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Full Script of Presentation:

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Strengthening family involvement in early childhood programmes

**Strengthening Family
Involvement in Early Childhood
Programs**

Alliance for International Education
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Research points to lasting benefits for children when families are involved in their educational process (Epstein, 1992)

Quality Early Childhood programs value the connections they make with families

Slide 1 (PPT) (after header slide)

Researchers have found that the earlier family involvement begins in a child's educational process, the more (lasting) the benefits will be. (Epstein, 1992) Studies have shown that the benefits of parental involvement extend beyond educational achievement and the early years of a child's life. Children whose parents are involved, show a greater social and emotional development (Allens and Daly, 2002) including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relationships, more tolerance and less delinquent behavior. (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003)

There has been a long tradition of quality early childhood programs valuing the connections they make with families. Early childhood teachers recognize that they alone cannot succeed in enabling young children to reach their optimal development. They need the support of families and the community. These partnerships with families ensure that the knowledge, skills and experience of both parents and teachers enhance the developmental outcomes of children. As well, they recognize that strong partnerships with families bring continuity and consistency between home and school which is important in providing a strong and secure foundation for children during their early years.

Specific involvement behaviors of parents
(Fantuzzo, J.W., et al., 2002)

- Supportive home learning environments
- Direct school contact
- Inhibited/disconnected involvement

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However, the development of effective relationships between parents and early childhood programs is not always easy. It seems to need lots of effort and commitment to reach all families. It can be complex and challenging and sometimes requires more outreach by early childhood professionals.

Studies (Fantuzzo et al, 2002) are identifying specific involvement behaviors of parents.

1. Supportive home learning environments -where parent behavior promotes learning at home through spending time with their children and talking about school activities.
2. Direct school contact – with parents' direct involvement in school-based activities and direct communication with staff.
3. Inhibited involvement – with barriers to parents' involvement in their children's education

A home learning environment is one in which parents actively engage with their children in play and learning activities. (Siraj-Blatchford, I., et al 2005)

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Researchers have looked into the effect home learning has had in promoting children's intellectual and social skills.

A home learning environment is one in which parents actively engage with their children in play and learning activities. (Siraj-Blatchford, I., et al 2005)

Research – Home Learning Environments

- University of Chicago (Christian, K., et al 1998)
- The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva, K., et al 2003)
- (Goodridge, M., 1994) families of the same ethnicity-culture and social status

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University of Chicago researchers (Christian et al., 1998) looked at what predicted children's academic skills on entry to school at around five years of age. They found that, regardless of parents' education or financial circumstances, parent involvement in (simply) monitoring television viewing or taking children to the library have substantially influenced children's academic skills. Children of mothers with less education but a high score for the family literacy environment actually outperformed children whose mothers were better educated but who engaged in fewer literacy-promoting activities with them.

In a study of the effective provision of preschool education on over 3,000 children in Britain (EPPE, Sylva et al, 2003) the importance of what parents' did to nurture their child's learning in the home was identified as being more important than who the parents are.

There are a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children which have a positive effect on their development. For example, reading with the child, teaching songs and rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores.

As part of her Ph.D. Megan Goodridge of New Zealand (Goodridge, 1994) identified diversity in parental ideas and practices for supporting emergent literacy in families of the same ethnicity-culture and social class. One family provided their child with organized learning through shared activities at home and in the community. They guided their child through active participation in literacy activities and they were responsive to their child's personal interest in doing this. The other family gave little support for their child's early writing. Writing was not a regular activity for this family. The outcome for these children was the large difference in the number of written productions by the children. What the family does to support the child's learning is the critical aspect.

Parenting is important for optimal child development and outcomes. What is important is what families actually do in the home (guided by the beliefs and knowledge of the child's parents and other family members such as grandparents) to support their child's learning, using their confidence and competence to put into practice what they know - to help their child. The knowledge and experience a parent acquires in his/her role and through their relationship with their child is uniquely special.

What might disconnect families?

- Working schedules
- A limited ability to communicate and 'understand' among families of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds

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The pattern of behavior that identifies parents who are 'disconnected' from the educational learning experiences of their child suggests barriers to their involvement in their children's education.

What might 'disconnect' families?

It is common today to have both parents employed in the work force. These families present with different needs as they find it more difficult to participate actively in their child's early childhood program. In the past, it was easier for parents (usually mothers) to volunteer for activities in the schools or attend meetings. Because of huge commitment to work, several factors—including competition, guilt and time—may affect the relationship between an employed parent and school.

Some parents of young children feel they compete with their child's early childhood teacher, since both parent and teacher have formed protective attachments to the child. They may feel they are abandoning their children by leaving them while they work.

Time is also a critical factor. Employed parents may feel that they have many roles and duties to perform but not enough time to perform them. Consequently, they feel overwhelmed, and may find it difficult to play their full role.

Children from a younger age are spending more time in non-family care.(Farquhar, S. 2005) While, for adults, managing to balance their work and their life, can be a real issue, for many children it is the daily contact they have with their parents and quality time spent as a family that are issues.

Opportunities for parents and children to be together, to learn from each other and to build memories from shared experiences seem to be diminishing through the demands of modern living, paid work, television, the internet and other 'time consumers'.

As well, in a global world, understanding the need for sensitive involvement of families from diverse cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds is a worthy objective for successful relationships. Their children will benefit if their parents are involved and able to share their knowledge, skills, life experiences and cultural practices.

Research conducted at Ryerson University in Montreal, Canada (2003) involving parents of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds highlighted the needs and concerns of these families in their efforts to play a big part in their child's education. Some of the parent comments were –

(Montreal Mothers' comments)

...when you come here first you don't know the language,...things become more problematic... we don't know what to do in a different system with different values and habits...

(We need) to know how the education system works and ...how to seek help and how to get involved more directly.

We need to have sessions for small groups of families...to get information in our own language.

Some families who were in the process of learning to speak the language of instruction of the school felt they could not effectively communicate with their child's teacher and needed the support of someone who knew their culture and language to assist. They felt they needed support groups to provide practical advice and help with supporting their child's education.

What might be needed?

- Personalized relationships with families
- Multicultural awareness
- Support for 'mother tongue' language
- Recognition of the diversity of family structures
- More stimulation of educational involvement and support at home
- Co-construct a workable program of involvement

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Sometimes it is necessary to develop a personalized relationship with culturally and linguistically diverse families, so that the uniqueness of each family system is recognized. This may be more effective in developing working relationships which are based on trust. Awareness of the differences of the families increases the likelihood of building effective relationships. As parents begin to contribute to teacher's and children's understanding of cultural difference, then teachers are able to contribute to parents' understanding of the new cultural context in which their children are being placed.

Also, bicultural and bilingual teachers increase a schools ability to create trust between families and professionals. Teachers who demonstrate a willingness to learn about the experiences and traditions of children, whose backgrounds are different from their own, are essential. It is not necessary to create a perfectly 'culturally matched' learning situation for each ethnic group, but rather to be able to recognize when there is a problem for a particular child.

It is also important to identify areas of training for staff – to become familiar with the research literature on bilingualism, which strongly supports home language maintenance. It is important for these families to be encouraged to continue speaking their first languages at home. As well, teachers need to be prepared for the possibility that there may be important adults other than the parents in the home making decisions regarding the children.

Early childhood professionals must continually work to heighten their awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity, improve their professional skills, and work to develop a shared vision of early education with all families.

Building a partnership with the culturally and linguistically diverse families may take more time and effort because of the communication and cultural differences but the efforts are well worth it for the benefits of the children.

For the families who are 'disconnected'- the greatest benefit for children will come from the commitment of time that parents can make. Time, which allows them to acquire the skills, knowledge and support that are necessary to parent well.

Through becoming involved and gaining support, parents are more likely to see a future beyond the here and now, of the difficulties and demands of parenting. Research confirms that by being supported they will discover that what they do can make a positive difference for their child's outcome into the school years and beyond.

With the recognition of the impact of the home learning environment on a child's outcomes, there is a need to further stimulate educational involvement and support at home. Early childhood teachers need to look for creative solutions for engaging parents in their children's learning. There is a need to focus on the content of home-based learning activities and search for more effective and efficient ways for parents to spend time with their children in the home context. Early childhood programs need to co-construct a workable program of 'involvement', to find common ground and common language in which to discuss strategies. It is a task worthy of everyone's commitment.

It is also important for early years' centers to assess their expectations in regards to family connections and determine if they are realistic. Efforts that are not in

the scope of possibility for parents experiencing 'disconnection' will create further difficulties for partnerships between home and school and will possibly have a disempowering effect on parents' ability to be involved in their children's education.

What are parents identified needs?

1. Good communication and an exchange of information

(Novick, R., 1996) – strategies

(Katz, L., et al.1996)- establish a climate conducive to open communication

(Coleman, M., 1991) – show respect for parents input

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In 2006, when parents were consulted by the East Renfrewshire Education Department in the UK the process provided an opportunity to reconsider what 'parental involvement' means to parents.

From the broad range of responses – a critical role was identified – one of showing an interest in their child's life outside the home. The parents wanted to know and understand what their child is doing when not with them. They appreciated the opportunities for communication with their child's school through newsletters, emails as well as joining in the life of the early childhood centre through open days or special events.

Good communication and the exchange of information are key components of the relationships between parents of young children and the staff of the programs that serve them. (Jean Mendoza, 2003) In order for information to be useful, however, parents must be able to comprehend it. Professionals who work with families are likely to be more effective when they are aware of how aspects of their own communication practices may affect parents' ability and willingness to engage with a program in the interests of their children.

Parents cannot use information that they cannot understand. It is important to understand that the reading level of written material can affect its usefulness to

readers. This may be the case for parents who are second-language English speakers or parents, whose home language is different from the language of the school. They may be cut off from important information and be prevented from sharing their own knowledge with the professionals who are involved with the family.

Having access to translators and interpreters to clarify or explain information is important. Communication is an intrinsic part of any relationship – especially that between parents and teachers. The ideal is two-way open and frequent communication between parents and teachers.

(Novick, 1996) Strategies, identified by teachers and researchers, to enhance parent-school communication, without putting additional demands on already over burdened families included the following:

- A home/school 'two way' notebook
- An open-door policy where parents were welcome to visit at their convenience
- Frequent phone calls to parents
- Newsletters – sometimes with a two-way communication through a short survey about children's interests or parents' hopes or expectations for the school year
- Family-friendly 'homework'
- Invitations to participate on fieldtrips
- Evening workshops

Additional strategies are outlined by (Katz et al 1996) ...to establish a climate conducive to open communication. It was identified that both teachers and parents share the responsibility for creating frequent and open communication.

Teachers can:

- let parents know how and when they can contact the school and the teacher and that they can be contacted directly as questions and concerns arise;

- elicit expressions of parents' concerns and interests in preparation for parent/teacher conferences. Some schools organize parent/teacher meetings to discuss their goals early in the school year. On these occasions, teachers can ask parents to share their main concerns and goals for their child. Brief questionnaires and interest surveys also provide good bases for meaningful discussions in parent/teacher conferences (Neilsen and Finkelstein, 1993)
- involve parents in classroom activities.

Parents can:

- introduce themselves. Parents should contact teachers and let them know when they can be reached most easily, daytime and evening, and how they would prefer to be contacted.
- Be involved in classroom and school activities at whatever level work and family responsibilities allow. If parents cannot volunteer to go on field trips, they can let the teacher know that they are interested in helping in other ways.
- Initiate regular contact.

To open up communication channels it is important to show respect for parent's input. (Coleman, 1991) suggests teachers create a comfortable conference environment in which parents feel free to share information, ask questions, and make recommendations. Allowing parents to begin the conference by asking their own questions and expressing their own concerns is one way to convey respect for their input. As well, scheduling an adequate amount of time, sharing the projects that involved his or her child, and beginning and ending the conference noting something positive about the child – enhances the sharing of responsibility with the parents.

Additionally consider:

- asking open ended questions –How do you.... ? Rather than – Do you...?

- Communicate in a way that matches, yet shows respect for, parent's background
- Send nonverbal messages of respect for and interest in the families
- Instead of only offering advice—ask the parents to share feelings and suggestions for addressing an issue.

Setting objectives and goals for each child is highly rated by parents. It is important that those identified can be reasonably addressed in a specified time. Break down the objectives into simple steps and agree responsibilities for teachers and parents. A time should be set aside to evaluate the outcomes from both the parent and teacher perspective.

The use of portfolio documentation and particularly digital portfolios has enabled parents to regularly observe their 'child in action' in early year classes. Digital portfolios allow teachers to attach video footage of the child - demonstrating the learning that is taking place. With personal access to the website, the parents can be updated on their child's progress on a regular basis.

2. Clear guidance and education in effective home learning activities

- Families Reading Together
- Story Sacks and Play Maths
- Health Promotion in the Home
- 'Coffee and Cake'

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Increasing the ability of families to have an influence on their children's learning was identified by the parents in the East Renfrewshire consultation as important for parent involvement. What they valued was the empowerment they received when given clear guidance and education in effective home learning activities. Some of the programs already in place for parents of young children included the following:

'Families Reading Together' was a program piloted with parents of children from 3 to 7 years in some schools in East Renfrewshire. The program engages parents in reading to their children. Parents reported reading more with their children, having more fun and taking their child to the library more often, sometimes for the first time. Central to the program is creating an interest in books through story telling and communicating with parents through a log book.

Story Sacks and Play Maths are packs containing books, toys and other materials, which are lent to parents to encourage reading together and an interest in literacy and numeracy.

Health Promotion in the Home initiative is a joint venture between Education and the Community Health and Care Partnership. Health kits are being piloted in some of the early learning centres. The kits encourage parents and children to become involved together in activities that support healthy eating, physical activities and emotional well-being. Parents are invited to special sessions to demonstrate how the kits can be used.

'Coffee and Cake' – is a session for parents at one early childhood centre, where parents are able to join with their child's teachers for an informal discussion of any issues concerning their children.

Judith Bernhard, Ryerson University,
Toronto, Canada (2005)
'Early Authors Program'
A literacy program that builds the children's
self-esteem and pride in cultural identity,
and increases reading at home.

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Judith Bernhard, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, has worked on research related projects related to early literacy development. One such project is the Early Authors Program which is not only successful in supporting young children's literacy but has proven successful with children whose families speak languages other than English.

The program involves the productions of several books for each participating child. The books are self-published within each program site. Together children, parents and educators author books in both English and the home languages of the children. The books are based on family histories, the children's lives, and the children's interests, and family photographs and children's drawings are used to illustrate the books. Parent involvement includes, authoring the book that their child features in, taking photographs to illustrate stories, and reading books to their children. This literacy program builds the children's self-esteem and pride in cultural identity, and increases reading at home. The parents have opportunities to talk with teachers and bring home new ideas, resources, and techniques for incorporating literacy into their everyday home activities.

'Raising a Reader'
Peninsular Community Foundation, San
Mateo, California
Mission: to foster healthy brain
development, parent-child bonding and
early literary skills

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Raising a Reader' is a nonprofit and supporting organization of Peninsula Community Foundation, a community association located in San Mateo, California. The 'Raising a Reader' mission is to foster healthy brain development, parent-child bonding, and early literacy skills critical for school success by engaging parents in a routine of daily 'book cuddling' with their children from birth

through to 5 years. Raising a reader is based on the premise that when parents establish a reading routine with their children, family bonding time increases, as do children's vocabulary and pre-literacy skills.

Raising a reader fosters a reading routine whereby children carry bright red bags filled with high -quality picture books into their homes each week.

During 'Literacy Nights', parents are taught read-aloud strategies anchored to language development research and storytelling.

Raising a reader has spread to libraries, child care centres, Head Start programs, teen mothers programs, and home visiting nurse programs in 72 communities, 24 states of the USA as well as Mexico, Botswana and Malaysia.

A 'parent-teacher reading group'
(Wentworth, G., 2003)
International School of Geneva
...enabled a 'community of learners' to
develop in the early childhood section and
provided positive relationships with
families from a wide range of cultures

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'A parent-teacher reading group (Wentworth, G.,2003) developed at the International School of Geneva functioned as a 'community of learners' and provided positive relationships with families from a wide array of cultures. The monthly reading group started after Gail Wentworth experienced a year of chatting to parents after school, answering their questions and distributing readings to address parental concerns. The group met in the preschool classroom once a month for about an hour and a half in the early evening. It enabled people to socialize first, before embarking on a discussion of the month's reading. As well as talking about early childhood philosophies and teaching strategies in a relaxed atmosphere – getting to know one another and

sharing stories about their children and their own childhood was the most valuable outcome of the group.

Gail Wentworth and Linda Kwon (teachers who coordinated the reading group) have provided some 'tips' for starting a Parent-teacher Reading Group.

- Ask parents about the most convenient times for them to meet
- Offer snacks and childcare
- Let parents lead the discussion – more talk from them, less from you
- Practice respectful listening and welcome all points of view
- Let people know that they are welcome to participate in one, some, or all meetings
- Give no homework (except the monthly reading)
- Encourage people to read even if they can't attend the meeting
- Follow up with a newsletter to share the highlights of each month's discussion
- Look for ways to get more men involved

(Their first newsletter)

Dear Families,

The first meeting of the parent-teacher group was a success. After some light food and drink we sat down together to discuss commercialism and media and their effects on young children. It was great to get both parents' and teachers' perspectives. We voiced concerns and shared some ideas to help children develop a critical eye for television commercials for toys or food directly marketed to them. We'd like to share two practical strategies that some parents use to help their children with these issues.

Some families ask their children to first choose something to give away before they purchase something new. For example, if a child wants a new doll that she sees in a store, she has to go home and look among the dolls she already has, and choose one to donate to another child before purchasing the new one. This is a great idea! The child must stop and think about how much she really wants the new toy. Sometimes the result is that the child is not ready to part with a toy,

and so decides she doesn't want to buy anything. There's a real lesson for the child!

Here's another idea that a mother shared. Before going out to the shops, the parents talk to their young children about what they are likely to see (stores with sweets, toys etc.) They make it clear to the children that they will not be buying anything. The children can, however, look at things that interest them. What a wonderful idea! The parents make *looking* at attractive toys a special treat. In fact their older son typically asks, "mommy, there's that new action figure! Can I go and *look* at it?" There is no discussion about purchasing the toy because that issue was made clear before they left the house! Try making *looking* a privilege for your children.

At our next meeting we'll discuss aspects of children's development related to gender and racial awareness. Please join us! Ask your child's teacher for our new reading.

Most sincerely,

Gail Wentworth and Linda Kwon

How well does your Early Childhood Centre-

- Communicate with parents about children's progress?
- Exchange information between parents on issues relating to children's care and welfare?
- Make full use of parent's knowledge and expertise to enhance the program?

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- Work in partnership with parents, professionals, key agencies and support workers?
- Create a welcoming atmosphere for parents?
- Consult with parents and take full account of their views and concerns

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- Communicate with ALL families?
- Survey parental views as a part of the self-evaluation process?

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To see how effectively an Early Years Centre provides for parental involvement - some of the following questions might be asked:

How well does your Early Years Centre-

- communicate with parents about children's progress?
- exchange information between parents on issues relating to children's care and welfare?
- make full use of parent's knowledge and expertise to enhance the program?
- work in partnership with parents, professionals, key agencies and support workers?
- Create a welcoming atmosphere for parents?
- Consult with parents and take full account of their views and concerns?
- Communicate with ALL families?
- Survey parental views as a part of your self-evaluation process?

All families want to help their children succeed. Some seem to know what to do naturally, while others appreciate some guidance. But above all, families need to feel welcomed and accepted.

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Paper Presentation

‘Strengthening family involvement in early childhood programmes’

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