

Building a Relational Partnership

The Essential Home-School Bridge

by Donna Housman

It is that time of year—another start to a brand new school year filled with little fresh faces. They are coming, with their lunchboxes and backpacks filled to the brim with curiosity, questions, and big emotions ... and they are not coming alone. Riding along on this most important journey are their parents. As these smallest of learners cling to their moms and dads, they anxiously scope out this new and strange place called “school.” Not only are parents carrying their new scholars

through the doors, but they are also carrying the weight of their own big emotions. For many parents, this might be their first drop-off, and they have no idea what to expect or what might happen once they let go of that little hand.

Parents are always filled with a jumble of emotions as any new school year begins. We are, however, in a “new normal,” and the children and parents coming through our doors have been impacted, as we all have, by the COVID-19 era. For many of our little ones, this is the only world they have ever known. Two and a half years of unpredictability, disruption, economic concerns, and loss of loved ones have caused levels of anxiety and stress for young children and their parents to rise off the charts. The chronic stress that parents have experienced and continue to experience impacts their children’s emotional, social and cognitive development and well-being, which can seriously affect their learning, behavior, and essential social-emotional and regulation skills. We are seeing study after study showing that infants and toddlers are absorbing the stress that their parents and families are experiencing, resulting in emotional and behavioral distress that impacts executive functioning skills, regulation, and elevating levels of the stress hormone,

cortisol. It is an endless spiral of stress passed on to children who do not have the understanding or the skills to manage it all. Without the presence of a supportive, responsive adult to be able to help them regulate their emotions, a child’s cortisol level will remain elevated, impacting healthy brain development and the body’s ability to regulate stress. As educators, we are seeing all of this play out in our classrooms every day—and certainly, parents are seeing it and they are concerned.

Parents have always kept a watchful eye on their children’s development and learning, but the pandemic flipped a switch for many of them. Adding to their already overflowing plates, they became kitchen table teachers with little if any support all during a challenging time, when resources and support were not accessible to many, and in a climate of unrelenting stress and uncertainty. The parents you will be meeting this upcoming school year are just as confused, uncertain, and anxious about coming to school as their children might be. These are stressful times for any parent, and the one they will look to, lean on, and rely on for so many answers to so many questions is you—not just for their child, but in many ways for them as well.



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childhood development center, based on emotional foundations of learning and cognition. Her evidence-based emotional, cognitive, and social early learning approach, *begin* to ECSEL™, fosters the building blocks of emotional intelligence starting from birth to promote self regulation and empathy for lifelong learning, mental health, and well-being. As children develop within the context of relationships the ECSEL relational approach trains educators to understand and manage their own emotions before they can model for and guide children in theirs. Housman is an active presenter and speaker both nationally and internationally, and her opinions and contributions have been published in numerous national and international publications, research journals, and platforms. Housman is the author of the ECSELent Adventures children’s book series. The first in the series, “Gilly and the Garden,” focused on helping young children to understand and deal with loss, as well as “Theo’s Deliciously Different Dumplings,” a story about helping children understand the importance of diversity, inclusivity, and equity will be released this fall.

As relieved as parents may be to walk through open school doors, they also want to remain involved in their child's day-to-day experiences, perhaps more so now than ever before. They want to understand more of what is happening with their child's learning and they want to be sure their child's mental health and social-emotional well-being is at the forefront. We have always known the importance of engaging with and involving parents and caregivers in children's education, but the reality of our world has thrown a spotlight on the vital input, feedback, knowledge, and commitment that families can share with educators. We now have a greater need to make an essential plan for engaging with families in ways that we may not have thought about or put into action before. As early childhood educators and caregivers, you are the first point of contact for parents for all things related to their children. You are the captain of their child's ship during school hours, the one helping to steer their child's journey—not only their learning journey, but their social and emotional journey as well. Parents need you, but you also need them. This relational partnership is foundational and at the center of the promise for students' fundamental well-being and success, starting in the earliest years. It is this partnership that we need to focus on, promote and foster.

Why This Matters

Young children develop within the context of relationships with the key adults in their world. Educators need to be mindful of what parents have experienced, their stress levels, and how the lack of stability has impacted them, and we also need to do this for ourselves. Young children are emotional detectives, and they have been absorbing this stress and these big emotions. They have been watching

and learning from the actions, reactions, and responses—both positive and negative—of their essential caregivers.

Modeling for children and guiding them towards emotional understanding, self-regulation, and empathy requires a full team. Educators and parents are the supports of a three-legged stool and children as that core leg need us to be there, together. To accomplish this, it is critical to form trusting and positive partnerships with families right from the start. After all, parents are their children's first teachers, and they know a lot of vital information about their child: their likes, dislikes, strengths, areas of growth, and quirks. They also understand what their child's comfort levels are, where they might be anxious or uncertain, their level of social interaction, how they are doing with basic skills and areas of growth, as well as the emotions and behaviors they are experiencing and expressing in both cozy and prickly ways. It is imperative that we mine that information and collaborate with children's most important "stakeholders," in order to do our important work.

As with any strong relationship, there are essential steps to making this successful. If children are not receiving consistent messaging and a consistent approach as they begin to learn how to understand, appropriately express, manage and regulate their emotions, they cannot learn the necessary skills of empathy and self-regulation, which impact the growth of executive functioning skills necessary for learning and development. We need to seek out knowledge that only parents and caregivers have, and in turn, share our observations, exchange tips, and provide tools and techniques to support children's continued learning outside of school hours.

How Do We Build the Home-School Bridge?

CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION. The foundation of that all-important bridge is consistency in communication. If children are receiving mixed messages between home and school, they will not be able to effectively establish and trust their own understanding, feel secure in navigating uncertain situations, learn how to respond to others, and know what to do with all they are feeling. This all starts with how we speak to families and how we receive information from them in return. Asking parents up-front about their communication needs, preferences, and ideas sets the precedent that you care about their input, and want this partnership to thrive. For example:

- What are their communication preferences (in-person, email, etc.)?
- What strategies and support methods work best for their child?
- What are their child's interests?
- What routines work well for them?
- What goals do they have for their child?
- Are there any concerns or information about their child's abilities?
- What accommodations are needed to be respectful and inclusive of the specific communication needs addressing cultural and family diversity, non-English speaking families or families with older guardians in charge?

Continuing this level of communication through in-person updates, phone calls, emails, and check-in communication apps throughout the school year ensures that parents feel heard, respected, informed and involved.

Receiving information from parents about how to directly support their children allows you to shape and plan your approach, teaching style, and support methods specifically for the needs of the children in your care.

ACTIVE LISTENING. There is a reason we have two ears and one mouth. We need to listen and listen carefully, not only to children but to their parents and caregivers. Our ability to truly understand what children and their families are experiencing, what their routines are like at home, what real concerns they are seeing, how those interrelate, and where we need to provide focus and support, comes down to listening. Start by asking important open-ended questions such as, “How is your child sleeping?” “Have you seen a change in their mood or behavior?” Actively listen as parents and guardians share their stories, provide insight, and express their concerns. Active listening ensures that you can adjust your responses and communications to fit their needs and provide support to them, in addition to their children.

MAKE A PLAN TOGETHER. Educators and parents need to work together to create a cohesive support plan that addresses both their needs and the needs of the child. Start by meeting together and learning from what parents observe at home, how their routines work, how they support their child, which support methods are successful and which are not, and what areas require additional support. Ask questions about how parents see school fitting into that plan. For example, “What strategies do you use at home to support your child’s big feelings? How can I incorporate similar strategies at school?”

Work together to fill in the pieces by listening to their observations and sharing your own. Use this information as a basis to build a plan for techniques

that address and help meet needs that can be incorporated consistently at home and at school. Schedule check-ins for sharing information about these techniques, and adjust your plan together, according to what is and is not working. The goal for this plan is to ensure that you and parents have a say in the plan and are presenting a united front and using the same language, tools, and techniques on behalf of children.

INVOLVE PARENTS EACH AND EVERY DAY. Whether it is at drop-off, pick-up, or as a visiting classroom helper, invite families into the everyday experience when appropriate and give them opportunities to engage. Help parents feel welcome and essential by including them in classroom routines, play, and curriculum. When opening the doors of your classroom to families, make sure to accommodate the family’s needs and preferences. Think of ways to involve parents each day through several avenues: extending curriculum activities between home and school, inviting families to attend your class play, and taking a video of the play to email home for those who cannot make it. Engaging in daily classroom life helps parents and caregivers feel connected and engaged in their child’s at-school world.

REASSURANCE. It may sound like common sense, but parents are looking to you for reassurance and understanding on a host of issues each and every day. Whenever possible, be sure to check-in with families about how they are feeling, and provide updates and reassurance on progress. Celebrate children’s victories (regardless of how small) related to the plan you created with families. Sharing these victories is a great way to provide parents with reassurance and help them feel involved in their child’s success.

COOPERATION. Parents are stressed and busy, and as much as they want

to be involved, they may not always have the bandwidth to do so. Take small steps whenever you see there may be some resistance to diving in. Work with families by asking in what ways they would like to stay involved, in order to accommodate their schedules. When asked, share easy tips for bringing learning from school to home. For example, suggest to parents that talking about the characters in story books is a great way to start conversations about emotions and can be part of the daily routine such as reading bedtime stories together.

BUILDING A COMMON LANGUAGE. Guiding parents and caregivers about the tools, tips, and language you use to start conversations about big feelings is key to children’s emotional development. Building a common language allows parents to apply their knowledge and language to heat-of-the-moment interactions with children at home. When challenges arise, provide comprehensive updates to parents. Do not just ask for their input and observations, but also be sure to sensitively and respectfully share what language or techniques you used to help with the situation at school. For example, if a parent is experiencing difficulty and struggling with helping their child during challenging drop-offs, step in to provide support. Remain attuned to both the child and the parent’s facial expression and body language. Using this moment as a learning opportunity for both the child and the parent helps the parent gain insight into the successful language used at school. This helps parents establish their understanding of how you support their children, but also gives them a model of how they can use similar language at home and what the outcomes might be.

EMPATHY. Being mindful and understanding of what parents feel and experience is key to building the emotional bridge between home and

school. The feelings, stressors, and experiences of parents impact themselves, their child, and the family. Approach each and every situation with empathy, honesty, and a desire to understand—much in the same way that you approach children to better understand what caused a big feeling. Consider challenging experiences from the perspective of the family and how each member might be impacted. Turn this mindset into a way of informing your responses with empathy and compassion.

BOUNDARIES. As an early childhood educator, you have more on your plate on any given day and at any given moment than anyone who is not in that role can imagine. An important part of building the essential partnership with families is that you establish guidelines and boundaries as to how this partnership can work for you. For example, create communication flows that will not stop you in your tracks or interrupt your day unless, of course, an emergency arises. Put effort into being friendly, which is different than being friends with families, without crossing the line of professionalism. You choose what you share and what you do not share with families. You are, after all, a professional in your field and it is important to be seen as such. Ensure that your time remains your time. While you always want to support the children and families in your care, make sure there is space for you, and that these partnerships are two-way streets that work for everyone.

TAKE CARE OF YOU. You are a key socializer in children's worlds. You influence, inform and shape their understanding and their ability to appropriately express, manage, and regulate their emotions. If you are not taking care of *yourself*—paying attention to your own stress and anxiety, understanding your own emotionality, and using stress-management techniques that serve *you*—you simply

cannot be your best or do your best for the children in your care, or their families.

Remember, this essential bridge you are building is all about creating a healthy and productive relational partnership with families. For children to thrive, you need parents' support and they need your support. They need to hear from you, they need to grow a relationship with you, and they need to have a continuous "conversation" with you. Equally important to building a successful new school year for everyone is communication, cooperation, collaboration, and engagement with parents. It takes a commitment on both sides, and it takes practice. As with any good relationship, keeping the doors open to communication and understanding, being able to make clear what works and what does not, and being flexible to change course when and where needed can create a solid foundation for that home-school bridge—and most importantly for each child who crosses that bridge every day.

