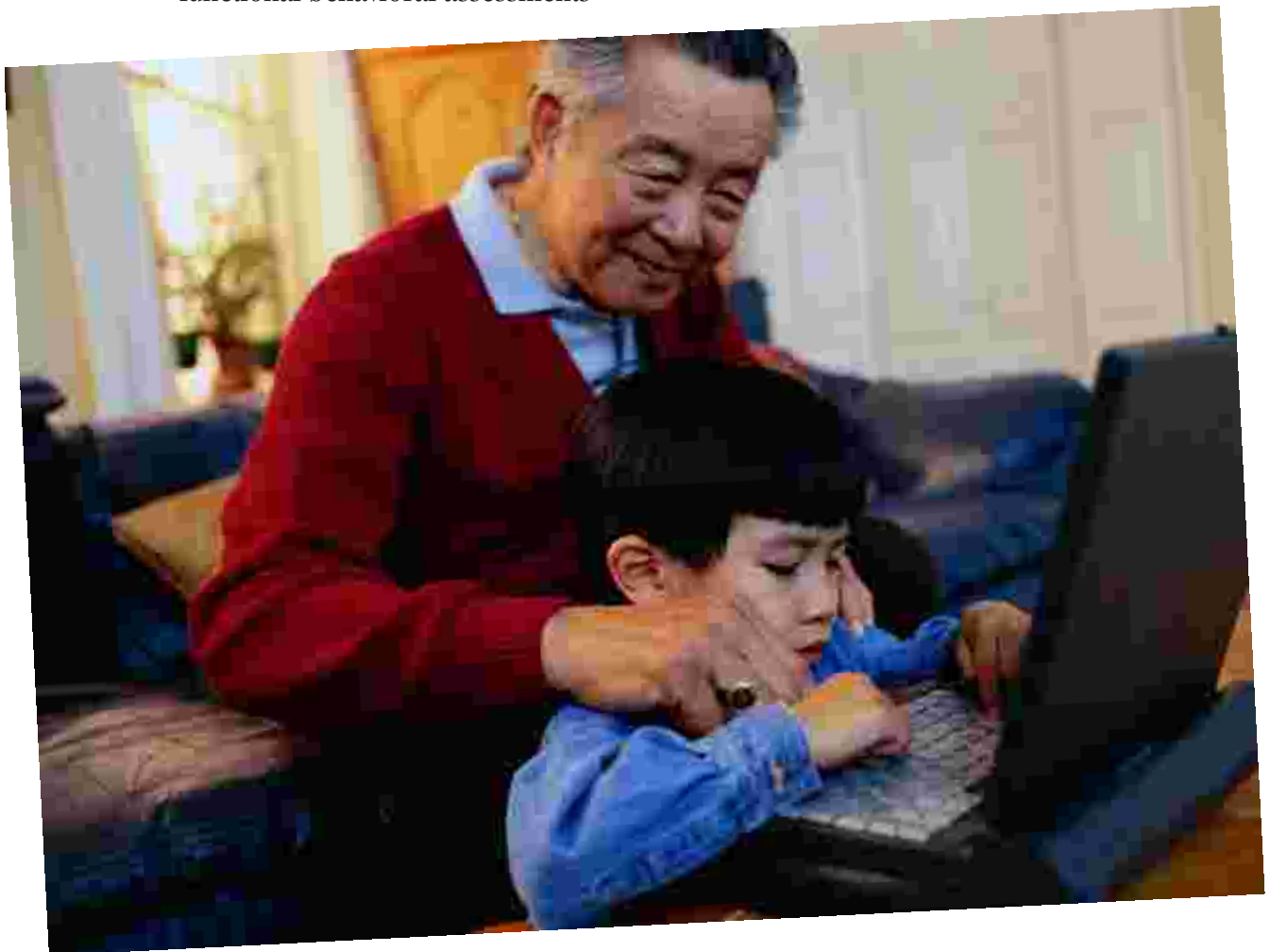


Strategy 5: Supporting family involvement on the homefront

Action Steps:

- Begin early in children's education to involve families in meaningful ways.
- Educate parents to use effective, age-appropriate strategies to encourage learning at home
- Assign homework projects that involve family interaction
- Provide information/resource support for parents helping their children with homework assignments
- Actively involve parents in educational activities such as action research projects and functional behavioral assessments



Going On To College Program

Families play a key role in supporting their children's education in Going On To COLLEGE (G.O.T. COLLEGE) developed by Families In Schools (FIS), a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles, CA, dedicated to strengthening parent engagement to improve student outcomes. The program is based on the success of the Mother/Daughter College Preparation Program, which sought to increase academic achievement by forming mother-daughter partnerships that encouraged 5th and 6th grade students and their parents to plan early for a college. Beginning with the 2002-2003 school year, the program became co-ed, including both boys and girls and their parents. The program includes field trips (university visits, conferences, action planning for college, etc.), student meetings that focus on college/career awareness and academic/life skills, and parent meetings that focus on topics such as college awareness and preparation, home support, and family relationships.

Participants in the program are chosen through school staff recommendations, an application process, and an interview. The program focuses on fifth grade and middle school students and their parents who must meet these criteria: 1) the student would be the first member of his/her family to become a college graduate; 2) the student has the potential and ability to succeed in college; 3) both parent and student commit to actively participate in the program.

Families In Schools developed the training materials and provide training to school and district staff. FIS staff also meet with the teacher mentors on a regular basis to provide coaching and assistance with program implementation. Teachers receive a stipend funded by schools and districts. The local district office also covers transportation for field trips. District leaders and university partners provide personnel and other resources to support the program.

During the 2002-2003 school year the program served 818 students and parents in 18 Los Angeles area schools. Evaluation of the program indicates benefits for participants as well as schools. Participating students and parents increase their knowledge of college and college requirements and their communication about academics. Students demonstrate more motivation to succeed academically. The program also benefits other family members as they learn more about college planning. The program benefits participating schools *“by increasing staff understanding of the importance of early college awareness in elementary and middle school and the value of working with families”* (National Network of Partnership Schools, 2002, p. 163).

According to Ruth Yoon, FIS Executive Director, *“the G.O.T. COLLEGE Program fills a great need — preparing students and families to set a goal for college at an early age.”* A former patient participant commented, *“Before joining this program, I never thought that my daughter could go to college. Now, I know that she can and will.”*

Weekend Study Buddies

Elementary classrooms often include learning centers that encourage self-directed student learning. A special education teacher in **Gwinnett County Public Schools** in Duluth, GA, took this concept and designed the “Weekend Study Buddy” as a portable learning center for her students with mild disabilities ages 5-9 (Stephens & Jairrels, 2003). Using cloth (more durable than paper) or paper (more cost effective and simpler to make than cloth) bags, Harristina Stephens created individualized learning centers that her students could take home on weekends.

Materials included in a Study Buddy can be individualized according to a student’s Individualized Education Program (Addition Facts Study Buddy, Reading Comprehension Study Buddy, etc.) and may include books, flash cards, number lines, photos, magnetic letters, and other manipulatives that students can use while working independently or with a parent. Ms Stephens also sent home written reports about her students’ classroom performance in each Weekend Study Buddy. She discovered after several weeks of use that the portable learning centers increased parent involvement and improved students’ reading and writing skills.

Stephens, who now serves as a learning disabilities teacher at Hull Middle School, said of the value of utilizing Weekend Study Buddies: *“As an educator, it is important that I find ways to help my students become successful learners. The Weekend Study Buddy helps me accomplish that through identifying where students are weak and parent involvement. When parents are involved, students become life long learners.”* A parent who participated in the study buddies project commented: *“When my child started with the study buddy, she was not motivated, but when we sat down together and completed the skills her attitude changed. She became excited about learning and her grades reflected it.”*

Programs that involve family members in the education of their children such as the Going on to College program and Weekend Study Buddies recognize the important connection between “what is taught (at school) and what is encouraged, practiced, discussed and celebrated at home” (Epstein, 2001, p. 510). Families can effectively help by supporting, encouraging, and motivating their children, monitoring their work, celebrating their progress, and engaging in interactions that will help children complete homework and do well in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Epstein, 2001).

Age-appropriate family involvement

The type of family involvement that is most beneficial in the home environment changes as children grow and mature. Helping children with homework is most appropriate at the elementary school level when families understand homework concepts and use developmentally appropriate practices when helping their children (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Balli, 1998). To support students doing well academically during middle and high school, parents should not interfere with self-study, but reinforce autonomy so that their children develop time-management and study skills that will enable them to become autonomous, lifelong learners (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000). Families can also support children as they grow older by helping them develop positive attitudes and values, discussing school-related issues at home, helping children to plan their educational and transition programs, maintaining high expectations for their children, and reinforcing their children’s feelings of personal competence by expressing confidence in their ability to succeed (Hoover-Dempsey, Battaito, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001; Marchant, Sharon, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Sui-Chi & Willms, 1996; Patrikako, 1997). Some students will benefit significantly from opportunities to partially or fully participate in home activities (cooking,

shopping, laundry, menu planning, etc.). Increasing experience and responsibility in these areas can significantly contribute to their potential for a successful transition into community living.

Promising practices that encourage and support family involvement in the home environment include communication to family members about student learning, programs that involve families in homework activities, homework helping services, literacy programs, action research projects, and functional behavioral assessments.

Guidance on student learning

Most parents want to help their children learn, but some may be unsure about what assistance is most helpful or appropriate. Working together, schools can help families develop a home environment that supports children's learning by providing written materials, workshops, web sites, home visits, etc., that offer guidance in the following ways:

- Informing family members about curricular goals and assessments for students in each subject at each grade level with suggested ways to complement the curriculum in the home environment.
- Informing family members of homework expectations and policies, including information about how to best assist children with homework assignments.
- Providing opportunities for parents to learn about differences in how children learn (learning styles, multiple intelligences, etc.) and prepare for school (studying, motivation, test preparation, etc.).
- Involving family members in setting goals for students, making course selections, determining Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and planning for transition to postsecondary education, careers, and the workplace.
- Providing opportunities for family members to learn about different types and levels of involvement and how they can effectively support the education of their children.
- Demonstrating to family members ways to reinforce behaviors at home that enhance learning, such as time management, organizational skills, planning, and limited television viewing and computer use. Encouraging family members to model good reading habits, participate in informal educational activities in the home and community, and promote lifelong learning.
(Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000)

Learning Families

A learning family recognizes that parents are not only teachers but also learners. They can learn from their children, and adults and children can learn at the same time. These learning experiences can be either structured or more casual experiences. Lowy (2002) describes these basic characteristics of a learning family:

- Any family can be a learning family.
- Learning families build a basic foundation for learning in the home and in their interactions with children.
- Parents view themselves “as their children’s learning partners, not their programmers.”
- “A learning family seizes the moment” to learn new things together.
- Anyone in the family can be an expert.
- “A learning family uses the whole community as a classroom and laboratory.”
- A learning family uses travel to learn.
- A learning family has fun while learning.

Involving families in homework activities

One of the most successful programs in the country for involving families in homework activities is the Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) elementary and middle grade program which features an interactive homework process to involve families in math, science, and language arts activities with their children. The program's two primary goals are:

- to encourage students to complete their homework well and to improve attitudes, behaviors, and achievements; and
- to create good information and interactions at home between students and their families about schoolwork (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997).

All TIPS homework assignments incorporate student-family interaction. Evaluations of the program, which have been consistently positive, indicate that a "large number of parents, previously not involved with their children's homework, were actively involved in TIPS; teachers were reporting much higher rates of return for TIPS homework than for regular homework; and the TIPS program itself helped teachers communicate with parents" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001, p. 188).

The following features make the TIPS program unique:

- The program helps all families become involved, not just those who have knowledge in subject areas.
- The program makes homework the student's responsibility and does not require parents to "teach" subjects or skills.
- The program requires students to share their work, ideas, and progress with their families.
- The program includes a home-to-school communication feature that allows families to comment or request information from teachers. (National Network of Partnership Schools, 2000)

The TIPS program can be introduced to parents through letters home, newsletters, or meetings. Classroom or grade-level meetings can be used to show parents examples of TIPS activities and how parents can be involved in them. Students also need an orientation to the program, emphasizing the family involvement component of each assignment.

Homework helping services

The United Federation of Teachers in New York City offers a Dial-A-Teacher homework helping service that provides parents and students free help via telephone when they need assistance doing daily homework assignments in all subject areas. A staff of 45 teachers responds to more than 2,000 calls weekly; approximately 10% of these requests for assistance come from parents. The program is available 12 hours a week on Monday-Thursday afternoons and evenings and offers help in eight different languages (United Federation of Teachers, 2002). Many teachers now post homework assignments on Internet web sites where parents with computers can access helpful information (Imelli & Purvis, 2000). Homework hotlines that include recorded messages of the day's homework assignments are also helpful to both parents and students.

Action research projects

Action research projects bring together teachers and families in new roles and responsibilities that "ultimately strengthen parents' involvement in their child's education" (Kay & Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 8). Parents' involvement in action research has much in common with the involvement of parents in the special education process:

Special educators have been trend-setters in parent involvement, using the individualized education program (IEP) to tap into parents' knowledge about their children. Parent-teacher action research takes the next step — inviting parents to join teachers in a systematic exploration of a puzzling issue. When they work together as equals, parents and teachers have more opportunities to express their respect for one another's wisdom, learn more about the other's perspective, and often become allies in making improvements in the school. (Kay & Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 8)

Action research projects usually involve parents participating as partners with teachers in research on their own children (Kay & Fitzgerald, 1997), although the projects may also entail research on broader educational issues in the school.

The action research process entails several steps:

1. Choosing a research question(s)
2. Collecting data
3. Reflecting
4. Analyzing data
5. Drawing conclusions
6. Brainstorming ideas
7. Developing a plan of action (Kay & Fitzgerald, 1997)

In action research projects focusing on an individual child, parents and teachers set mutual goals and carry out action plans that provide for consistency between home and school. The observations and reflections that are afforded by these projects “yield new knowledge about the child that helps both teachers and parents improve their practices” (*Achieving*, 2002). This process requires “a great deal of commitment from everyone on the team: parents, teachers, and student” (Ryan, Kay, Fitzgerald, Paquette, & Smith, 2001).

Functional behavioral assessments

Family members can be involved in various kinds of assessments of their children's learning. For children with behavioral disorders, families are active participants in the assessment process and implementation of interventions to address problem behaviors. The 1997 amendment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that a functional behavioral assessment be conducted “when a child exhibits significant behavioral difficulties,” in order to “identify why the behavior occurs within a specific context . . . [and] to develop appropriate interventions” (Asmus, Vollmer, & Borrero, 2002). Once the appropriate intervention components are identified, parents, teachers, and other care providers are offered training and coaching so that the intervention can be carried out consistently at home and school. When a comprehensive approach involving parents, teachers, and care providers is used, “there is an increased likelihood for long-term success” (Asmus, Vollmer, & Borrero, 2002).

Parents have valuable insights into their children's behavior — the possible triggers, underlying messages, and desired effects. Too often, their only opportunities to share those insights occur in the wake of serious behavioral incidents, when they are perceived as making excuses or minimizing the behavior at issue. Parent involvement in the FBA process is crucial because it represents an opportunity to use parent's knowledge proactively rather than defensively.

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