a Baby: What Parents and Caregivers Need to Know.* Includes vignettes from parents who have been exasperated with their baby's crying. (613) 233-1900 or www.shakenbaby.ottawakiwanis.org.

References:

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Dr. Dorothy James is an Assistant Professor and Family Life Specialist with Texas Cooperative Extension. She directs a statewide effort to strengthen parenting skills and reduce child abuse.



Seamless Communication Key to Parental Involvement in Family Childcare

by Laura Strawn, MA, RN

Janette Dale takes a break from her duties as owner of a rural family childcare home to talk about parental involvement. A rooster crows in the background, adding a bit of atmosphere to this family farm setting. “We encourage parental involvement in their child’s day here in our home. And we have found that continuous communication about what type of involvement is beneficial to the child helps the parent to be an asset to the family childcare environment.”

For example, take a child who is having separation issues. “We tell the parent that they can minimize separation problems the child is experiencing by structuring *how* they spend time in the childcare setting.” Janette recommends that parents keep the morning drop off routine as simple and brief as possible. That way, the child does not feel uncertain whether the parent will stay in the morning and does not prolong the separation time unnecessarily. If a child asks for a parent to “come in and play with the new blocks,” it is best for the parent to come back early and spend time at the end of the day in the family home. Of course, it is extremely important that the parent make time to do exactly that. The child can then look forward to this time at the end of the day.

Parental involvement can also meet the parent’s needs. Janette regularly takes time from her busy day to talk on the phone to the mother of an eight-week old baby, who is feeling sadness at the separation. “This mom is not really worried; she just misses him. I tell her he is fine and what he is doing, and she feels better.”

Sometimes, parents need to take the day’s schedule into account when they want to be a part of the activities at the family childcare center.

“Just when we are settling down for a nap, it is difficult to shift gears if a parent drops by with a baby pool. It helps if the parent is aware of our schedule, especially if they are wanting to

spend special time with their child alone.” Again, she finds that most parents are more than willing to work around the group’s scheduling needs.

Janette sees many parents as having very demanding careers, and this prevents them from having time to spend at the family home. Parental involvement in field trips and other extra activities, such as gardening on a Saturday morning, is an option some parents don’t have. She wonders if some parents see childcare as a service they are purchasing and consequently do not feel a need to “work” at the childcare center. Therefore, she practices flexibility in allowing parents to choose the level of interaction they are able and wanting to have.

Flexibility and sensitivity are two of Janette’s assets, but she emphasizes communication above all else. “Some providers feel worried when they have to talk directly to parents about a little problem. But really, you prevent bigger problems by dealing with the little ones when they come along.” A little pause follows this bit of wisdom. Then the rooster agrees.



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