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A Play Bag Intervention: Bridging Home and School

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Abstract

With family involvement in early childhood education threatened by time constraints, the authors offer a dynamic solution for building relationships and fostering communication through take-home play bags.

Key words: early childhood education, research/statistic

Kalasia (all names are pseudonyms) prepares for dismissal from preschool, zips her backpack, whispers to her best friend, and listens to her teacher call out instructions. “Bus riders, line up!” From this moment on, the volume of the room seems to increase.

Everyone is talking at once when three situations collide in a last-minute rush to manage dismissal. First, Ms. White, the lead teacher, sees Jordan still at the snack table; “Jordan! Aren’t you on the bus today? Hurry up and get in line!” Then the twins’ grandmother walks into the classroom laughing in conversation with another parent. She is greeted by the assistant, “Good afternoon!” The twins, noticing their grandmother’s entrance, squeal “Mimi!” Lastly, Kalasia, a bus rider, shouts a cheerful “Bye” as she walks out the door.

The home–school connection is alive in this active and boisterous part of the day in early childhood classrooms. However, many early childhood educators find it difficult to make connections

with parents during these crucial moments in pickup and drop-off. This scene depicts missed opportunities to build home-school connections with busy parents as well as highlights the lack of opportunity to connect with bus-riders' families. This article suggests creating take-home play bags to engage families from preschool through kindergarten. Individually designed, take-home play bags contain books, toys, tips, and feedback sheets that represent a teacher's knowledge of the student, build rapport among teacher and parent, and support in-home parent-child interaction. The play bag design strategies presented here provide new ways for teachers to draw in families on the perimeter.

Family Involvement

Research on family involvement in school highlights the benefits for young children (Epstein, 2011; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013). Positive associations between parents' involvement in school and their children's achievement are well established (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Parker, Boak, Griffin, Ripple, & Peay, 1999). (Note: We use the term *parent* throughout to refer to any adult who regularly cares for a child in a home environment). However, busy drop-off and pickup times are common hurdles for many teachers trying to build home-school connections (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

Parents' self-efficacy, defined as important parental beliefs or expectations about their ability to parent successfully (Jones & Prinz, 2005), can be negatively impacted when parents value school involvement but struggle to make connections. Work and time constraints often limit parents' availability for school involvement (Child Trends, 2013). Dynamic family engagement initiatives are needed that support busy families rather than increase the demands on their overloaded schedules (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998).

Take-home play bags can offer an innovative way to foster a stronger home-school connection with families that have limited time to spend in the classroom (Abadiano & Turner, 2003). When face-to-face time with families is difficult to achieve, take-home play bags can encourage parental involvement in school by initiating connections between teachers and families who would otherwise be disconnected. Take-home play bags are unlike notes home or homework worksheets, which may be easily lost in the bottom of backpacks, misunderstood, or perceived by busy parents as an additional responsibility rather than a resource. Strengthening connections among teachers and families (by sharing intentionally designed take-home play bags) as well as among parents and children (by

encouraging in home parent–child play) supports parent self-efficacy as well as home–school partnerships.

A Building-Connections Theory

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory offers understanding of the relationships among children’s multiple learning environments. Parents’ in-home support of young children’s development represents what Bronfenbrenner called the *microsystem*. Microsystems do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they interact (microsystem to microsystem) in what Bronfenbrenner referred to as *mesosystems* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Mesosystems are characterized by mutual influences, such as the influence of home life on school performance and the influence of school experiences on home life (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Based on this theory, we conceptualize the parent–child relationship as one microsystem and the teacher–family relationships as another microsystem, converging in a mesosystem, which is a home–school partnership (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research on school and family partnerships has asserted that teachers and parents reciprocally influence one another’s beliefs regarding parents’ role and involvement (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Take-home play bags support the home microsystem, with specific attention to the parent–child relationship. Take-home play bags can be tailored for efficiency through a strong school microsystem, which is the teacher–child relationship. The more a teacher understands a child’s interests, the more engaging a teacher can design a take-home bag to be.

Take-home play bags simultaneously build a bridge within the parent–teacher relationship (mesosystem). A well-designed take-home play bag can support the growth of the home–school mesosystem by reflecting the early childhood educator’s understanding of a child’s interests, expertise in early childhood education, and enthusiasm for connecting with the parent. In turn, busy parents who are lost in the shuffle of busy drop-off and pickup gain new opportunities to get to know teachers, to embody their interest in their child’s education, to use resources to build connections through play rather than “work” (homework), and to foster new lines of communication with teachers.

The Intervention

We conducted a take-home play bags intervention with 10 Head Start families. Each family received a new play bag, once a week, for four weeks. A second iteration of our play-bag design, first conceptualized with mathematics content by Linder (2017) in a funded project investigating home mathematics environments, included bags inspired by social and emotional development (Emerson & Linder, 2017). The social emotional play bags included a children's book, manipulatives, a tip sheet, and a feedback sheet. The children's books were carefully selected to match the child interests and the bag theme. The manipulatives varied from simple exploratory toys to collage-type materials. Tip sheets supported families with open-ended strategies for enriching interactive play. Feedback sheets elicited parent responses regarding the play bag's appeal, difficulty, and novelty.

To assess the effectiveness of the intervention, parents were invited to share their experience. A concurrent mixed-methods design was used to explore the efficacy of the intervention. We sought to ascertain how the intervention was perceived and used by participants. Quantitative (single-page, paper-and-pencil feedback surveys) and qualitative (semi-structured post-intervention interviews) data were collected and combined to assess the influence of the intervention.

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed families' consistent interest in each of play bags. Results from "agree" and "disagree" survey response items showed that families found the bags enjoyable, novel, and helpful for supporting play. Emergent coding of the qualitative data revealed high levels of engagement between parents and children as they enjoyed the play bags together. Within the post intervention interviews and short-answer surveys items, parents shared insights into how the bags supported their parent self-efficacy and home-school connection. Parents described examples of how they extended the take-home play bags or made them their own.

How to Create Take-Home Play Bags

We synthesized our participants' feedback to provide you with a framework for creating your own take-home play bags.

Know your audience.

“*She loved that bag, ’cause she love trains.*” This quote is from a parent describing why her child enjoyed a particular bag. It reveals the power of harnessing children’s interests to create engaging play bags. Begin the design of a take-home bag by considering what you know about your students and their families. For example, carefully selecting a book that features a child’s favorite topic indicates your knowledge of the child to the parents. In this way, you can display your commitment to engaging the child (mesosystem) and strengthen your parent–teacher bond.

Use bags to share power with parents.

A second consideration for bag design is to consider what the child is working on or struggling to learn. Difficult topics can often be addressed by including quality children’s literature in the play bag. When Mo Willems’s book *Waiting Is Not Easy!* was paired with some tips for sharing waiting experiences and strategies with young children, these materials provided support for an in-home discussion about waiting. A father recalled his experience with the play bag by sharing, “*When they would have to wait, the twins would bring up Gerald. We had to ‘wait like Gerald’ for them to understand what needed to be done.*” In fact, the children referenced the book when they found themselves waiting for dinner later in the week. The bag provided a segue for the family to share examples of how waiting makes them feel and some different ways to deal with it.

Moreover, this father’s feeling of self-efficacy was boosted by the teacher’s book choice, which helped him approach a topic that posed a challenge to his family. Along with *Waiting is Not Easy!*, the play bag contained a waiting race activity that used small sand timers, binoculars, and a dry-erase board for families to explore *looking* in an open-ended way as a strategy for waiting. Parents felt empowered and connected when the take home bags included books and activities that their children not only greatly enjoyed, but also delivered helpful messages. You can support parents’ self-efficacy by setting them up for success.

Reflect the family's characteristics in your selections.

It is important to consider each child's uniqueness in selecting play-bag materials. An early childhood teacher might spend hours in the library browsing children's literature for books that reflect every student in culturally relevant ways. But a bus rider's parents may never see the fruits of that teacher's labors. Sharing culturally responsive literature like *I Love My Hair* by Natasha Tarpley in a take-home play bag allows teachers to represent the way they honor children's individuality directly with parents. A grandmother recalled her granddaughter's reaction to a book shared in a play bag: "*She relates to the girl, Keyana. We braid my child's hair every week. She says she is Keyana!*"

Linking these specially selected texts and uncommon open-ended play materials provides preschoolers and their families opportunities to play with challenging themes at home through their own cultural lenses. *I Love My Hair* paired with stress balls, a tangles toy, and art materials to make face collages provided unprescribed ways for families to discuss and play with emotional vocabulary at home. Selecting books that feature children and themes from varied cultures, ethnicities, or abilities shows support of all families.

Present simple materials in new ways.

Consider selecting materials that are open-ended or novel to home learning environments. A mother reviewed her favorite play bag:

This was probably the best one (take-home play bag), where she was able to get more creative with it. She got her little puppets and, yeah, she really liked that one. . . . I liked it because I was actually able to see her get into things. She learned how to draw happy faces and sad faces.

This mom described how some simple take-home bag materials (googly eyes, crayons, glue, and paper bags) allowed her to share new experiences with her daughter. Parent and child made puppets together and discussed emotions in ways that worked for them. The pairing of these simple open-ended materials with Saxton Freymann's *How Are You Peeling?* provided a new space for mom and daughter to discuss emotions in their own way. Rather than prescribing to parents the best ways to teach their children about emotions, these materials facilitated another activity and discussion relating to emotions that parent and child were openly invited to craft together.

Closing Thoughts

Take-home play bags are an effective way for early childhood educators to help parents feel connected and engaged in their child's early education. The excitement generated by the play bags made them an easy sell to young children. The books and materials seemed to motivate children, and their excitement often initiated parents' interest. Our requests for parents' feedback completed the home-school partnership loop. Our interest in parents' preferences deepened our understanding of the families and opened new lines of communication.

How will you harness the potential of take-home play bags to bridge the home-school divide? Let a take-home play bag do your talking and see what happens. Send the bags home and watch relationships grow.

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