

BUILDING STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND SCHOOLS

A Workshop Facilitation Guide

Workshop Purpose and Focus:

The purpose of this workshop is to guide schools, community organizations, families, and researchers in their efforts to build **deeper engagement and partnerships** between **schools** and **families of children with disabilities** based on existing research and promising practices. Participants will use an **assets-based lens** to identify ways to overcome barriers to partnerships and to develop **meaningful collaborations** in different cultural and country contexts.

Learning Objectives:

- Define and understand the importance of family, school, and community partnerships in supporting children with disabilities' learning, development, and well-being.
- Identify types of and barriers to inclusive family, school and community partnerships.
- Develop contextually-relevant strategies for strengthening partnerships between families of children with disabilities and schools.

Definitions:

Family, school, and community engagement encompass the many ways families, educators, and community groups work together to promote student learning and development and support schools to thrive. Engagement varies depending on the context, but the intention is to support **stronger collaborations and partnerships** that ensure teaching and learning is equitable, inclusive, high-quality, and relevant

Suggested Timeframe: 90 – 120 minutes

Suggested Participants: Schools (teachers, education leaders, staff), community organizations, families, and researchers

Materials Needed:

- Large paper and writing utensils for group work
- Copies of scenarios in the Appendix for all participants

Proposed Workshop Agenda

Time	Facilitator Notes
20 minutes	<p>Objective 1:</p> <p>Welcome and Define Family, School, and Community Partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening: Introduce the purpose, learning objectives, and framing of the workshop. • Storytelling: Share a story that describes strong partnerships between a child with disabilities, their family, and their educators. <p>Activity 1: Think-Pair-Share. Share the questions below with the participants. First, participants independently reflect on their responses to the questions. Second, in pairs, participants discuss their individual reflections. Third, 3-4 pairs share their reflections with the whole group.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is one word that describes the current state of inclusive family, school, and community partnerships in your school, community, or context? • What is one word that describes your hope for inclusive family, school, and community partnerships in your school, community, or context in a year from now?
20 minutes	<p>Objective 2:</p> <p>Identify types of and barriers for inclusive family, school, and community partnerships.</p> <p>Activity 2: Small Group Brainstorming. In groups of 4-5 participants, each team will identify barriers to and opportunities for building strong family, school, and community engagement and partnerships. Participants will skim: "Research on Types of and Barriers to Family Engagement" (Handout 1). Then, groups will discuss the following questions and map out types of engagement and barriers to engagement they have seen/experienced in their communities.</p>

Time	Facilitator Notes
40 minutes	<p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are types of family, school, and community engagement and partnerships in your communities? • What are the barriers to family, school, and community engagement and partnerships in your communities? <p>Objective 3: Develop contextually-relevant strategies for strengthening family, school, and community partnerships.</p> <p>Activity 3 (Part 1): Small Group Scenarios. In the same small groups, each team will read 1 of the 6 scenarios shared with them “Scenarios from Around the World” (Handout 2). Then, groups will discuss the types of (existing and potential opportunities) and barriers to engagement in their scenario and identify some strategies that may be taken to build stronger partnerships.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are types of (existing and potential opportunities) for building family, school, and community engagement in the scenario? • What are the barriers to building family, school, and community engagement in the scenario? • What are 2–3 strategies for building partnerships that could be used? (designate clear roles/actions of educators, families, students) <p>Activity 3 (Part 2): Gallery Walk and Discussion. Participants will participate in a gallery walk. Each group will have a space (virtually or physically) to display their types of, barriers to, and strategies for partnerships. Participants will read or listen to other team’s family engagement types, barriers, and strategies. The activity ends with a whole group reflection, with suggested questions below.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What types of and barriers to engagement did you find in common across groups? What differences did you see? • What would it take to implement some of the strategies that were named?

Time	Facilitator Notes
10 minutes	<p>Closing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recap: Recap the workshop objectives. • Q&A: Allow space for questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ How can we ensure that families of children with disabilities are seen as assets, resources, and allies to schools? ◦ How do we strengthen existing partnerships between families of children with disabilities, school, and communities? • Final closing statements.

Handout 1: Research on Types of and Barriers to Family Engagement

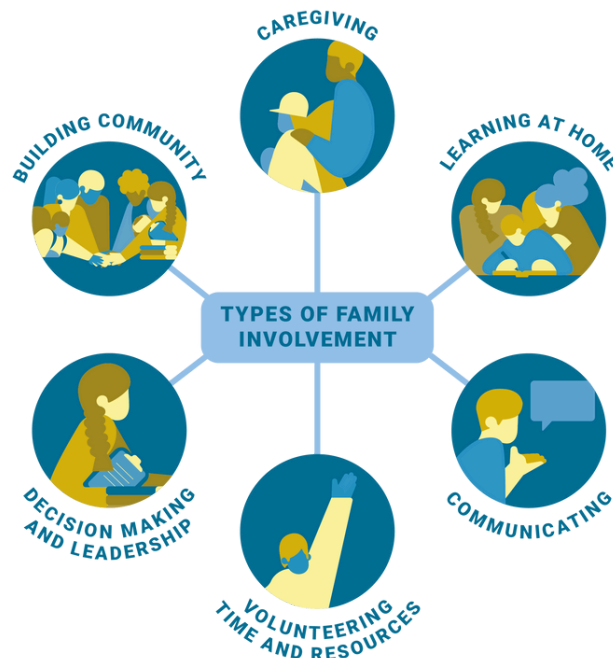
Family, School, and Community Engagement

Family, school, and community engagement is the **many ways** that families, educators, and community groups **work together** to promote **student learning and development** and to support **schools to thrive**. Family, school, and community engagement varies depending on the context, but the intention is to support greater collaborations and partnerships that ensure teaching and learning is **equitable, inclusive, high-quality, and relevant** (Morris & Nora, 2024).

Types of Engagement

Families are involved and engaged in their children's education in six different ways (Epstein et al., 2018). From global research on family school, and community engagement conducted by the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, families think of their engagement as the work they do in caregiving and to support their children's learning, which are not types highly visible to educators. Educators often think about family, school, and community engagement as direct communication, participation and involvement in school events, decision making, and leadership, the types that they see directly (see [Six Global Lessons on How Family, School, and Community Engagement can Transform Education](#)).

Figure: **Types of Family Involvement and Engagement**



Source: Center for Universal Education, 2024

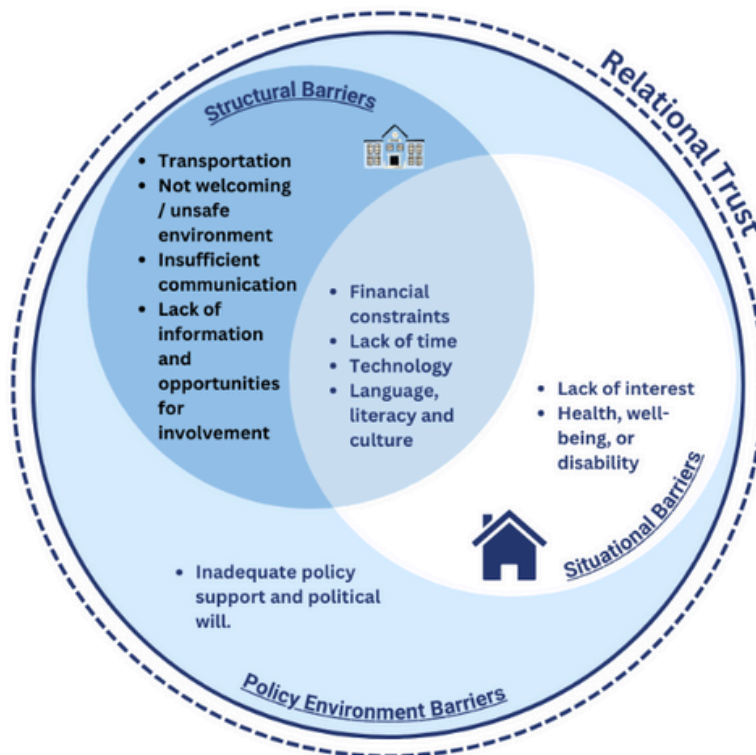
Research shows that families of children with disabilities often have...

- **Caregiving:**
 - more **demanding caregiving responsibilities**, and that mothers often carry a heavier share of the caregiving (Aldosari, 2023).
 - to extend their **caregiving into schools**. For example, in some Malawian schools a caregiver serves as a support staff to their child in the classroom.
- **Supporting learning at home:**
 - to **adapt learning and assignments** to meet the child's needs at home (McKenzie et al., 2021).
 - to advocate for **adequate and appropriate resources** for the home learning environment (Oranga et al., 2022).
 - to invest in **private tutoring, healthcare, therapies**, and other **critical services** to support learning (Camino & Turley, 2023).
- **Communication:**
 - to **communicate regularly** with educators to ensure their children's needs are met, including securing services and accommodations (Burke & Goldman, 2017). The level of communication varies across contexts (Zablotsky et al, 2012). Here are some examples in different countries.
 - In the US, communication often occurs through Individualized Education Plan meetings (Rossetti et al., 2021; Goldman, 2020).
 - In Argentina and Costa Rica, communication often occurs through informal channels like WhatsApp and after-school chats (Camino & Turley, 2023).
 - In Kenya, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and South Africa, there is often limited or no structured communication (Lee et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2021; Oranga et al., 2022).
- **Building community:**
 - to work together with **schools, community organizers, and healthcare professionals** to advocate for their children's needs and rights. This helps them bridge gaps in access to information about advocacy (Burke & Goldman, 2017). Example: In Malta, some parents/caregivers created informal support networks where they shared contacts, helped children access school placements, and shared advice on how to tailor education.

Barriers to Family, School, and Community Engagement

There are many structural and situational barriers impeding strong partnerships. Structural barriers are those barriers perpetuated by society and policies, whereas situational barriers are those encountered in households and families. Different beliefs among school educators, families, and students on the barriers and the source of barriers often leads to a blame game between schools and families. In order to break this blame game, strengthening family and school partnerships and building relational trust is critical (Morris & Nora, 2024).

Figure: **Barriers to Family Involvement and Engagement**



Source: Center for Universal Education, 2024

Structural Barriers

Children with disabilities and their families often find that:

- **there is not adequate or safe transportation** (World Bank, 2022)
- **schools are not welcoming or are unsafe**, and that students with disabilities:
 - face **stigma** in school and society (World Bank, 2022).
 - are **assigned lower expectations** by educators (Smith et al., 2020).
 - may be removed from schools because of **bullying** (World Bank, 2022).

- **there is insufficient communication** and:
 - **insufficient information** tailored to children and families with disabilities (McKenzie et al., 2021; Oranga et al., 2022; World Bank, 2022).
 - **existing communication** with educators and leaders can be **latent with power dynamics** and tensions, making advocating for their child(ren) difficult and stressful (Burke et al. 2020; Camino & Turley, 2023; Goldman et al., 2020).
- **there is a lack of opportunities for family engagement. Additionally, families of children with disabilities:**
 - are **excluded from school-based activities** and events, such as family days (Gedfie et al., 2021).
 - are less **likely to receive report cards** (UNICEF, 2021).

Situational Barriers

Families of children with disabilities often experience:

- challenges to **health and well-being**, including:
 - **poor health** and disabilities of a caregiver (Dunst, 2022)
 - **high levels of stress** as they navigate the school and health care systems (Ilias et al., 2018), which is especially true of mothers in many parts of the world who carry a heavier share of caregiving (Ilias et al., 2018; World Bank, 2022)

Overlapping Structural and Situational Barriers

Families of children with disabilities often grapple with:

- **financial constraints** that prevent them from engaging more with schools. For example, they have:
 - **greater educational costs** such as learning materials, private tutoring, and additional healthcare services (World Bank, 2022). Families experiencing poverty often do not have the same access to services, resources, and needs and capabilities to engage with schools (Soni et al., 2022)
 - may have **limited earning potential** if they have to frequently take time away from work to attend to their children's needs (Inclusive Development Partner, n.d.).

- **lack of time** to get engaged and involved because they have so many other demands upon them and their families. Namely they have to take time away from their work to communicate with schools and support learning at home (Wong et al., 2015).
- **language, literacy, and cultural barriers.** Families with:
 - lower education and literacy levels often **struggle to access the same services** and supports, and navigate policies, laws, and other educational jargon (Goldman, 2020).
 - **minoritized racial, ethnic, and language identities** often feel less welcomed and included in schools (Burke & Goldman, 2017).
- **lack of technology**, which includes **inequitable access** to technology to support learning at home or communicate with schools (Bakaniene et al., 2023; Miles et al., 2018)
- the **policy environment** can also pose challenges including:
 - **limited legal, social support, and funding** for children with disabilities (Ilias et al., 2018; Odondo, 2018).
 - many countries also have **limited guidelines** for **implementing** inclusive education policies (Lee et al., 2023).

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Handout 2

Scenario 1: Amira is an 8-year-old girl with intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) who has never been allowed to attend her local mainstream school. Her mother learned that there is a new government policy that mandates that all children with disabilities should be able to receive an inclusive education. When the mother went to the school leader to enroll her daughter, Amira, in school, she was told that they were not prepared to support a child with her daughter's level of support needs and denied Amira access to enrollment. The mother went to a local organization of persons with disabilities (OPD) to explain her challenges. The OPD then went to the school and educated the headteacher on the new law and requirement for inclusive education. The school said that Amira would be able to enroll, but her mother had to provide a teacher's assistant/personal aid for her to attend.

Scenario 2: Augustine is a 5-year-old boy with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). His parents/caregivers would like to enroll him in school but were told that first he had to be evaluated as having a disability, and obtain a disability certificate before the school would enroll him. There are only 15 assessment centers in the country and they are all understaffed and underfunded. Many of the assessment center staff have limited training in the identification of disability and use an old checklist that was made for learners with Down Syndrome but does take into consideration other forms of intellectual disability or developmental disability such as autism. The assessment centers are in the main cities, which are far from the family's village. The family does not have the funds to travel to the assessment center outside of their village, so they decide to keep their child at home and engage him in house chores, and support the family in farming.

Scenario 3: Samir is a 12-year-old boy with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). He spent the first 5 years of education in a segregated school away from his family. The country where Samir lives has started to promote inclusive education, the family was excited that Samir could live at home with his family. He is now attending a mainstream school but other children often tease him for speaking differently than they do and moving in a way that they find strange. His parents are concerned that he is being bullied at school by both his peers and his teacher. They are hesitant to bring this to the attention of the school leader as they are afraid Samir's teacher will become angry and make things worse for their child or even potentially request to remove Samir from school and send him back to the segregated school far from their home.

Scenario 4: Joy is an 11-year-old girl with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). The school is very open to having Joy in the classroom, and the teacher is very kind to Joy and works with her to make sure she is learning academics and has a good relationship with her peers. The challenge is that the school is very far from their home, and Joy's mother is concerned that she will have to walk a mile each way to school on her own. There are several stories of girls being assaulted on their way to school and Joy's mother is concerned that she would be vulnerable due to her disability. Joy's mother used to walk with her to school and wait for her to walk home together. However, Joy's mother now needs to earn an income (as her husband is ill), and she is afraid to send her child to school without someone to protect her. Due to the risks, she removed Joy from school to keep her safe and then was contacted by the school to ask why she does not value education for her daughter.

Scenario 5: Evan is 5 years-old with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) who is scheduled to transition to primary school this coming fall. He resides in an urban center with his parents and neurotypical older sibling. Due to his family's resources, Evan has been receiving services to support his development through private providers, including speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and social skills training. With his transition to primary school on the horizon, his parents are concerned that Evan's needs will not be addressed by his local school. They fear the progress he has made with private services will be lost if the public school does not offer him services as intentionally as they have provided for him privately. With their older son at the primary school, they already have a sense that Evan will be placed in an exclusionary, substantially separate environment that will not focus on learning academic and critical skills for his development. As he transitioned to primary school his parent servicing will transition to the school. They are considering keeping him home from school and homeschooling him with private resources.

Scenario 6: Maria is a 9 year old girl with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). Maria was thriving in her local school up until this fall. As a result of feeling threatened by a male classmate, Maria exhibited an 'extreme' protective behavior that the school viewed as violent and aggressive. Although Maria did not intend to hurt anyone, did not physically hurt the boy, and was acting out of her own preservation, Maria was treated by the school as the perpetrator and aggressor in the situation. Deemed a threat to her classmates and teacher, Maria was expelled from the mainstream school and placed in an institution for evaluation.