



TEACHING  
TOLERANCE 

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# Rethinking Family Engagement During School Closures

*Taking time to check assumptions about family engagement can make a huge difference in the lives of your students and their caregivers.*

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As educators, we often strive to find ways to increase family involvement in our classrooms. Research confirms that family involvement positively impacts students' academic experiences. And in this moment of crisis, especially, engaging our students means engaging their families: Including caretakers is one way to support our students from a distance.

But what should that inclusion look like? What do we mean, exactly, by family involvement?

In my dissertation, I examined how parents from marginalized groups defined their own involvement in their children's education. I discovered that, sometimes, this involvement aligned with educators' expectations—like when caregivers spent time reading with children, helping with homework and volunteering.

More often, however, the examples caregivers used to describe their engagement did not align with what educators frequently identify as family involvement. Parents and guardians described teaching cultural lessons and supporting social emotional learning, for example. They engaged with their children's schooling by relocating to change school districts and navigating social services to ensure their children's needs were met.

Educators must remember there are many ways for families to engage. We must recognize that all families care about their children's education and that engagement can vary based on many factors, including caregivers' cultures and beliefs, their own educational experiences, their types of employment, responsibilities to others and more.

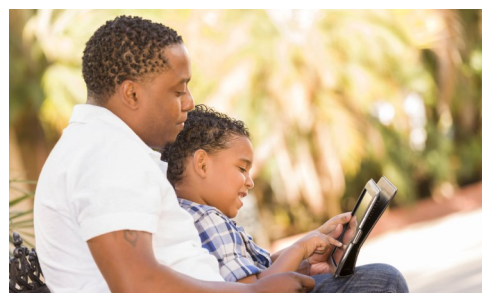
**Assumption #1: Caregivers are home with their children and can help direct distance learning activities. They are available to answer questions, help with assignments and navigate technology issues.**

When designing engaging lessons, even the most well-intentioned teachers can make incorrect assumptions about family involvement. Not all caregivers are home with their children during this distance learning time. Many students are home alone, are being cared for by older children or are taking care of younger children. Caregivers who are at home may be adjusting to working remotely. Only a small percentage of students have a caregiver free of other responsibilities who can dedicate time to guiding them through their learning packets or navigating websites.

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Of course caregivers want to be able to help their children. Many may feel guilt that they cannot be there to help with schoolwork or frustration that they can't navigate the technology their children are required to use. So while families likely appreciate the effort to make activities engaging—like that bird walk you asked your students to take or that recipe you assigned—it may be much easier for them to have their child complete some independent work than to supervise a scavenger hunt.

Educators can increase opportunities for family engagement by being flexible. Providing students with menus of activities that they can pick from will help them to be more independent. And many caregivers prefer having a week's worth of activities up front so that they can plan around their work schedules. Put the bird walk on there and the recipe, but also the e-learning and the reading pages. When students and their families have options, caregivers can create opportunities for distance learning that fit into their lives and current responsibilities, reducing feelings of stress or guilt.



### **Assumption #2: Caregivers understand your expectations and know how to motivate students to complete assignments.**

Let's be honest: Anyone who has kids can probably tell you that even before distance learning, it was a struggle to get their children to complete daily homework. Many families are at a loss for how to manage all the work that is coming home, let alone how to convince students to complete assignments. Even families with education experience may be confused about expectations if they are overwhelmed by conflicting information from school districts, principals and multiple teachers.

Educators can keep caregivers involved by streamlining communication and offering clear expectations. Collaborate with colleagues ahead of time to send one message to families with all the pertinent information for the week. Explicitly tell caregivers what work students can and should do independently, how long it should take and what—if any—role should they might play in supporting their child in this work.

Educators can further support families by assigning work that students are able to complete independently. They should choose work that is engaging and confer with students to establish meaningful incentives. To ensure students aren't forced to rely on caregivers to complete their work, educators can reach out to provide more direct support with check-ins by email, phone or video conferences.

### **Assumption #3: Families expect teachers to assign a full day's worth of work.**

For most families, meeting children's basic needs is their primary focus during this crisis.

Educators must recognize that families can prioritize their children's educations and still be more worried about keeping their employment, their financial security and access to healthcare than they are about their children completing every assignment.

Instead of expecting caregivers to become teachers, educators can complement family engagement by partnering with caregivers to address children’s social and emotional needs. For families, educators can be the person who checks in on their child. We can be there to talk to their child about all that is going on when they are busy trying to make ends meet. We can be an advocate for their child when there is a need.

It’s OK to put the worksheets down. It’s OK to spend time checking on your students. Families trust your expertise—use it to ease their stress rather than add to it during this crisis. Assure parents that you are there to support their children and that their children won’t miss any learning opportunities that cannot be made up when this moment passes.

Maybe you have been focused on trying to get all those positive learning experiences for your students that they will be missing. Maybe you have made some of these assumptions, not realizing their impact. That’s OK. Like their families, you want the best for your students. You can offer yourself some grace, too. Then make some changes.

We are all finding our way in this new learning environment. It’s OK to take a moment. It’s OK to reach out to your families and ask them, “How are you? What do you need from me?”



## Seven Shifts for Reframing Family Engagement across Sectors

Search Institute has identified these seven shifts for reframing family engagement that grow out of our research and field experience:

