



Focus Area 3

Family Partnership

Create meaningful partnership opportunities and two-way communication that invites families to understand, experience, inform, and support the social and emotional development of their students.

Families are a child's first teacher and an essential factor in the cultivation of social and emotional competencies throughout a child's life. When schools and families work together, they can build strong connections that reinforce social and emotional skill development. In fact, research suggests that evidence-based SEL programs are more effective when they extend into the home (Albright & Weissberg, 2010). Families who understand and value SEL help provide consistent supports for young people across their school and home lives.

Schools, in turn, can build upon and learn from the strategies that families are already using to support SEL through authentic family partnerships. These partnerships, however, are not always easy to develop. It is important to remember that not all families have fond memories of and experiences with schools. In fact, these prior experiences can have a deep impact on how willing families are to pursue partnerships with their child's school.

Families are far more likely to form partnerships with schools when the school's norms, values, and cultural representations reflect their own experiences (Atunez, 2000). Onikama, Hammond, and Koki (1998) explain, "It is difficult for families to want to become involved with institutions that they perceive are 'owned' by a culture that discriminated against them in the past."

For these reasons, it is important for teams to foster a culturally responsive and welcoming school environment and authentically engage families as partners in promoting students' SEL.

If you have already begun develop family partnerships for SEL, use the rubric or the questions below to identify areas for continuous improvement:

Does the school have multiple avenues for ongoing two-way communication with families, inviting families to understand, experience, inform, and partner with the school to support students' social and emotional development?

Do families participate on the SEL team?

Does the school provide meaningful opportunities for all families to learn more about and contribute to SEL in the school?

Whether you are beginning to build family partnerships or looking to improve your existing partnerships, the examples and strategies below can help you meaningfully engage families in schoolwide SEL.

Communicate with Families and Invite Them to Participate

School teams can create structures that foster strong two-way communication with families. Two-way communication means that the schools send regular, coherent messages about SEL that are consistent in tone and content across grade levels, while also ensuring they listen and respond to families' inputs, ideas and needs. This is most likely to happen when schools take the time to learn more about the families they serve through surveys, open houses, phone calls, and strategies that connect with families on a personal level.

Consider the following ways to include families in the school's SEL efforts:

- Inviting families to contribute to SEL goals and shared agreements.
- Inviting families to participate in the planning, selection, implementation, and evaluation of SEL programming.
- Sending positive notes home to families about their student's academic or SEL growth.

- Asking families to share information about their child (e.g. how they learn best, what kinds of supports and approaches have been most helpful in the past, etc.)
- Inviting families to participate in SEL learning opportunities, family events, back-to-school night, etc.
- Including information in family newsletters about ways to practice SEL skills at home.
- Asking families about the best ways to communicate with them.
- Providing materials and experiences in multiple languages.
- Inviting family members to visit or volunteer in the classroom, observe SEL, and participate in a lesson or activity.

Organize Opportunities for Families to Come Together and Discuss SEL Topics

CASEL has designed an SEL Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers, available in English and Spanish. This discussion series features ten fully scripted sessions that explore key topics around parenting and SEL. The SEL team or a community partner can coordinate logistics for these sessions and provide space for parents and caregivers to lead the discussions.

Schools have found that SEL Family Nights are a successful way to share information and activities. Some examples of SEL family night activities might include:

- Sharing information about the school's SEL program.
- Discussing the school's shared agreements and having students explain why they are important.
- Offering an SEL experience, such as giving families an opportunity to participate in a Class Circle or team-building activity.
- Sharing books with an SEL theme that families can read together at home. (See resources from First Books' Health Feelings and Relationships)
- Setting SEL goals as a family.

Building Staff Commitment for Service High School's Family Engagement Plan

Service High School (SHS) in the Anchorage School District determined that family engagement and involvement was central for promoting students' SEL and academic achievement. Their SEL team developed an interactive activity to gauge and foster staff commitment to this goal. Before this activity began, the team facilitator posted three signs around the room, each representing one of the three positions on an opinion continuum – "agree," "disagree" and "unsure."

During the activity, the facilitator asked staff to think about the following three statements:

1. In general, I believe that increased community and family engagement will promote students' success.
2. My observation is that the majority of SHS families are enthusiastic about attending SHS activities.
3. I acknowledge that I can do more to facilitate family engagement at SHS.

After thinking about the statements, staff members indicated where they were on the continuum by standing next to the sign that best reflected their opinion. The facilitator asked for volunteers at each position to share their opinion, emphasizing that all responses would be valued. By sharing opinions in this way, the group had a chance to foster enthusiasm and engagement on this issue while also discussing possible roadblocks they needed to address. Based on the shared experience, the team was then able to develop a road map for how to work together with staff to engage families.

Suggest SEL Strategies to Use at Home

Schools can use newsletters or home activities to describe these strategies. Parent-teacher conferences may also be a forum for providing support to individual students. Some strategies to suggest to families include:

- Participating with their child in SEL-related homework assignments.
- Emphasizing their child's strengths before discussing what might be improved upon.
- Making a list of feeling words with their child and being an "emotions coach," encouraging him/her child to express feelings.
- Giving their children choices, and providing age-appropriate opportunities to contribute to family decisions. Start small with what to have for a meal they help prepare, or what game to play in the evening before bedtime.
- Asking what ideas they have to solve a problem and helping them identify pros and cons of alternative solutions.
- Encouraging their child to share and be helpful to others by participating in neighborhood or community service projects.
- Modeling empathy, fairness, and helpfulness toward others and encouraging their child to do the same.

Download Tool

Strategies for Establishing School-Family Partnerships in support of SEL

This tool suggests ways that the SEL team can further engage families in learning about, supporting, and promoting SEL.

Download Tool

SEL Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers (English)

This discussion series helps caregivers become more familiar with social and emotional learning and encourages them to actively engage in their own growth while supporting their children to practice social and emotional skills.

Download Tool

SEL Discussion Series for Parents and Caregivers (Spanish)

SPANISH: This discussion series helps caregivers become more familiar with social and emotional learning and encourages them to actively engage in their own growth while supporting their children to practice social and emotional skills.

Resources

- [CASEL's School-Family Partnerships to Enhance Children's Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth](#)
- Videos: SEL for Parents in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)
- [NBC Parent Toolkit](#) provides tips on supporting children's social and emotional development at all developmental stages (most resources available in both [English](#) and [Spanish](#))
- SEL-focused parent site and blog, [Confident Parents, Confident Kids](#), featuring strategies parents can use to build social and emotional skills at home
- University of Illinois at Chicago's SEL Research Group [parent resource list](#)
- Montana's Department of Public Health and Human Services + Montana State University's [Parenting Montana site](#) provides SEL tools that have been requested by parents

Up Next: Community Partnerships