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# Engaging Extended Family and Friends in Young Children's Education

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WILL PARNELL, ELLIE JUSTICE, LAURE PEARSON PATRICK

Think back 20 years ago, before the days of digital cameras or smartphones, before teachers could capture children's learning moments and send them to password-protected classroom websites. In the late 1990s, our early childhood center—a university-based lab school—offered families handwritten daily journals of classroom learning experiences. Our teachers and children used whiteboards to tell the day's story in words and drawings. In one classroom, the educators and children were committed to including a written snippet related to each child, every day. After each child provided input, the daily highlights were displayed for parents and other primary caregivers to review during pickup time.

One day, a graduate student from Japan who had a child enrolled in our program stood in front of the whiteboard, snapped a photo of the day's recollections, and sent it off to extended family and friends back home in Japan. As the family continued taking and sharing photos over the school year, our thinking was transformed. This act of solidarity, kindness, and interest in classroom learning became a strong narrative component in our school, opening us up to the value of connecting with extended family and friends.

Considering how the family from Japan demonstrated the value of daily connections between the child's worlds of home and school, a colleague remarked, "When I look into the faces of the families and their children, I realize they all have life stories that we cannot fathom, and this includes the stories of their ancestry." Collectively, this led us to wonder, "What would happen if we widened our circles and broadened our sense of family relationships in the school? How might we rethink children's learning in this community context?" Thus launched a journey of opening our arms and ears to the wider circles of influence in our school—the children's extended family, friends, and community.

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Currently in our Reggio-inspired lab school, we continue experimenting with ways to connect extended family and friends to the school's everyday practices, curricula, and philosophy. One approach that has been particularly valuable is our annual Friends and Family Day. This opportunity for engagement is not simply a demonstration of what and how the children have been learning—it is an event in which we all learn together. Friends and Family Day includes hands-on curriculum-based events in which children's relatives and friends join in theory building, experimentation, and learning at our school (Parnell 2011b). We see such events as a way for the important people in the children's lives to experience our everyday activities. We facilitate genuine family and community connections through all-ages, hands-on learning experiences.

To prepare for Friends and Family Day, teachers and children together reflect on their ongoing daily classroom experiences to design ways to engage the guests in their learning. At the events, guests are welcomed with coffee, tea, and baked goods from the school's kitchen. They choose between touring the school or going directly into the classrooms and shared spaces to engage in projects with the children. Families (and all primary caregivers) want to know and understand their child's world at school (Rinaldi 2006). We see families, friends, and staff increase their interest in our school when they are invited to participate in a specially planned day or evening of activities.

More broadly, our thinking about extended family and friends is influenced by Reggio Emilia's Municipal Preprimary Schools and Infant/Toddler Centers. Through our visits to Reggio Emilia, Italy, we have learned that parents in their schools engage with teachers regularly about children's ongoing learning experiences and are deeply invested in being coparticipants in teaching and learning (Rinaldi 2006). In addition, we know that children who make meaningful connections between home and school form strong relationships across these two spheres of influence in their lives (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky 2001; Krechevsky et al. 2013).

In many educational settings, teachers see the parent and child in isolation—without extended family and friends. In Reggio Emilia, parents are considered to be coprotagonists who are deeply engaged in children's development (Rinaldi 2006). In our center, we think of parents (as well as extended family and friends) as coprotagonists—as key figures in the lives of children, and, therefore, in the school; parents, families, friends, and community members are far more than volunteers or fundraisers.

## Making connections through big ideas

Our center provides full-day programs to 200 children, ages 4 months to 5 years, from Portland State University's community members; a majority are the children of students. We seek meaningful ways to connect across the 12 classrooms in our complex community. Our program offers a lot of latitude for teachers to create playful, challenging, and engaging curriculum with children. We firmly believe that children coconstruct their own ideas and theories about their world through play, social interaction, and experimentation. Teachers observe and plan carefully to provoke, enhance, extend, and document children's learning.

At the end of each year staff come together to review our school's strengths and challenges, reflecting on the many forms of collective documentation. We ask ourselves how we might build on our strengths in the coming year and work to identify emerging interests that might engage our community. Inspired by the work of Christine Chaillé, a professor emeritus at our university and former president of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators, we have embraced the study of "big ideas" as one way we learn together and engage families more fully (Chaillé 2008).

A big idea is "an overarching idea that unifies, inspires, and resonates with children, an idea that is rich with possibilities and permits teachers and children to work together in many ways" (Chaillé 2008, 9). In recent years, our open-ended studies have included topics such as light, zooming in and zooming out, and transformation. We brainstorm and web the many ways we can offer provocations in the classrooms and shared spaces based on the big idea. Provocations might be as simple as setting out materials and seeing how children use them, or as direct as asking the children to do research and project work. We also consider what materials might add new dimensions, what places in our urban community might offer new experiences or opportunities for collaboration, and how we might connect with each other and with families to deepen these experiences.

When we focus on a big idea together, we begin to see elements of it everywhere. We discover that seemingly unrelated studies and projects are connected. When we identify and make visible the relationships between the many projects in the school and some aspect or element of a big idea, we nurture children's natural tendency to make connections and construct knowledge.

In our current work, the big idea is movement and motion. As we explore the many aspects of motion—speed, trajectory, gravity, and so on—we begin to see common elements of motion in our daily experiences. Children and educators together notice and build on the ways that motion influences their indoor and outdoor environments, materials, and bodies.

As teachers bring the elements of motion to the surface of the children's experiences, motion becomes a common thread that makes explicit the relationships between one project and another, which helps children see the connections that are so important in the creation of new ideas and theories. With curiosity and wondering as our guides, we move forward together into these explorations. One example of an early provocation in the motion study is creating a space in a long corridor for children to construct ramps, chutes, and pathways for balls. Teachers observe, take photos and video, and note children's interests to build on this inquiry.

Following the lead of Reggio educators, we make children's learning visible by documenting—collecting, interpreting, and displaying photos, observations, and children's work samples. Such documentation keeps the experiences present beyond the actual moment. This year, we purposefully documented the children's inquiries and competencies while they engaged in several different movement and motion learning experiences. We then created a gallery showcasing and explaining those experiences in preparation for Friends and Family Day. This documentation serves as the foundation for the collaborative learning that children, families, and friends engage in throughout the event. Viewing the prior learning puts power in the hands of family and friends; they can ask more substantive questions about the child's current thinking about movement and motion—and about everyday school experiences.

*We make children's learning visible by collecting, interpreting, and displaying photos, observations, and children's work samples.*

## Connecting with extended families

Our studios (called ateliers, in Reggio Emilia) are intentionally designed spaces that support children's research, "where imagination, rigor, experiment[ation], creativity, and expression . . . interweave and complete each other" (Vecchi 2010, xviii) through multiple graphic languages. We are reminded that "the atelier bears marking and traces of children's learning. . . . Clay figurines molded by children's hands, the best paints carried in mason jars with high-quality brushes of varying sizes and beautiful marking on canvas, shiny sequins sewn into fabric, and glass windows beaming with light onto displays of children's work exist in a space alive with learning journeys" (Parnell 2005, 6). In the studios children engage in project work with big ideas using complex and varied materials. The classroom and studio teachers work together to extend classroom projects and create meaningful connections across curriculum. A primary intention in the studio is to encourage and nurture an exchange of ideas between children, teachers, families, and friends so that children's projects are woven into the fabric of their lives inside and outside school.

Our Reggio-inspired approach to learning is new to most families when they become members of our school community. We want families to see how we interact with their children and model our view of children as idea generators, concept builders, and collaborators. During Friends and Family Day, the activities and materials used replicate and extend the ideas and activities that the children are currently experiencing in their classrooms and studios. Activities are organized so that children and adults alike have full access to the materials. The staff encourages families and friends to work alongside children, experimenting with the materials. Clipboards and pens are available for adults to document the theories that children and adults develop together. We ask families and friends, "What do you see and hear? What surprised you?"



As we explore movement and motion, our center's piazza is filled with children and adults creating sand art using child-made pendulums; experimenting with the properties of water by making boats out of reused plastic, metal, and wooden materials; and building block towers together, then considering how to use a wrecking ball to topple the towers. We observe children, families, and friends interacting with the materials and making adjustments to improve their designs.

Sometimes, families and friends want to show the children what they think is the right way to interact with the project materials, such as how to move the pendulum or swing the wrecking ball. The studio teachers gently encourage them to invite the children to share their thinking and wonderings. These types of exchanges begin to take place among other children and their extended family members. Soon, there is a noticeable shift in adult-child interactions as the visitors model for each other the collaborative style that engages both child and adult.

Friends and Family of  
Parents and Children:

Come Explore  
Motion in Art & Science

November 12th & 13th  
9:00-12:00, 3:00-5:30  
Plaza



Experiment with our child-created sand pendulums and other hands-on materials. Collaborate with your child and develop theories about how motion affects different materials.



Helen Gordon Child  
Development Center  
Portland State University

**The following vignettes, developed from our observation notes, show how everyone benefits from this deep involvement in the children's learning.**



As Nora, age 4, and her grandmother approach the water bucket pendulum, a studio teacher asks, “Nora, will you show your grandma how you get this to work?” Nora begins to fill the bucket with water and gently pushes it as the water slowly trickles out the hole in the bottom of the bucket. Nora says, “This is like the red swing we have at home. It moves the same



way.” Her grandma responds, “I noticed wherever we start it, it goes back to the same place.” Nora adds, “It’s coming right back home!”



Henry, age 3, takes his uncle by the hand and leads him to the wooden ramps and balls in the corridor. “Look,” he says, “You can make it go fast!” He shows his uncle how to prop the ramp up to make a steeper incline for the balls. He tells his uncle to “shoot it all the way down the hallway!” His uncle follows his lead, dropping the ball onto the ramp, and they both cheer with enthusiasm as it rolls down the hall. They repeat this experiment many times as friends watch.

At the water table, Chloe’s grandmother gently holds a stack of scrap wood and cork as her grandchild tapes it together. Chloe, age 4, explains, “I’m going to stick these really hard together so they will float. If you don’t stick them really hard the tape won’t stick.” Her grandma asks, “So what did you discover?” Chloe responds, “The wood is too heavy. I need fabric and string.”

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## Lessons learned

In the past we perhaps held too limited a perspective on when and how we could engage with our extended community. We used to struggle with how to attract busy parents' attention. Now, we find that by hosting the curriculum gatherings focused on big ideas, we have enticed more engagement, fostered better understanding of our school's core philosophies, and brought about a coconstruction of ideas for the children's living and learning.

When we offer hands-on experiences, parents, extended family, and community members see children's abilities to investigate, and they appreciate our approach to teaching and learning. Family members witness children's construction of knowledge in action as they experiment together. By highlighting the value of active inquiry and sharing our view of young children as "competent, confident, curious, theory-builders" (Chaillé 2008, 3), we forge a community of informed advocates who can join us in articulating the power of inquisitiveness and motivation in early education.

In addition, through the school's ongoing efforts to make visible the child and adult learning experiences—in wall panels, microbooks, password-protected blogs, invitation-only social media pages, and emails, in addition to our Friends and Family Day—we are able to capture the interests of large numbers of families and garner more support for children's learning in the home and through the school (Parnell 2011a, 2012).

We have also established a parent liaison in each classroom to spread the word about school events, ongoing curriculum projects, and extended family and friends' initiatives. This volunteer liaison checks in with teachers and communicates by email with parents in phone tree fashion. As one parent liaison said, "After being here and seeing what you all do on a daily basis, I couldn't help but want to be here and be involved."

Further, we have learned a significant lesson about how to support children and parents without extended family or close friends in the region (which is not uncommon since many parents are university students). We suggest that these families invite student teachers whom they have formed relationships with or neighbors they would like to get to know better to Friends and Family Day. We have also turned this event into a multiday opportunity by encouraging families to engage in the big ideas during pickup time for several days after the official event. This is a great way to increase participation among those who are not able to attend the official event.

*Post big, enduring questions—open-ended questions with many different possibilities that will linger in participants' minds.*

Now and always, we are still growing and learning and becoming all that we can be as a full-day school for young children, their families, the extended community, and ourselves. We are learning that the more ways we offer engagement, the more chances parents and

their extended communities reciprocate and align with our school's practices and theories on learning. This approach builds trust and strengthens the community surrounding the children and their education.

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## Tips for Meaningful Communication with Families and Friends

1. Help parents (and others) quickly identify different types of communications by having distinct, child-made logos for each (i.e., each classroom and event should have its own logo). When parents see the logo again and again, the nature of the communication is familiar and easier to understand.
  2. Personalize event invitations for families at drop-off and pickup by verbally passing the invitation along in conversations (in addition to written invitations on the school's website and through classroom communications). Create buzz and excitement for the upcoming event by describing and quoting children's interest in it.
  3. Post photos of the children's current projects for families to view. Make a gallery showing the children's ideas and theories about the curriculum focus. Walk families and children through the gallery a few days before the event. Even a brief look at the gallery at drop-off or pickup helps families arrive at the event ready to engage.
  4. Develop a strategy that embraces parents as communicators. Expressly invite them to share communications with extended family and friends.
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## Tips for Activities with Families and Friends

1. Engage children in setup and design of curriculum events.
2. Encourage active participation by people of all ages by varying the height of tables, platforms, and activity placement. Put materials and project components on floors, raised platforms, low tables, and high (adult-sized) tables. Spread adult-sized chairs throughout so visitors with limited mobility can fully participate.
3. Survey the project components and materials to assess any safety issues (e.g., choking hazards) and the range of developmental challenge available to encourage risk-taking across age levels.
4. Rather than attempting to hold, dry, and return small and individual permanent expressive art pieces to families, engage participants in impermanent art constructions or consider creating a large cooperative drawing, mural, or other collaborative representation. Photos can be taken to document the learning and help families remember the experiences.
5. Plan for projects that model your program's pedagogy through hands-on experiences. Post big, enduring questions—open-ended questions with many different possibilities that will linger in participants' minds.

6. Offer your guests healthy and nutritious snacks, and let them know on the invitation what to expect in terms of food so they can plan ahead.
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## Widening the Circles of Community: A Director's Reflection

As the director of a university early childhood program, especially in a time of increased regulation and reduced funding, I often feel pressure to prove the merits of our Reggio-inspired approaches to teaching and learning against the measurable outcomes desired by funders and policy makers. At times, it is tempting to stay within the small circles of a supportive community—until I recall the many enriching experiences I have enjoyed by engaging with wider circles of the school community.

When a pair of teachers working with toddlers shared photos from the day with parents, for example, the parents in turn shared with friends and family. One grateful recipient, a 96-year-old great-grandpa, responded to a shared photo of a toddler facing her own shadow on a bright, clear day by writing, “I have become somewhat fixated with the picture of my great-granddaughter pulling the two toys behind her with the well-formed shadow of herself directly in front of her on the ground. Do you think she is focusing on the shadow and wondering what it is? Or, is she aware of shadows? I fantasize that she is looking at the shadow and wondering what it is . . . and therefore stood still long enough for the photographer to snap the picture.” This great-grandpa's wonderings paralleled the teachers' wonderings. They had been focused on uncovering the toddlers' understanding of and interests in shadow and light. Several circles away from the core of our daily school life, great-grandpa was engaged in the dialogue with them.

Similarly, on our most recent Friends and Family Day, I was moved by the responses of the many visitors who accepted my offer of a school tour. What was intended to be a quick overview of the program became a rich dialogue on the nature of learning, the politics of education, and the astonishing capabilities of young children. Perhaps connecting to their own childhoods, visitors commented on the interesting materials and investigations: “This was a blast!” “So much fun! We loved playing with the water and watching the demolition video!” Others made deeper connections to the lifelong benefits of high-quality early childhood education. For example, one grandmother who works with individuals who are struggling with chemical dependency remarked, “It warms my heart to see this true drug-combating work that you all do.” (This grandmother is quite perceptive; a growing body of research shows that high-quality early childhood education reduces the likelihood of later drug use [NIH 2016].) Interactions like these fuel my desire to create and sustain innovative experiences for children and the larger community.

—Ellie Justice

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Photographs: courtesy of the authors

**Audience:** Administrator (director or principal), Teacher

**Age:** Kindergarten, Preschool

**Topics:** Other Topics, Family Engagement, Family Engagement, YC

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