



SCHOOL-BASED 4-H PROGRAMMING SERIES

Incorporating Family Engagement into Your Program

What is a school-based program?

For the purposes of Florida 4-H Youth Development a school-based program can be defined as:

- **School Enrichment:** offered to groups of youth, taught by Extension staff or trained volunteers (can be a trained classroom teacher), and designed to support the school curriculum.
- **In-school club:** follows a more traditional club approach but occurs during school hours.
- **After-school club (also referred to as Out of School Time or OST):** follows a more traditional club approach but operates directly after school hours (between 2:00 and 6:00 PM); can be at a school, community center, or a similar location. Sometimes these clubs may be offered before school.

For more information, refer to Spero-Swingle, V., and Munyan, S. (2018). *School-Based 4-H Programming: Getting Started* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4H389>).

What is family/parent engagement?

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), parental engagement in schools is defined as “family and school staff working together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents.” For the purposes of this fact sheet, we will refer to parent engagement as family engagement because caretakers of youth may include extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles), friends of the family, babysitters, foster families, or others. This factsheet will also refer to “sites” and “partners” because not all after-school and OST activities take place at schools.

Why is family engagement important?

Research has shown that engagement improves grades, test scores, attendance, homework completion, and high school graduation rates, decreases negative and at-risk behaviors, and increases positive attitudes and behaviors. Overall, adults benefit since they learn improved parenting skills, build strong relationships with their children, and learn about available community and family resources.

4-H places an emphasis on family engagement. Volunteers who lead clubs and assist youth with their projects are often parents or family members. The relationships and interactions that family can have with youth and the family’s engagement make the 4-H experience more successful and impactful. Fostering a sense of belonging and inclusiveness is not only important for youth but also for adults. In a school-based setting, the family component will look different, as will the volunteer component; nonetheless, it should not be overlooked.

While it is easy to envision family engagement, barriers can stand in the way of successful family engagement. Below is a list of possible barriers, although more may be identified through collaboration with your partner:

- **Lack of awareness of site staff to barriers:** Have the barriers ever been addressed at the site you are working, and is the staff willing to address these barriers?
- **Lack of planning and lack of mutual understanding:** Did anyone plan to engage the family in the program at all? Sometimes engagement is an afterthought or overlooked piece.

- **Fear:** Adults in the family may have had a negative experience in schools themselves or have had a negative experience when trying to advocate for their child. Adults may also be unaware of the school policies and procedures (grading, graduation, behavior, etc.) and feel their child should know better than they do. All these factors contribute to families disengaging in any attempts to get involved in their child's school activities.
- **Language and culture:** Many programs do not have bilingual staff to assist a family and this can deter participation. Cultures put a different emphasis on volunteering and what that word means to them. Understanding the cultural differences can have an impact in engaging family. Simply using a word other than "volunteer" may solve the problem. At the same time, some cultures may not understand that family plays a role in the success of their child. They may feel that education is the responsibility of the school and not the family.
- **Time:** Whether it be an in-school or after-school program, adults are likely to be working while their children are in school-based programs. Today more families are dual-income families, single-parent families, or generational families. These factors make it more difficult to add another commitment to busy schedules. In addition, families may work split shifts, have multiple children of different ages, or work more than one job, making it even more difficult to find a convenient and accessible time to participate.
- **Childcare:** This can be an issue if families have children at different ages who require childcare.
- **Transportation:** The absence of reliable, accessible, and frequent transportation (car, bus, train, etc.) can keep a family from participating.
- **Home/legal situation:** Is the child in a foster home? Do they live with extended family members? Are they homeless? Are any family members incarcerated? What is their family's citizenship status? With these and similar issues, family support will be more difficult to engage. There may be custody, abuse, welfare, or other issues that keep families from participating. The

site you are working with will be aware of these issues and can address how to handle them appropriately.

Assessing with your partner what the barriers are can help to address them. Some of these barriers can be addressed, while others may be out of your purview. As in all programs, you will do the best you can with the resources you have available to you.

How do we go about addressing the barriers we can impact? In *School, Family, and Community Partnership: Your Handbook for Action*, Epstein (2019) develops a framework to address family engagement. Family engagement should be intentional and built into your program. It is not an afterthought. There are six components to consider, summarized below:

- **Parenting:** helping to improve family's and parents' relationships with their children and helping schools understand their families.
- **Communication:** finding ways to facilitate communication back and forth between both parties using various methods.
- **Volunteering:** encouraging family help at school, home, and other locations, as well as recruiting students for activities.
- **Learning at Home:** assisting families in helping their children with homework and other curriculum materials.
- **Decision-Making:** engaging families in having a voice and advocating for their children through encouragement in school committees.
- **Collaborating with the Community:** bridging the gap between accessible community resources and families to strengthen school programs and allow students to engage in the community.

What can these six components look like in action? The following are ideas to improve family engagement within the areas you can address based upon the aforementioned barriers. Keep in mind that patience and a variety of methods will be necessary to ensure success.

Barriers and Solutions to Family Engagement	
Barrier	Solution
Lack of staff awareness to barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a cooperative system with school/site administration and staff: Does the school/site have a system in place to engage family? If so, tapping into that resource could be very important. • If the site has not addressed family engagement, can you work with them to improve upon this? • Does the school already have a volunteer requirement that you can tap into for families? • Is there an existing Parent Teacher Association or Organization you can approach for assistance? • Can 4-H be linked on the site website and social media to enhance the awareness?
Lack of planning and mutual understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define involvement for family: This could be through a family handbook, seminar, or other means. Setting the expectations for families can help clarify how they can be involved and why you may want them involved. • Increase awareness of 4-H: There may be open house or family nights that you can attend to promote 4-H and expose the family to what their child can or could participate in. Make sure to utilize those opportunities to build a connection with the school, site, and family. If there is no open house, can you create a family night of your own to highlight 4-H and Extension? While most schools/sites have family nights onsite, providing a special offsite family night may encourage families to be more active in what their child is learning in 4-H—for example, a new family orientation that takes place on a separate day and in a separate location (your office or another family-friendly location) from where the club takes place. Sometimes a change of venue can encourage participation. • Invite families to participate: Don't just assume they know they can participate. Sometimes the best way is to have youth make the invitations to welcome them to a family engagement night or event. • Provide the necessary communication, whether through a newsletter, flier, text messages, or emails. Don't use only one method. Make sure to utilize any communication methods your partner may already be using.
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an inclusive environment for all adults: Be welcoming by greeting adults during pickup. Learn family names and build trust through personal connections and genuine interest in the family. At the same time make it an inviting and welcoming space where families will want to talk to you.
Language and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge language and cultural barriers: If leaving automated messages, can those messages be translated into another language? Don't rule out youth being the translator for their family. Encourage family participation and let families know you would like them to be a part of the program.
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it meaningful to get the family engaged: What will the family get out of it? Can you offer a meal? Can you offer assistance in another area of Extension that can be brought to the family (such as healthy eating classes, money management classes, etc.)? When you do offer classes, it may be best to steer away from calling them parenting classes, because that term may not be inviting.
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't forget to offer childcare or anticipate that younger siblings may be present. This can be an opportunity to bring in other 4-H youth to help work with siblings in other activity centers.
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer programs close to home on nights where something else may already be happening at the site, community centers, or other venues. Look for resources that may fund transportation. Think of ways to engage families via social media or webinars.
Home/legal situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may not find an easy viable solution for this barrier if it is a legal matter. Making sure to include the entire "family" will help bridge the gap if extended family, friends, or others are the caretakers of youth you are working with.

The benefits of a site encouraging family engagement allow the site, family members, youth, and community to become more aware, cohesive, and invested in the development of youth. While it may seem difficult to grow family engagement in school-based clubs, don't let that stop you from putting a plan in place and trying multiple, alternative methods. Family engagement may look different, but it is one of the most important elements in all 4-H and youth development programs.

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