School Mental Health Practice Brief

The Role of Family-School Partnerships in School Mental Health

Author:

Andy Garbacz, Ph.D.
Professor, School Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

For decades research findings have suggested the important role families have in their child's learning and development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2019). The purpose of this brief is to describe defining features of family-school partnerships, review research that supports family-school partnerships, and identify how family-school partnerships can be aligned and integrated in school mental health systems and practices. This alignment aims to amplify positive student outcomes and promote family and student inclusion and empowerment.

Family-school partnerships are relationships wherein parents and school professionals work together to promote children's learning and development (Garbacz et al., 2020). Family-school partnerships are distinguished by the following defining features: collaboration, multi-directional communication, shared decision making, co-equal roles, and commitment to positive student outcomes (Garbacz, Minch, et al., 2020). Each of these features occurs along a continuum with the goal to continually working toward authentic partnerships between parents and school professionals. Throughout the relationship, there are times when a parent might take the lead and times when a school professional might take the lead.

There are many elements of each defining feature of family-school partnerships. Collaboration refers to family members and school professionals working together to achieve outcomes that are mutually determined. Multi-directional communication suggests that there are multiple and varied ways for families and school professionals to share information back-and-forth. Shared decision-making means that families and school professionals make decisions together through a transparent process, with outcomes communicated to all parties. In family-school partnerships, parents and school professionals have co-equal roles, sharing power and influence. While hierarchies are acknowledged, efforts are made to eliminate them (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

Organizational Components of Family-School Partnerships

Due to their focus across and within settings, family-school partnerships are ecological in nature. This ecological approach emphasizes family-school partnerships in home, school, and community settings, including connections across these settings. Family-school partnerships facilitate positive parenting practices in the home, effective teaching practices at school, and schoolwide practices that promote a positive school climate (Garbacz, Minch, et al., 2020). In addition, neighborhoods and communities influence family-school partnerships. For example, family- and youth- serving organizations, such as a YWCA, can facilitate family and school partnerships. Thus, family-school partnerships promote positive outcomes for students through the connections, interactions, and relationships that families and school professionals share (Sheridan & Garbacz, 2022). For instance, when families and school professionals decide together to promote social and behavior competencies for a student, they collaborate to decide on what they will change at school and at home, and how they will communicate and coordinate with each other.

In addition to setting considerations (e.g., home, school, home-school), there are developmental considerations over time within family and school ecologies. Family-school partnerships are important throughout a child's schooling. However, there are changes in how family-school partnerships are carried out across the school age years. For example, relative to the kindergarten transition, during middle school transition, shared decision-making often includes the student themselves as a co-equal partner. In addition, peer relationships and monitoring of student activities become critical during adolescence as teenagers develop more independence in where and how they spend their time (Garbacz et al., 2018).

Ecological considerations of family-school partnerships extend to students' and parents' perceptions of themselves and experiences with schools and schooling (Holmes et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 1997). Self-perceptions and experiences with the school setting, as well as school professionals' actions, shape the influence and impact of partnerships. Understanding these experiences provides insight about the role of power and privilege in schoolwide systems and practices, and how such practices are hostile or oppressive to students and families with specific identities. In particular, this ecological examination can help school professionals better understand the experiences of minoritized families and students, and how school practices affect the development of family-school partnerships.

Research Support for Family-School Partnerships

For decades, researchers have examined the role of parenting, parent involvement in their child's education, and family-school partnerships on child outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2019). Data point to clear evidence that parents can have a positive impact on their child's social, emotional, behavior, and academic competencies (Garbacz, Minch, et al., 2020). Parenting behaviors such as positive parenting, proactive parenting, limit setting, and monitoring are particularly promising for supporting children from kindergarten through high school (Stormshak et al., 2021). When families are involved in their child's education, there are benefits for families, educators, schools, and students (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

In contrast to parenting interventions and parent involvement in education, family-school partnerships include collaboration among parents and school professionals (Garbacz, Minch, et al., 2020). Family-school partnership interventions have been rigorously evaluated with findings that suggest improvements in parenting practices, teaching practices, the parent-teacher relationship, and child social, emotional, behavior, and academic competencies. In particular, findings suggest that family-school partnerships positively impact student outcomes through improvements in the parent-teacher relationship and parenting practices (Sheridan et al., 2012; Stormshak et al., 2021). Figure 1 depicts these relationships, which are supported by research findings.

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Intervention Strategies

Data point to unmet mental health needs among children and youth across the U.S. (Twenge & Joiner, 2020). School mental health has been advanced as an approach to address barriers to community care (e.g., access; Weist, 1999). However, school mental health services have similar barriers to a community care model (Guo et al., 2013). Findings on family-school partnerships suggest that when parents and school professionals work together, they can create school mental health systems and practices that are relevant and responsive to student mental health needs in a strengths-based manner, promoting parent and youth empowerment (Garbacz, 2019; Ishimaru, 2019).

Family-School Partnerships within a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework

The multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework offers a structure and process for integrating family-school partnerships (Garbacz et al., 2016). Garbacz, Minch, et al. (2021) identified core components of family-school partnerships within MTSS based on an integrative review and summary of family-school partnership research. These core components include (a) family-school relationships, (b) multi-directional communication, (c) shared decision making, (d) family-centered parenting support, and (e) training and support for family-school collaboration. Family-school relationships emphasize that schools are focused on improving or enhancing the family-school relationship. Multi-directional communication includes communication systems that allow families and educators to communicate back-and-forth. Family-school shared decision making includes building systems to support educators and families making decisions together. Family-centered parenting support includes providing resources for parents to strengthen their parenting skills in a manner that is consistent with their culture. Training and support for school staff and families includes building capacity for school staff and families to collaborate. The four core components of family-school partnerships within MTSS are operationalized across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 based on tiered logic which holds a commitment to all students across enrollment groups and with a full continuum of supports (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Garbacz, Minch, et al. (2020) and Sheridan and Garbacz (2022) provide an expanded discussion of these options.

Tier 1 Family-School Partnership Practices.

At Tier 1, family-school partnerships emphasize schoolwide approaches to promote student social, emotional, behavioral, and academic competencies (Garbacz, Minch, et al., 2021). To promote family-school relationships at Tier 1, school teams consider ways to expand or enhance their relationship with families. For example, a school team might promote schoolwide efforts toward proactive and positive outreach to families about their child's positive behavior or if student behavior concerns are present (Garbacz, Minch, et al., 2020). Multidirectional communication at Tier 1 includes providing multiple and varied options for families and school professionals to communicate. For example, families might have to provide input in a school newsletter, or teachers might connect individually with different families each week over a school year. School events, such as family-teacher conferences and back-to-school events are other instances where families and school professionals can communicate. In addition, schools can send families a beginning of the year check-in, which includes (a) options for communication preferences and (b) an assessment of student strengths and needs to identify areas to promote social, emotional, behavior, and academic functioning. School teams focus on using varied options to reach families across enrollment groups in ways that align with their preferences, inclusive of time, format, and language.

Shared decision making at Tier 1 includes bringing families into school decision making processes. There are many ways school teams can bring families into decision making. Schools might invite family input through a survey, a focus group, a "town hall" style session, or brief online polls. If a school chooses to have one or more family members join a school decision-making team, it is helpful to have a plan for how those family members will connect with and obtain input from families across enrollment groups. Another important consideration with seeking out family input is that there should be a plan in place for incorporating family input once it is obtained.

Family-centered parenting support is another core component of family-school partnerships within MTSS. Family-centered parenting support can include support for academics, social behavior, emotional competencies, and academic achievement. With family-centered parenting support, schools can provide resources or options for tailoring school-based practices to fit a family's culture. For example, for schools implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, school teams can share information with families about the framework and note how families can use one or more of its features to promote positive and proactive support at home.

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School professionals and families often have a desire to work together, but may not have had preparation or training in collaborating with each other. Thus, it can be helpful for school teams to consider how to support school professionals and families in building or refining their skills in partnering with each other (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). For example, when family members are attending a school meeting, consider the norms and terms that need to be made explicit. Using common terminology minimizes space in relationships and can bring partners together.

Tier 2 Family-School Partnership Practices.

At Tier 2, the core components of family-school partnerships within MTSS are operationalized to align with support for students who have elevated needs. Targeted intervention at Tier 2 emphasizes moderate-intensity supports. In turn, relative to Tier 1, family-school partnership practices at Tier 2 focus on more frequent and targeted communication, shared decision making for individual or groups of students, and tailored parenting and home-school support. Family-school partnerships at Tier 2 can be incorporated into common Tier 2 interventions, such as Check-in/Check-out or group-based social and emotional skills training programs. Before considering the specific Tier 2 practices, it is important to determine the procedures whereby students are identified for Tier 2 support. School teams should consider using data from families and school professionals when determining eligibility. The Strengths and Needs Assessment discussed in the Tier 1 section has established thresholds for determining eligibility for Tier 2 support (Garbacz, Lee, et al., 2021).

Using data from families when making eligibility decisions promotes family engagement in Tier 2 intervention and reduces the risk that families may find the Tier 2 practices lack relevance for their family (Moore et al., 2016). Regardless of the program, family-school partnerships can use the following strategies: (a) inviting families to share their goals or co-develop goals with school professionals, (b) asking families to share their values and culture, (c) creating or adapting practices to align with family goals and culture, (d) communicating back-and-forth with families about progress toward goals, and (e) determining progress toward goals and next steps together as a family-school team (Dishion et al., 2020).

Through using data from families when making eligibility decisions and inviting families into the Tier 2 process to set goals at the beginning, school professionals are emphasizing relationship-building and collaboration. Multi-directional communication and shared decision making are then incorporated throughout the process, and school professionals can provide options for families to use parenting practices at home that are aligned with their values and culture.

Tier 3 Family-School Partnership Practices.

Following the tiered logic discussed relative to Tier 1 and Tier 2, Tier 3 support emphasizes intensive and individualized assessment, plan development, plan implementation, and plan monitoring (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Family-school partnership practices can be integrated within these features of Tier 3 support (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008; Stormshak & Dision, 2009). As with Tier 2 support, eligibility for Tier 3 is made based on data from families and school professionals. Once a student is identified for Tier 3 support, the family and school professionals meet with a facilitator (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker) who guides a process focused on building and maintaining positive relationships and using strengths-based practices. A facilitator aids in the identification of family strengths, student strengths, and teacher strengths, and the team determines how to leverage those strengths to promote change in valued and shared outcomes. With the assistance of a facilitator the team collaborates to co-create plans, co-develop data collection approaches, determine home and school plan components, examine fidelity and outcome data together, and make decisions about next steps in a joint manner. Thus, the emphasis is on collaboration among families and school professionals throughout a typical Tier 3 decision-making process.

Research supports family-school partnership practices at Tier 3 impacting improved student outcomes through the parent-teacher relationship and practices implemented at home and at school. The facilitator of the Tier 3 process engages in a set of practices that are designed to build relationships among family members and school professionals (e.g., using collaborative "we" language, pointing out strengths of each setting) while emphasizing tailored support to promote implementation at home and at school. The facilitator makes a concerted effort to build a collaborative relationship with the family and school professionals as early as possible to establish a shared understanding for their co-equal roles and collaborative participation. At the end of the process, family members and school professionals share in the decisions they make about the effectiveness of the intervention and next steps.

Key Implications for Practice

✓ Contact families proactively before concerns are present to invite them into a partnership and share their child's strengths.

✓ Seek out family suggestions about school systems and practices and integrate their suggestions into policy and practice changes.

✓ Ask families how they would like to communicate with school professionals and use families' preferred communication strategies.

✓ Ensure family outreach is across all enrollment groups.

✓ Provide training for school professionals in family-centered strategies.

✓ Use data from families to determine student strengths and needs.

✓ Emphasize relationship-building and trust-building with families.

✓ Invite families into Tier 2 and Tier 3 planning before determining student needs or creating plans.

Related Resources

- Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement.* Southwest Educational Development Lab. https://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf

- Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2019). Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2). https://dualcapacity.org

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Figure 1

Research Findings that Support Family-School Partnership Impacts on Student Outcomes
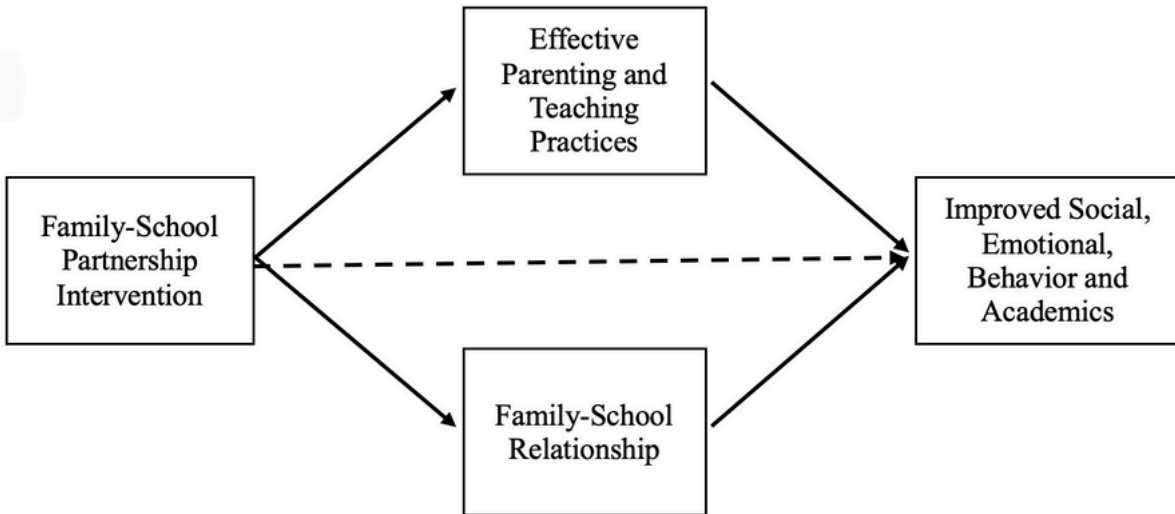
Note. This diagram depicts the direct impact of family-school partnership intervention student outcomes through the family-school relationship and effective parenting and teaching practices.

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