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Home Learning Activities: A Feasible Practice for Increasing Parental Involvement

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Parental Involvement

Through recent No Child Left Behind legislation, schools are indisputably being held more responsible for better supporting students who are at risk of academic failure. During this time of increased accountability, there is an overwhelming impetus for school reform to increase student achievement. Parent involvement has been identified as one key to increasing student achievement and engagement.

Research has substantiated the importance of increased parental involvement in schools for improving student academic outcomes. Parental involvement in education has been found to be positively associated with child academic success across multiple populations and age groups (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Lareau, 2000; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Steinburg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). Results suggest that when parents are actively involved in their child's education, long lasting academic, social, and emotional benefits occur (Chavkin, 2006). For example, Hill and Craft (2003) found that increased parental involvement leads to early social competence, which predicts academic success. Similarly, parental involvement in school also increases opportunities for families to access additional support and resources that may be necessary to achieve school success for some students (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Furthermore, increased parental involvement has been identified as an effective strategy for reducing the achievement gap (Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Chavkin (2006) sums up these findings well when she states, "When parents are involved in their children's learning, children do better in school and in life" (p. 629).

In light of these findings, schools should seek ways to increase levels of parental involvement to better academic outcomes for students. Research from Bower, Bowen and Powers (Submitted for review) identified a way to effectively and efficiently do just this. Bower and her colleagues found that by increasing parental involvement through home learning activities (HLAs), the relationship between teachers and families can be improved. This study by Bower et al., builds on the previous work of Hoy, Tarter, and Woolfolk Hoy (2006) and used data collected with the Elementary School Success Profile (an ecological assessment tool) to measure Family-Faculty Trust. Family-Faculty Trust is a construct comprised of the reciprocal relationship between teachers and parents where each trusts the other to act in the best interest of the child. Study results suggest that increasing the degree to which parents talk about school with their children and engage in learning activities in the home could be as valuable for increasing Family-Faculty Trust and academic achievement.

Findings from Bower and her colleagues suggest that by facilitating learning in the home, schools can reinforce what is happening in the classroom, and parents can be actively and effectively involved in their child's education even if they cannot be physically present on the school campus. Since many families are prohibited from attending school functions due to a variety of reasons including problems

with transportation, childcare, or needing to work multiple jobs-this is an important finding. Parents and primary caregivers can make an important contribution to their children's learning by participating in educational activities at home.

This finding is well supported by other research that describes the benefits of nontraditional parental education involvement and identifies the need for academic learning opportunities in the home (Barnard, 2004; Chavkin, 2006). For example, Epstein developed a framework for parental school involvement that includes less traditional methods for engaging in a child's education (1985; 1987). In her work, Epstein describes HLAs as schools giving ideas and information to parents about how to effectively help their children with schoolwork or participate in educational activities at home (Epstein, 1995). By promoting and providing HLAs to families, schools can effectively increase parental involvement and strengthen the home-school relationship.

This insight from research can greatly assist schools in their reform efforts. Rather than attempting to regularly bring all parents to the school campus, which may not be feasible, schools can promote academic success by increasing HLAs for families. In response to the previous research findings described above, this article outlines strategies to implement an HLA program in schools and provides eight examples of practical and ready-to-use HLA resources that schools can use to facilitate home learning for families at all grade levels.

Home Learning Activities

HLAs can serve as a tool for providing the means and encouragement for parents or primary caregivers to become effectively engaged in their child's education at home. HLAs provide the strategic opportunity for families to work explicitly on skills that teachers are addressing in the classroom, creating additional support for student success (Barnard, 2004; Chavkin, 2006). As parents become more involved in their students' learning at home, attendance and academic achievement continue to increase, thus success breeds success (Jeynes, 2003). To effectively promote this positive and reciprocal effect, schools can develop an HLA program.

Creating an HLA program can be as simple as gathering and/or creating a cluster of HLAs that school staff can use with students who are struggling academically. Effective HLAs address specific learning outcomes in a simple and engaging manner. HLAs should consist of a structured but fun activity that parents and caregivers can participate in *with* their child. The goal of an HLA is shared time between the adult and child that positively focuses on an academic element and reinforces what is being taught at school. The HLA should support the notion that learning is important and fun within the home.

HLAs must include specific, yet simple instructions for adults about how to conduct the learning activity. The directions should be written concisely, free of educational jargon, and translated into the appropriate language spoken within the home. Furthermore, school staff may consider creating video tapes of a staff member and a child conducting the activity; these tapes could be provided for families with low levels of literacy or who may be apprehensive about engaging in the activity "correctly." Each HLA must clearly describe the developmental and/or proficiency level the activity was designed to address so that school staff can choose an appropriate HLA for a child; the level should be written as concrete skills or objectives rather than grade levels in order to lessen the stigma for students who may be working below grade level. These standards and proficiency levels should also be written in clear terms so that parents understand the specific skills they are developing and the direct connections to

the classroom. The HLAs should be developed to target specific academic skills, such as subtraction or reading fluency. School staff should ensure that HLAs are developed for all skills levels: below grade level, at grade level, and above grade level. All families should have the opportunity to participate in the HLA program; listing the standards in terms of skill rather than grade level may allow schools to maximize the utilization of activities by students at various levels in different grades. Additionally, HLAs can also be created and used to support the development of social skills, character education, and emotional literacy of students who are at risk due to behavioral or social skill deficits. Any materials needed for the HLA (such as books, pens, or stickers), should be provided free of cost to families in an envelope or backpack accompanying the HLA instructions.

Once HLAs have been assembled, they should be stored in a central location at the school where all teachers can access them, and a plan for how they will be delivered to families should be developed and enacted. Staff may provide specific HLAs to parents when individual students encounter difficulty with a specific concept or behavior in the classroom, or schools may choose to distribute HLAs universally through email, mail, or by hand to parents and students. Creating an HLA Center as part of the Media Center may also be an effective strategy for not only housing HLAs but also monitoring their usage and return. Furthermore, plans should be established for restocking HLAs to ensure that the appropriate materials are always available for families.

Advocating for a school to provide free HLAs for parents so they can actively and competently engage in their child's education may be a first step toward strengthening relationships between adults in the home and at school and toward improving academic outcomes. This may be especially true for at-risk students whose families do not have access to many educational resources at home. Ensuring that the HLAs are described as a positive opportunity for families rather than an added responsibility or obligation will be critical to the intervention's success. Parents and caregivers may be more likely to use the resource if their efforts in the home are acknowledged and if the HLA is promoted as a new and fun way to further support a child's learning. Schools may consider providing tangible incentives such as books or school supplies for HLA completion; for instance, students may be able to choose a book after successfully completing ten HLAs.

To help support schools in increasing parental involvement through the use of HLAs, we have developed and provided in the appendices eight activities that can be copied and distributed to parents. These HLAs are provided to show the range of skills that can be targeted and examples for elementary, middle, and high school students. Each HLA lists the targeted skill, required time, needed materials (which should be provided for families along with the instructions), and specific steps involved. Targeted skills are listed rather than grade levels to ensure students are not stigmatized for receiving an activity that may be below their current grade level but still necessary for their individual skill development. Optional extension activities are also provided for many of the HLAs. A brief description of the HLAs included in the appendices is provided below.

- Appendix I describes a reading comprehension HLA (kindergarten student).
- Appendix II outlines a number sense (math) HLA (kindergarten student).
- Appendix III provides a math HLA that reinforces fraction skills (third grade student).
- Appendix IV provides a social skills HLA that promotes the identification of feelings (first or second grade student).

- Appendix V provides social skills HLA for understanding and respecting differences and diversity (kindergarten student).
- Appendix VI provides a reading/science HLA about metamorphosis (first grade student).
- Appendix VII provides a writing HLA about informative writing (seventh grade student).
- Appendix VIII provides a civics HLA about the branches of government (ninth grade student).

Discussion

Study findings highlighting the importance of HLAs for promoting academic achievement imperatively illustrate why schools must consider how to best promote education within the home. HLAs can be an effective and feasible tool for accomplishing these goals. As parents and caregivers become more actively engaged in their children's education, schools will reap the powerful benefits of increased parental involvement, an improved school culture, and higher achievement for students.

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Appendix I

Literacy HLA: Goldilocks and the Three Bears

Proficiency Skill: Reading Comprehension

Time Required: 15 minutes

Required Materials: The book: *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, oatmeal

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet space to read *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* with your child (uninterrupted if possible). Answer any questions that your child may have as you go.
- After you are done reading the book together, ask your child these questions: Did you like this book? What did you like (or not like) about it? How many bears were there in the book? What food did Goldilocks eat that belonged to the bears? Do you know what porridge is? (Porridge is like oatmeal that you might eat for breakfast).
- In the future, make connections between the book and the real world with your child. For example, when you count to the number three, remind them there were three bears in the book. If you eat oatmeal, compare it to the porridge that goldilocks ate.
- Make the oatmeal for your child provided in this HLA packet.

Appendix II

Math HLA: How Many Are There?

Proficiency Skill: Number Sense

Time Required: 15 minutes

Required Materials: A box of toothpicks

Optional Materials: Marshmallows or grapes

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet place where you and your child can sit comfortably with a flat surface. A table or clear area of the floor might work nicely.
- Place five toothpicks between you and your child. Ask your child how many toothpicks there are in the pile. If necessary, help your child count. Use additional toothpicks to form the numeral five beside the pile. The number will look like it does on a calculator, which will help your child learn to use a calculator.
- Ask your child how many toothpicks would be left in the pile if you took two away. If necessary, move two toothpicks from the pile and count the remaining toothpicks. Arrange additional toothpicks to write the math equation ($5-2=3$).
- Repeat the process with different numbers of toothpicks. You can also add toothpicks to the pile for a variation.
- Optional Activity: Use the marshmallows or grapes to attach the toothpicks in the shapes of the numbers. These numbers can then be moved to make multiple math equations.

Appendix III

Math HLA: Peanut Butter Pizza

Proficiency Skill: Fractions

Time Required: 15 minutes

Required Materials: Tortillas, peanut butter or cream cheese, apples, knife

Activity Steps:

- Clear a space on the kitchen counter or a table where you and your child can make the pizza and gather the ingredients.
- Spread an even layer of peanut butter or cream cheese across the entire tortilla.
- Cut the apple in half. Ask your child how many pieces of apple there are now. (Two.) How much of a whole apple is each piece? ($1/2$ or a half.)
- Cut each half in half again. Have your child identify where half of each piece is before you actually cut. Ask your child how many pieces of apple there are now. (Four.) How much of a whole apple is each piece? ($1/4$ or a quarter.)

- Cut each quarter in half again. Ask your child how many pieces of apple there are now. (Eight.) How much of a whole apple is each piece? ($1/8$ or an eighth.)
- Cut each eighth in half again. Have your child identify where half of each piece is before you actually cut. Ask your child how many pieces of apple there are now. (16.) How much of a whole apple is each piece? ($1/16$ or a sixteenth.)
- Arrange the pieces of apple on the tortilla like pizza toppings.
- Ask your child what fraction of the pizza they would like. Which would be a bigger piece: one half or one fourth? One fourth or one eighth? Have your child show you where to cut the desired fraction. Cut the pizza and enjoy!

Appendix IV

Social Skills HLA: Identifying Feelings

Proficiency Skill: Character Education – Feelings

Time Required: 20 minutes

Required Materials: The book: *Today I Feel Silly and Other Moods That Make My Day* by Jamie Lee Curtis, white paper, markers or crayons

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet place where you and your child can sit comfortably to read *Today I Feel Silly and Other Moods That Make My Day* together (uninterrupted if possible).
- Point to the pictures as your child reads and answer any questions he or she may have about the story.
- After your child is done reading the book, ask the following questions: What were your favorite parts of the story? How you are feeling right now? What does your face look like when you feel sad? Mad? Happy? What makes you feel sad? Mad? Happy?
- After discussing the story, take out your paper and drawing materials. With your child, choose 4 or 5 feelings to depict in simple drawings. Allow your child to be creative and provide help when asked.

Appendix V

Social Skills HLA: Respecting and Appreciating Diversity

Proficiency Skill: Character Education – Diversity

Time Required: 20 minutes

Required Materials: The book: *It's Okay to be Different* by Todd Parr, white paper, markers or crayons

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet place where you and your child can sit comfortably to read *It's Okay to Be Different* together (uninterrupted if possible).
- Have your child read *It's Okay to be Different* to you. Help her or him figure out how to read certain words if she or he is having trouble. Point to the pictures as your child reads and answer any questions he or she may have about the story.
- After your child is done reading the book, ask the following questions: What was your favorite part of the story? Have you ever felt different like the characters in this story? How so? How do you think you should treat other people who are different from you?
- In the future, try to connect the content of this book to the real world with your child. For example, if your child is interacting with others who are different from her or him, remind your child of this story and your discussion together.
- Draw and color a picture that represents the example of difference your child identified earlier in this activity. Use the story you read for ideas and be creative with your drawing.

Appendix VI

Reading/Science HLA: Metamorphosis

Proficiency Skill: Reading Comprehension/Fluency

Time Required: 15 minutes

Required Materials: The book: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, white paper, crayons or markers

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet place where you and your child can sit comfortably to read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* together (uninterrupted if possible).
- After your child is done reading you the book, ask the following questions: Did you like this story? What was your favorite part of the story? How many different kinds of food did the caterpillar eat? What did the caterpillar turn into at the end of the story? Do you know what it is called when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly? (answer: *metamorphosis*) If you were the butterfly, where would you fly if you could fly anywhere?
- In the future, try to connect the content of this book to the real world with your child. For example, if you and your child see a caterpillar, you could ask what the caterpillar will eventually become and talk about a caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly. When you are eating food that appears in the story, you could link that back to the food that the caterpillar ate (such as an apple).
- Draw a picture of the very hungry caterpillar and/or a butterfly with your child. You can both be creative, changing the colors and making it into your own version of a caterpillar or butterfly.

Appendix VII

Writing HLA: Informative Writing

Proficiency Skill: 5 W-H Writing

Time Required: 20 minutes

Required Materials: Paper and pen/pencil

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet place where you and your student can sit comfortably and have a flat surface.
- Ask your student to think of a favorite memory.
- Once your student has decided upon a memory, have him or her answer the 5 W and H questions (Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How?)
- Once he or she has answered those questions, ask him or her to write the answers to the questions as a newspaper article. The answers should be clear enough that you feel as though you are reliving the memory.
- Optional Activities:

–Ask your student to illustrate their article or find a photograph to attach.

–Write your own version of the memory. How close are the articles? How can two people view the same event differently? (This could be used as the beginning of a discussion about arguments between preteens and parents; there are usually two sides to every story.)

Appendix VIII

Civics HLA: Branches of Government

Proficiency Skill: Branches of Government

Time Required: 20 minutes

Required Materials: Newspaper

Activity Steps:

- Find a quiet place where you and your student can sit comfortably and have a flat surface.
- Ask your student to look at the newspaper. As he or she reads the headlines, he or she should look for an article that involves each of the three branches of government:

–Executive (The branch of the government that oversees the day to day operation of the government: a mayor, governor, or the president.)

–Judicial (The branch of government that enforces the laws: the courts.)

–Legislative (The branch that makes the laws: the city council, Senate, House of

Representatives.)

- Once the articles have been located, discuss why this branch is important. What would happen without them?
- How do the three branches work together? Are other branches mentioned in an article that is primarily about one branch? (For instance, a governor may sign a law that the legislature created.)

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