

Family Engagement

Share the language goals of your program with families. The Bridges Program may be used with a variety of program models. Examples of basic information you might share include:

- Language learning is essential to your child's development and learning in all areas.
- Children who have a strong foundation in their home language are able to transfer the concepts learned to a second language.

Bridges is designed to enhance existing classroom learning experiences by focusing on children's oral language, vocabulary and early literacy skills and knowledge. It builds on what children already know, have experienced and are able to do. The program increases the child's second-language vocabulary for concepts already established in the child's home language, and it recognizes that the child's home culture and language are strengths that should be used in all early childhood program planning. Bridges encourages teachers to use many strategies to support the child's ability to understand the meaning of what is being said, and develops new concepts, reinforces and expands the child's home language skills.

While the Bridges curriculum may be used to extend any curriculum model, if you use children's home language in your program, be specific in sharing that information with families.

For example, if your program is a bilingual Spanish/English program model, you might include one or a combination of the following in

your information to families.

In our program we have:

Alternating days in English and Spanish (or the home language):

- For example, Mondays and Wednesdays all activities are in Spanish, and
- Tuesdays and Thursdays all activities are in English.

Different activities/routines are offered in different languages:

- Circle-time activities can be done in one language and repeated in a second language at a different time.
- Small groups can be individually designed so that children will focus on learning new concepts in their primary language and then rotate to secondary language groups to learn vocabulary of concepts already learned.

Specific staff members consistently use one language or another:

- During arrival time, free-choice time, outside time and mealtime, a staff member provides casual conversation and guidance in the primary language of your child.

When working with families that are multilingual and multicultural consider the following:

- Use many ways to communicate regularly with all families in your program.
- Hold high expectations for all children.
- Remember that families come in many different forms and structures.
- Reach out to all families, because it is up to the program to create a family-friendly environment.

Two-Way Communication

Learn the stories, hopes, dreams, needs and strengths of families. Building trusting and respectful relationships with families is every teacher's goal. This vision will not become real unless a teacher considers how and when the opportunity to talk with families might occur.

Having short, daily or weekly child pickup and drop-off conversations, as well as scheduled conferences, family night group meetings or home visits are all tried-and-true early childhood program practices. Opportunities for reporting back to families how their child's program reflects their culture, values and goals and is meeting their child's learning and development needs is usually the next step in a growing teacher-family relationship. Engaging regularly in planned connections with families offers the possibility of a caring community of child and adult learners to grow over time and to work successfully together.

Inviting families to share stories that include the activities, as well as the people and places that are important to them is a natural way to include family culture in the classroom. Partnering with families is a two-way street: Teachers know a lot about how children learn and grow, but families are the experts on their own children, their own home culture and their values. The barriers of lack of time, conflicting schedules and the different roles and perspectives of a parent or a teacher may sometimes make connecting difficult. When families feel a teacher really respects and has a genuine interest in them, they often find ways to connect with teachers and overcome participation challenges.

Listening to Families

Here are some family engagement suggestions for use in a program for young children and what it might look like. Create:

A welcoming environment that is culturally and individually responsive

Teachers strive to meet children's individual, cultural and age-related needs and expectations by frequently sharing information and listening to families.

Images, pictures and other materials connect to children's lives in the classroom and reflect the children visually, culturally and linguistically. For example,

The dramatic play area has dolls reflective of the children's cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Pretend food looks like the food eaten by the children and their families.

Dramatic play props introduce children to items used by other cultural groups not present in the classroom.

The library area has books and stories on tape in the languages of the enrolled children and of families in the local community.

Images, themes and stories reflect the lived experiences of the children and also introduce them to the experiences and cultures of others.

Infuse what families share into classroom activities and curriculum by asking families to continuously share their child's interests and what the family enjoys doing together. This may happen through:

- home visits by teachers
- family nights, with a variety of academic and social activities
- meetings in families' home languages
- potluck nights
- evening parent-teacher conferences;
- meetings with parents to give them the tools to support at home

Here are some suggestions to ask families:

- *Ask about family hopes & dreams for their child in a home visit, or conference, or during the intake process to the program.*
- *Inquire what languages are spoken and who in the home speaks these languages.*
- *Ask what songs, stories and activities are shared with the child*

Home Language Support

Record stories and songs in a child's home language and share them in school. Provide some print in the child's native language to help establish the literacy link, as much as possible. Seek help from adult speakers of the child's language if this is not readily accessible. Otherwise, provide tapes of the narrative in books and of songs in the child's primary language. Practice key phrases in the child's primary language with assistance of adults in the child's language community, and seek volunteers or paid staff to spend at least some time in the classroom to support children in their primary language.

Family Connections

The Bridges curriculum offers specific ways in each unit to share what is occurring in the classroom to support second language growth and development. Consider also what families already know and do to support their child's first-language development in daily conversations, stories, games and experiences. Then find ways to use the family skills and knowledge to support learning in the classroom. For more information and specific steps for connecting with families, refer to the Family Connections 60-Minute Session communication suggestions and Take-Home Story guidelines.

You may also:

- Write short weekly emails or create periodic journals or newsflashes about classroom experiences
- Contribute to an online blog or send periodic phone communications home to the family
- Invite families to interact with posted classroom photos or written documentation of school activities
- Invite a family member to be an expert in any area of interest in classroom activities or projects
- Plan for ways families can participate in experiences in the classroom
- Invite families to offer ideas about their child's interests and responses to their classroom experiences
- Consider ways to create regular times that are open for families to drop in and visit the classroom or your program in the evening.

As a simple guideline, the Bridges engagement session activity and ideas (which are outlined on the unit Family Engagement Cards and located within the Take Home sections) are meant to serve as a welcoming place for families to connect with your program as well as an introduction to families on ways they can support their child's oral language development while discussing various content topics from the program. Finally, it is an opportunity for you, the school representative, to continue to gain information about the children through their families. By participating in this session, whether in a school or during a home visit, families are showing their commitment to their child's school experience. Build on this commitment and begin to create a family - program relationship that will allow each family to connect with you to support their child's future school success.

60-Minute Session

The suggested 60-minute session will begin with time for introductions and discussion, followed by a short presentation (or video) that provides a chance for everyone to listen to an expert on content related to one of the program topics or see their children in action. The session will conclude with discussion and the sharing of strategies to support language development while participating in suggested activities at home.

After welcoming each family at the door you will want to start the session by introducing yourself and communicating the expected goals of the session. It is important to follow your introduction with time for each family to briefly introduce themselves, remembering to respect each participant's level of comfort in a group set-

ting. Before starting the formal discussion on the program topics it is important that you check in with the group to see if anyone has questions or concerns about the program so far. Be prepared to ask the families what types of activities they are doing with their children now. Before starting the video let the families know that the purpose of the session is to offer many ideas on how to reinforce the child's oral language development. Following the video, review some of the ideas in the presentation, then share ideas for reading aloud and using books at home. Finally, have the families participate in three stations introducing activities from the Bridges Program.

Before concluding, bring the group back together to discuss experiences and ideas they may have gotten from the session. Thank them for being committed to their children's future success. And invite them to participate in the next family engagement session..

To make the session as successful as possible, here are a few items to remember:

- Provide a welcoming environment.
- Make the session interactive and personal.
- Create opportunities for two-way communication.
- Share ideas and strategies.
- Thank everyone for their participation.

Home Visits

Preparing for a home visit is first meant to be a time to meet, welcome and connect families to the program. It is also an opportunity to introduce families to ways they can support their children's oral language development and help prepare them for school success. Finally it is

an opportunity for you, the school representative, to begin to gain a better understanding of each child's early experiences and strengths. By opening their home to you, families are already showing their commitment to their child's school experience. It is now time to build on this commitment and begin to create a family - program relationship that will allow for you to work alongside the family to support their child's future school success.

The home visit will last between 30 and 60 minutes. Be sure to explain your purpose for visiting and listen to family responses. It will include time for introductions and getting to know one another. Ask family members about their child's strengths, where they would most like to see their child grow and what their hopes and dreams are for their child. Validate and applaud what they are doing to support their child's learning and development, and let them know you are there to support their goals and needs. Next, share the short video that provides a chance to listen to a few experts to hear what they say about school readiness. After the video, go over the activity booklet with the family and show them several of the activities they can use with their child. Conclude by checking in with the family to find out what activities they feel comfortable using and how you can support them further and to discuss next steps.

To make the home visit as successful as possible, here are a few items to remember:

- Be open and respectful of the family and their home.
- Make the session interactive and personal.
- Create opportunities for two-way communication.

Introduction continued . . .

- Share ideas and strategies.
- Thank everyone for their participation.

Family Support Tools

As part of the Bridges Program, there are a variety of resources for connecting families to the language goals and progression of the program. These include:

1. Family Engagement Cards

There are presentation guidelines with suggested activities and videos in English and Spanish to support a 60-minute family engagement session related to the language topic of each unit. Please consider how you are able to personalize the presentation by adding pictures from your school and activities to best meet your program goals and the interests and needs of family stakeholders. A goal is to cultivate the time and space in your program to share with families how children are progressing in their new language. Make this a memorable, rewarding and celebratory experience.

2: Family Take-Home Letters

Bilingual family letters are provided to inform and communicate the oral language activities and related learning goals within each topic area. These are located within the “Take Home” tab or section of each unit.

3: Vocabulary Pictures

Directions for how families can support classroom language goals and key vocabulary are in the Take Home section. This may be a tool to share with families by showing them a game to play with the picture cards. Children may color

and cut out the pictures to label objects or reinforce language learning at home in creative ways.

4. Take-Home Stories

Daily practice books are supplied to extend language practice and incorporate early print knowledge. You may wish to use these in class in small groups or at home. They are intended to help communicate with families the kinds of language children are experiencing and learning in class.

Here are a few ideas to explore with children, families or class volunteers:

Step 1:

Talk about the pictures in the story. Ask questions and point to pictures. The experience should be easy, fun and relaxing for children.

Step 2:

Color the pictures and talk about what they show. Cut them out, then use them to stimulate vocabulary recognition in natural ways.

Step 3:

Glue the pictures onto the story pages. Practice reading the picture stories together. When children are comfortable and show oral comprehension, point to the words. Practice reading the stories many times. Have fun, and see the experience as a positive way to build children’s confidence in their ability to recognize the language they can use and understand.

To make paper books, copy the two-page story template using a front/back copy feature. Cut along the dotted line. Put the pages in order, then staple the pages together.

5. Audio, Video and Web

On the web at www.babbletree.com you will find various learning games, short videos and resources for teachers, children and families to support language learning. Explore the resources and share them with families alongside the unit DVDs and classroom game activities.