

Off to a Good Start!

Ways Families Can Help Children Succeed in Kindergarten



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SAMPLE

Provide a family resource center

A family resource center (FRC) can play a key role in promoting student achievement through family engagement. And it's an ideal way to make kindergarten families feel welcome and comfortable in your school. Here are some suggestions for setting up and maintaining a family resource center. If your school already has one, use this checklist to evaluate your program.

How do you set up a family resource center?

Recruit families and teachers to serve on a planning committee. Have the group:

- Establish goals.** The committee may also want to write a mission statement that could be posted on your website, included in your school handbook and used in grant applications
- Determine a budget.** Work with school, district and state advisors. Consider asking business partners to help underwrite expenses.
- Find a space.** If possible, house your family resource center in a special room in your building, easily accessible for families. If no space is available, find a corner of the library or the cafeteria. Consider an off-site location or even a mobile unit.
- Identify items needed for the space.** These may include a table, chairs, shelves, a coffee pot, cups, lamps, a phone, a computer with internet access, a screen for viewing video content, etc.
- Determine resources needed.** Stock printed materials (books, pamphlets and booklets), lists of community contacts, forms, etc.
- Assess how you will staff your center.** Will your family resource center have a paid coordinator? Will you have a volunteer or a rotating team of volunteers? Will you need to train volunteers to work in the center?
- Set a schedule.** When do you want your family resource center to open? Also consider the days and times you will have the center available for families.
- Plan to evaluate.** It's important to make sure the family resource center is meeting the needs of families. Ask the planning committee to create a form that can be used for yearly evaluations.



Program profile: Working with low-income families

In Oklahoma City, many children were coming to school hungry on Monday mornings. Many of them hadn't eaten anything since their last school meal on Friday afternoon. When children come to school hungry, they can't concentrate on their school lessons. Some teachers were reaching into their own pockets to buy food for hungry children. Now, thanks to a partnership between Feeding America and participating schools, the Backpack Program provides nourishing food that keeps children fed over the weekend.

Telstar Elementary School has nearly one-third of its student population participating in the food program. Each Friday (or the last day of the week), students pick up a bag filled with food. Each pack contains milk, juice, cereal, peanut butter, crackers, beef jerky and other natural snacks. The items provide enough food for four to five meals over the weekend. "It provides enough nourishment that the child does not come to school hungry on Monday," says Candi Ahrens-Padfield, a teacher who coordinates the Backpack Program.

There's very little red tape involved in carrying out the program. Each year, Ahrens-Padfield sends out a questionnaire to all the teachers in the school building asking them to look for children who seem unusually hungry on Monday or who rush to the cafeteria for the free school breakfast. "I don't second-guess. Any child they suspect is hungry gets added to the list."

"Teachers say their students are more focused on Monday morning," Ahrens-Padfield says. Families are grateful, too. They are more likely to trust the school and work with educators. "Families who are worried about putting food on the table are not going to be able to help their child do better in school."

Here's how to make it work for you:

- 1. Learn to recognize the signs that your kindergartners are hungry.** Students you believe have behavior problems may simply not have eaten since they left school.
- 2. See if a local food bank can help.** Feeding America already operates Backpack Programs in 39 states and the District of Columbia. If there is no food bank near you, see if a local church or other agency would cooperate.
- 3. Link families with agencies for additional help.** A family who can't feed a child over the weekend may also need help paying a utility bill or getting to work.
- 4. Use this model to meet other needs.** Perhaps a local business or service organization would help defray the cost of the school supplies you purchase for students each year.
- 5. Be flexible.** Don't turn families away just because they don't qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

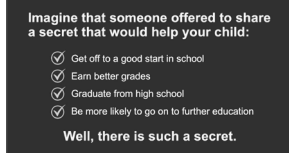
Presenter's script

This presenter's script provides suggested wording for the *Off to a Good Start! Ways Families Can Help Children Succeed in Kindergarten* PowerPoint presentation found in the online portal. You are, of course, free to modify the script to make the words your own, adding or deleting information as you choose. You may make changes to the PowerPoint as well. Please note, however, that under the copyright license for your Resource Kit (see Section 1), you may use the modifications only for your own personal presentation use. The presentation is written to run for about 10 minutes, depending on the speed at which the narrative is delivered.



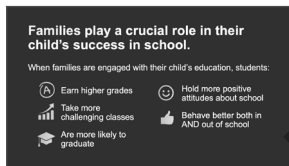
Slide 1

Hello! Thank you for being here today and for taking an interest in your child's school success.



Slide 2

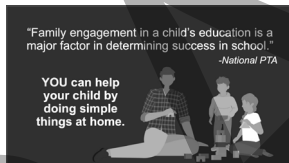
Just imagine ... that someone offered to share a secret that would help your child: [+] get off to a good start in school, [+] earn better grades, [+] graduate from high school and [+] be more likely to go on to further education. [+] Well, there is such a secret. Although, come to think of it, maybe it shouldn't really be a secret after all.



Slide 3

You see, twenty years of research and hundreds of studies have all shown the same thing: Families play a crucial role in their child's success in school. [+] When families are engaged with their children's education, students:

- [+] earn higher grades
- [+] take more challenging classes
- [+] are more likely to graduate
- [+] hold more positive attitudes toward school, and
- [+] behave better both in and out of school.



Slide 4

The National PTA sums up the research by saying: [+] "Studies continue to show that regardless of economic, ethnic, or cultural background, family engagement in a child's education is a major factor in determining success in school." So let's take a few minutes to talk about how you can help your child get off to a good start. [+] There are simple things you can do at home that will help your child develop the skills needed to be successful in the classroom.



Slide 5

Let's start with the most important. Reading together is the best way to help your child get off to a good start in school. Reading is the foundation for success in school. [+] And the best way to help your child develop that important foundation is by spending just 30 minutes a day reading together. 30 minutes may not seem like a lot, but it really adds up. [+] Let's say you read with your child for 30 minutes a week. Over the course of a year, that adds up to just 26 hours of reading time. [+] But if you read 30 minutes a day, you and your child will have 180 hours of reading time over the course of that same year.



Help your child get ready to read

Your child is about to start kindergarten and you may be wondering how you can help with reading readiness. Your goal as a family should be to teach your child *about* reading, not *how* to read. Researchers have identified many reading activities families can do to prepare their children for reading. Here are just a few:

Make the most of reading time

One of the best ways to boost reading readiness is to spend at least 10 minutes a day reading with your child. Be sure to:

- **Allow your child** to choose the book you will read.
- **Ask your child** to help turn the pages. This teaches that pages turn from right to left.
- **Point to words** as you read to show that words read from left to right.
- **Leave out a familiar word** in a sentence and let your child fill in the blank.
- **Ask your child questions** about the story. “What do you think will happen next?” “How do you think this character feels?”

Talk about letters

An important reading readiness skill is knowing that each letter makes its own sound. You can reinforce this skill if you:

- **Name a compound word** like *birdbath*, and ask your child to split it (*bird* and *bath*).
- **Give your child pairs of short words** (such as *bug/jug*, *cat/dog* and *fish/wish*), and ask if they rhyme.
- **Say a sentence out loud** and ask your child to count the number of words in it.

- **Take an easy word** like *big* and ask your child to change one of its sounds (for example, make the *b* sound into a *p*).

Take trips to the library

Help your child develop a love of reading by visiting the library. Let your child sign up for a library card and select books to bring home. Be sure to ask the librarian about children’s programs, such as story hours and visits from authors. Remember to pick out a few books for yourself, too.

Go beyond books

Books aren’t the only tools to help you nurture your child’s reading skills. You can:

- **Label household items.** After seeing *mirror* and *dresser* often enough, your child will begin to recognize those words.
- **Boost vocabulary** by introducing new words. Is that lollipop *yummy*, or is it *delicious*?
- **Point out signs.** Show your child street signs, store signs and traffic signs.
- **Find fun ways to practice writing** letters. Let your child write on a flour-coated cookie sheet or a foggy mirror.



Attendance really matters

Schools are responsible for teaching your child. But schools can't do their job if your child is absent. Learning builds day by day. A child who misses a day of school also misses a day of learning. And it can be difficult to catch up. Your job as a family is to get your child to school on time every day. Kindergarten is the perfect time to show your child that attending school is a top priority and to create an attendance habit that will last.

Attendance is linked to school success

Research on kindergartners through third graders suggests “chronic absence” (missing 10% or more of days in a school year) is linked to:

- **Low performance in school.** It's also connected to dropping out of school, substance abuse and more.
- **Lost learning time** for the children who are at school. When absent children come back, teachers must help them catch up.

Show your child school is important

You can show your child that school is a priority in your family if you:

- **Are excited about school.** Talk to your child about how much fun school is and how much you learned when you were in school.
- **Only let your child stay home** from school because of illness or family emergency. Don't ever let your child miss school as a “treat” or to catch up on sleep from a late night.
- **Don't interrupt the school day.** Make every effort to schedule doctor's appointments and vacations during non-school times.

Establish routines

Getting up early for school can be a difficult adjustment for kindergartners. Routines can help your child make it to school on time every day. Try to:

- **Do as much as possible** the night before. Set out clothes, backpacks and breakfast foods that do not need to be refrigerated. Pack your child's lunch and place it in the refrigerator. Leave a note so you remember it's there.
- **Evaluate bedtimes** and wake-up times. Is your child truly rested in the morning? If not, you may need to set an earlier bedtime. If your child rushes through each morning, you may also need to wake up earlier.

Stay healthy to stay in school

- **Teach your child to wash hands** often—in the restroom, before meals, after sneezing and after playing outside.
- **Don't let your child share things** that have touched another person's mouth.
- **Keep your child at home in bed** if you detect a fever. Be sure to check your school's policy for additional health reasons to keep your child at home.

Welcome families to your school

As the saying goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. It's very important for families to feel welcomed and involved during their child's all-important year in kindergarten. If you can engage them as kindergarten families, you're likely to keep them involved in the future.

For your first encounters with kindergarten families:

- **Make welcoming families a staff priority.** From the office manager who cheerfully answers the phone, to the bus driver who waves hello, to the janitor who greets them with a smile, every member of the school staff should make an extra effort to make kindergarten families (and all families) feel welcome when they are in your school.
- **Send a welcome letter.** Everyone loves to open the mailbox and find a personal letter—and when it's about their child starting kindergarten, families are sure to pay attention. See a sample welcome letter in Section 4 in this resource kit. If possible, send a separate welcome letter to the child, too. The families will be impressed!
- **Phone families before registration,** before your fall kick-off activities or before the first day of school. Having a teacher or even the principal call says “We welcome you!” in a most impressive way. And families will love the opportunity to ask questions of a real-live human being!
- **Greet them outside.** Don't wait for families to come into your building for your registration event or on the first day of school. Have staff members outside to greet them. Have some way for families to identify staff. On the first day, they may not be able to distinguish between other families and staff members.
- **Offer guided tours.** Of course kindergarten families want to see the classrooms, but they'll love a tour of your entire building, too. Recruit families of older students to be tour guides for small groups. They can answer questions as they go along.
- **Use your marquee.** Greet your new kindergarten students and their families as they drive onto the school grounds with a warm welcome on your marquee. No marquee? Consider getting a Welcome Kindergarten Students and Families banner that you can use every year.
- **Use your mascot.** If you have a school mascot, have it outside to welcome students and families as they enter the building. Families and kids will love this.
- **Offer to help.** Kindergarten families are filled with questions—from what supplies their children will need to how to help their children make friends. Provide frequent offers to help them. Once their children settle in, they'll be less likely to need you, but they will always remember you were there!
- **Ride the bus!** Most kindergarten families wait with their children at the bus stop. They will be thrilled to see a staff member waving hello as their child climbs aboard. For more ideas on “riding the bus,” go to Section 4 in this resource kit.
- **Feed them.** Hospitality has always been connected to food. During your first encounters with kindergarten families offer cookies and lemonade or a hot dog cookout—even pizzas for families. It's a great way to say “Welcome to our school,” and it will provide a wonderful opportunity to build a bond that will last through their child's years in your



Invitation to a parent-teacher conference

Here is a sample invitation you can send families to inform them about a parent-teacher conference. A customizable version of this resource, which you can adapt to your needs, is available in the online portal.

(School Name)
You're Invited to a Parent-Teacher Conference

Dear **[family member's name]**,

We've scheduled a conference to talk about **[student's name]**'s progress.

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

What to bring: _____

A parent-teacher conference is one of the most important ways to support your child in school. At a conference, you can:

- Find out what your child is learning in kindergarten.
- Learn ways you can reinforce your child's learning at home.
- Get to know your child's teacher better.
- Tell the teacher about your child's life outside the classroom.
- Share any concerns you may have.
- Ask questions about how your child interacts with others.

If you cannot attend your conference at the time and place listed above, please contact your child's teacher to arrange a time that works better for both of you. Here's the information you'll need:

Teacher's name: _____

Phone number: _____

Best time to call: _____

Email address: _____

Host a family-student breakfast

Breakfast isn't just the most important meal of the day—it can be the most enjoyable, too! So consider hosting a family-student breakfast in your classroom. Although it could happen anytime during the year, think about scheduling the breakfast during a month when there aren't a lot of other activities going on. Who knows? It might be just the thing to keep students (and you) out of the “mid-year doldrums.”

As with planning any event, start by enlisting a core group of family volunteers. Once you have a willing and eager group in place, get together and coordinate a simple menu. Have students design the invitations to send to their families. Since this is an in-class activity (and you'll have the rest of the school day ahead of you once it's over), plan to serve relatively mess-free finger foods and drinks, such as granola bars, cut-up fruit, graham crackers and juice boxes.

This event shouldn't last more than one hour, so you don't need to plan tons of activities for your students. But it's a good idea to have at least one project to do both before and after breakfast is served. Here are some ideas:

- **Placemat masterpiece.** Give each student a piece of construction paper and an assortment of art supplies. Have them create their own placemats before breakfast is served. They'll probably want to use their masterpieces immediately, so avoid giving them glitter glue or anything else that needs to dry.
- **Menu madness.** A few days before the event, have students cut pictures of food out of magazines. On breakfast day, after everyone has finished eating, give the students stacks of the pictures. Have them create a “perfect menu” by selecting foods and pasting them onto construction paper (or paper plates). Send the menus home with families or hang them in the classroom.

Note: As with any classroom activity where food will be served, be aware of students' allergies when planning your breakfast menu.

Tips for encouraging family volunteers

- **Communicate.** Reach out to volunteers well before an event takes place. Continue to communicate right up until the big day.
- **Be accessible.** Notes and handouts won't work for everyone. To reach as many families as possible, be available via phone and email, too.
- **Be creative.** Some families assume they don't have time to help. Find clever ways for them to pitch in—pre-event tasks at home, post-event cleanup, etc.
- **Be grateful.** Let families know they're appreciated with a sincere “thank you” for their efforts. It may encourage them to help out the next time, too!