



**UNSW**  
SYDNEY

# Being your child's first and forever teacher: How to be an effective partner in your child's learning



# What does the research tell us?

Parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. While many parents do this in the before-school years, sometimes we forget that we can help our children learn, even once they are at school. 'Parental engagement' means being positively involved and active in your child's learning process. It is one of the simplest ways to help your child be successful.

Parents are particularly well-placed to interact with their children frequently. The reciprocal, spontaneous conversations, language-rich interactions, shared customs, routines and play experiences that are facilitated by many parents help to build a healthy and responsive brain and well-supported child.<sup>1</sup> These regular opportunities offer multiple opportunities for learning and provide parents with extensive knowledge about children's interests and needs.

Parental engagement promotes shared responsibility for education and a partnership between families and schools. In recent research, 93 per cent of parents saw the role of a child's education as a shared responsibility between them and teachers.<sup>2</sup> A collaborative and supportive relationship between home and school is key to promoting better outcomes for children's learning and happiness.<sup>3</sup> When we don't have strong partnerships between schools and parents, we won't see schools be as effective as they can be and children's outcomes suffer.<sup>4</sup>

Children's outcomes across a whole range of areas are improved when parents are engaged in the learning journey. These include

1 Pascoe, S., & Brennan, D. (2017). Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions. [Three's a Crowd](#).

2 Graham, A. (2019). Giving parents a voice: Strategies to enhance parent capacity to support transition to school. [AEL](#), 41(3).

3 Piccoli, A. (2019). 12 ways your child can get the most out of school. [ABC Books](#).

4 Fox, S., & Olsen, A. (2014). Defining parental engagement. [Department of Education and Training](#).

improved readiness for school, enhanced cognitive ability and improved academic achievement, prosocial behaviour, positive approaches to learning, greater engagement and participation in learning activities, improved student behaviour, self-regulation and confidence, increased motivation to learn, better attendance and retention in school and participation in higher education.

For some parents, it is hard to know where to start if they have not experienced positive examples themselves or struggled at school. But it is important to know that your engagement can make a massive difference, even if there are other things in your child's life that makes it harder for them to learn. Research has shown that the benefits of parent engagement at home is a bigger predictor of a child's success at school than family income.<sup>5</sup> So how can you do it?

5 Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). A new wave of evidence. The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. [Southwest Educational Development Laboratory \(SEDL\)](#).

## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILD'S LEARNING?

No matter what the age of your child, the following tips might help:

- ✓ Understand the difference between being involved, and being engaged. School-based involvement by parents is not linked to improved student learning. You might help in the canteen, which is helpful for the school and great if you enjoy it, but this is not the same as engaging with your child's learning and being a collaborator.
- ✓ Communicate with the school, and expect the same in return. Teachers can help parents understand what is happening inside the school gate, and vice versa.
- ✓ Provide a stimulating home learning environment with a range of toys, books and learning materials. If resources are tight, consider swapping with friends, buying second-hand goods or using libraries.
- ✓ Make learning fun, by engaging in activities that your child enjoys. These can be formal, like learning letters or structured activities, but they can also be more incidental, like cooking together, doing puzzles and playing board games.
- ✓ Have regular conversations with your child about school. In these, try to cover a range of topics about their school work, friendships, relationships with teachers and if they are worried about anything. Link their school work to current events and topics of interest.
- ✓ Communicate the importance of learning, and talk positively about school and learning.
- ✓ Read to and with your child every day. It is one of the simplest activities that can make such a difference to your child's literacy development, and is also a great activity to bond over.
- ✓ Play with your child! Use this time to learn about their interests, and look for teachable moments that can be found through play. For example, playing with trains and talking about the steepness of the tracks.
- ✓ Let your child play often and use their creativity. Unstructured play is one of the most important ways for a child to develop critical social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills they need to be successful at school, and in life.<sup>1</sup>

1 Sahlberg, P. & Doyle, W. (2019). Let the children play. [HighBridge](#).

