



No. 12 July 1999

# Teacher-Family Contact

Following are excerpts from "Patterns of Family-School Contact in Preschool and Kindergarten" by Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman and Robert C. Pianta of the University of Virginia. The article is in press for a special issue of *School Psychology Review* on "Beginning School Ready to Learn: Parental Involvement and Effective Educational Programs." This article is based on a NCEDL study that examined family-school contact in preschool and kindergarten.

## Teacher-family contact changes from preschool to kindergarten

The most central finding from a two-year study of 290 children is that kindergarten family-school contacts were less frequent and more likely to be focused on children's problems than preschool contacts. Also, this study showed that family involvement differed among preschool programs. This corroborates earlier findings that parents are more likely to become involved in their child's education when they perceive that schools are working to involve them.

### Differences between preschool and kindergarten programs

- Preschool teacher-family contacts occurred more frequently, were more likely to be initiated by the family rather than the school, and were less likely to discuss children's academic and behavioral problems than contacts in kindergarten.
- Home visits and conversations during drop-off and pick-up were more common methods of communication in preschool than in kindergarten. Notes between teachers and families were used more often in kindergarten than preschool.

### Differences among preschool programs

- Head Start contacts, compared to the local preschool contacts, were more likely to be home visits and less likely to be school visits, were more often medium in length (from 5-30 minutes), and were less likely to discuss health issues.

### How we did this study

We asked preschool and kindergarten teachers to record their contacts with families using a daily-diary method. Family-school contact was compared among a Head Start program, a local preschool program, and a kindergarten program. Rates and characteristics of contact between families and school were examined cross-sectionally and longitudinally.

### Characteristics of teacher-family contacts among preschool, kindergarten programs

	Local preschool	Head Start preschool	Kindergarten
<b>Contacts per month</b>	2.3	2.4	1.6
<b>Home or School Initiated (%)</b>			
Home Initiated	32.7	38.2	25.2
School Initiated	61.9	57.8	71.2
<b>Type of contact (%)</b>			
Home visit	6.1	24.2	1.5
Drop off/pick up	7.9	6.9	2.7
Note	18.4	20.3	41.2
School Visit	33.9	21.5	28.8
Phone Call	23.8	22.6	19.9

## Discussion of findings

These data reflect the discontinuity between the preschool and kindergarten systems and show how the transition to kindergarten is associated with diminished success in engaging families in school. Teacher-family contact occurred more frequently, directly and informally, and contained less negative content in preschool compared to kindergarten. Because more kindergarten teacher-family contacts were negative (discussing academic and social problems), families may have been less interested in continued communication with their children's teachers.

Families may have been more involved in preschool than kindergarten because of the younger age of their children. This foreshadows the trend that families become less involved in their children's education as children progress through school.

Years of preschool teaching experience were correlated positively with rate of teacher-family contact, but no other child or teacher variables predicted contact rates. Teachers with more experience teaching preschool may have become accustomed to building strong family-school relationships and may have been more aware of their importance.

The data support the claim that program priorities influence rates and characteristics of family involvement. It also shows that rates and types of family involvement appear to be influenced by what is mandated by the program, particularly between preschool programs. The Head Start programs with its "school as community" approach mandated home visits and encouraged teachers to offer support to family members, resulting in a higher prevalence of these types of contacts.

Family-school relationships are an integral part of preschool programs. The importance of school-family relationships is described in the National Association for the Education of Young Children guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices and this has implications for personnel preparation. Preschools not only acculturate children, but they prepare families to share responsibility for their children's education. Maintaining this attitude of shared responsibility, particularly as children enter kindergarten, however, appears to be a challenge.

## If you want to know more

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## Role of school psychologists

School psychologists may play a role in enhancing family-school relationships in two ways: first, by serving as an additional contact person for families as their children make the transition into kindergarten, and second, by recognizing and bridging discontinuities in school culture.

This intervention may decrease families' alienation from the school, increase their willingness to collaborate with school personnel, and in turn, contribute to positive, cooperative problem solving between families and schools.

Also, there is a need for school psychologists to educate parents about their role in their children's education and to work to maintain the degree of family involvement that families attained in preschool.

Finally, the practice of such objectives serves to accomplish two of the National Educational Goals: to involve families in their children's education and to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn.

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