One of the greatest predictors of a ready child is a ready family. Parents are the child’s primary teacher, model and provider. Family is one of the most important components that shape children’s early development. To grow up secure and ready to learn, children need a safe, warm place to sleep; enough healthy food everyday; and loving, nurturing adults who support and care for them. (Colorado’s School Readiness Indicators Project)

Children’s readiness for school is related to their families’ ability to prepare them for school. And a family’s ability to prepare their child for school is related to the information, resources, and supports they are able to identify and access. Positive outcomes for children and families are possible when families receive the information and supports they need to fulfill their fundamental parenting responsibilities.

Statistics paint another picture. Statistics highlight the trends that our population of young children has become increasingly diverse, and reinforce the need to expand the role of early education in the lives of young children and families.

- In 2002, 12.1 million children under 18 years of age lived in families with income below the federal poverty threshold (e.g., $18,392 for a family of four).
- In 2002, 5.2 million children in the U.S. had disabilities.
- In 2002, nearly 14 million children had at least one foreign-born parent and were more likely to live below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.
- In 2002, nearly 8.5 million children younger than 18 years of age had no health insurance coverage.
- In 2002, approximately 11.4% of children under the age of 18 had not seen a physician or other health care professional in the prior year.
- In 2003, 63% of mothers with preschool-aged children (younger than 6 years) were in the labor force (either employed or looking for work).
- In 2004, 1.5 million children younger than 18 lived with their grandparents.

(Child Health USA 2004)
There is evidence from several sources that parents’ ideas about readiness are related to their ethnic, cultural, and educational background, as well as to the ways in which readiness is constructed within their community. Parents’ ideas about what being ready for kindergarten means are influenced by the philosophy of the local elementary teachers and administrators and by the ideas of other parents within the community” (Graue, as cited in Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000).

Regardless of the variables that influence how families prepare children for school, parents are their child’s first teacher. Research has identified numerous examples of the formal and informal activities that families engage in to prepare their children for school. Figure 1 offers a sampling of key activities.

**Figure 1**

*Family activities to prepare children for school*

1. Parents read to and with their child; they visit the library, explore books and attend story hour; they tell stories and make up stories together.
2. Parents show interest in what happens at school, preschool, or child care. They display their child’s work, ask questions about the day, keep in contact with the teacher, visit and volunteer in the school when possible; parents attend parent-teacher conferences and/or case conferences.
3. Parents maintain a warm, loving, safe home environment. They have established rules and a predictable daily routine, and have dinner together as a family as often as possible.
4. Parents provide nutritious meals. They make sure their child has up-to-date immunizations and check-ups. They obtain recommended health screenings for their child through an ongoing relationship with a medical professional.
5. Parents encourage turn taking, helping, and sharing at home with and among adults and siblings.
6. Parents praise and encourage their child’s efforts and focus on their child’s abilities and strengths.
7. Parents talk to their child about the world they live in; parents find naturally occurring opportunities to promote and encourage their child’s innate curiosity and love of learning.

Legal impetus for meaningful parental involvement can be found in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). No Child Left Behind also includes a focus on accountability – schools must develop programs that will increase student achievement, and develop programs to communicate and engage families in their children’s education.

In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act has based its definition of parent involvement on the PTA’s National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. Programs should include activities that meet the following six standards:

1. Educators ensure that communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. Educators promote and support parenting skills.
3. Educators ensure that parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. Educators make sure parents/families feel welcome in the school, and encourage their support and assistance.
5. Educators ensure that parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. Educators seek out and collaborate with community resources to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

In addition, an interconnected set of expectations of early childhood programs is encouraged (Powell, 2003):

- To be culturally and socially relevant to the families they serve;
- To foster mutually respectful and reciprocal relations between staff and families;
- To empower parents with information and social support that promotes optimal engagement of the child-rearing role; and
- To function as a bridge between families and other services in the community.

Children who experience challenges before starting school—poverty, single-parent families, welfare, disability, abuse, neglect—are less likely to experience success in school. The role of early educators is to intervene, and “Even if only a portion of the detrimental consequences facing at-risk children in the school-age years and in adulthood can be
It then becomes incumbent on early education to make itself ready for all children and all families.

The diversity and complexity of today’s families compel early educators to re-examine their role in developing family involvement and family education opportunities. Incorporating universal design will allow an even greater number of families and children to benefit from these efforts.

The universal design of family involvement practices supports the engagement of all families in the full range of experiences including communication, learning opportunities, and involvement activities. Practices are responsive to families’ primary language, strengths and needs, experiential differences, culture, ethnicity, and other characteristics. Universally designed family involvement opportunities should enable easy access for all families.

In order to develop a variety of information that will appeal to a wide range of families, schools must first identify, understand and embrace the diversity of the families and children in its own community.

Table 1 offers suggestions for expanding and supporting family involvement through the use of universal design.

Roosevelt Elementary School in St. Paul, Minnesota, organized the Second Cup of Coffee program—a monthly morning activity during which parents have the opportunity to meet with teachers, administrators, and other parents and discuss such school activities as testing, homework, and reading programs. Translators encouraged parents with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to attend these and other school activities. (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

Summary & Implications

Children and families will approach school with diverse experiences and opportunities from which to draw. The challenge is to involve families in ways that are respectful and sensitive to their uniqueness; to offer family involvement and learning opportunities that do not inadvertently isolate, overlook, or stigmatize. Through the lens of universal design, formal and informal strategies and practices can be expanded to welcome and engage the diverse families and young children we serve.
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<th>Evidence-Based Practices</th>
<th>Universal Design Considerations for the Early Educator</th>
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| 1. Early educators ensure that communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful. A variety of options and methods for communication is available, such as: lunch hour telephone calls with parents, off-site meetings, e-mail communication, school and classroom web sites, and information hotlines. | ▪ Strive to accommodate family schedules by offering a variety of options and methods for communication, provided in the primary language of the family.  
▪ Record information hotlines in the languages used by children and families at school and at home. |
| 2. Early educators promote and support parenting skills. Parenting classes are offered on a variety of topics. A lending library of parenting information is maintained and readily available. Newsletters and web sites contain parenting tips, parenting information, and a community resources directory. | ▪ Utilize interpreters/translators, as needed, to help ensure information is presented in all languages used by children & families at school and in their homes.  
▪ Ensure that information is culturally sensitive and does not inadvertently offend or insult any group of people.  
▪ Ensure that parenting classes, library information, newsletters, web sites, and resource directories contain information that is pertinent to families who have children with disabilities or other at-risk or special health needs. |
| 3. Early educators ensure that parents/families play an integral role in assisting student learning. “Family Night” provides assistance and information on subjects such as writing and math and how to help children learn. A family literacy program is available to help families select age-appropriate reading materials for their children. | ▪ Offer child care during family night and organize potluck dinners before meeting times as additional incentive and support for family participation.  
▪ Ensure that child care services clearly include children with disabilities or other at-risk or special health needs.  
▪ Family literacy programs teach families about strategies for reading to a child who may have learning disabilities or other learning challenges.  
▪ Families of children with disabilities have opportunities to learn about the individualized education program (IEP), special education laws and parent rights; support family participation in case conferences. |
| 4. Early educators make sure parents/families feel welcome in the school, and encourage their support and assistance. The vision and mission statement is written in meaningful language that is easy to understand. The definition of family does not exclude anyone who is important in the life of a child. | ▪ Write the vision and mission statement in all of the languages spoken by children at school & at home.  
▪ Expand the definition of “family” to include different configurations of families: extended family members; friends of family—anyone who is important in the life of a child. |
| 5. Early educators ensure that parents/families are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families. Opportunities for families to be involved in school decisions, governance, committees, and advisory boards are widely publicized. Meetings are scheduled at times that are convenient for the majority of families. | ▪ Publicize parent involvement opportunities in a variety of ways, including word of mouth, written information translated into the languages spoken by children at school & at home; schools engage interpreters/translators, if needed, to support and promote meaningful family participation.  
▪ Offer child care during meetings. Include potluck dinners before meeting times to help encourage family involvement and in recognition of families’ home responsibilities.  
▪ Ensure that child care services clearly include children with disabilities or other at-risk or special health needs. |
| 6. Early educators seek out and collaborate with community resources to strengthen schools, families and student learning. Community newspapers carry parenting information and school news. Local libraries offer programs that promote reading to children and other literacy activities. Buildings are open to families after hours to accommodate adult education classes, computer classes, recreational programs, trainings, etc. | ▪ Post newsletters in community libraries, grocery stores, laundromats, health clinics, physician/dentist offices, etc.  
▪ Enlist the support of community and religious organizations, establishments, and churches who serve minority populations, to foster and encourage family involvement.  
▪ Ensure that community adult education classes teach families how to access and use the school web site and other technologies of the school.  
▪ Distribute information in the languages spoken by the children and families of the school community. |

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