

## Linking Schools and Early Years (LSEY)

# Research Snapshot

### Snapshot three

## Actively engaging families

The LSEY project has been working towards early years services and schools actively connecting with families. A central theme has been actively involving parents in their children's learning environments and ongoing education. Children learn in the context of their families—the primary influence on children's learning and development (DEECD, 2009). To build on this, the LSEY project was informed by research that indicates children make better progress academically and socially when their families are actively and positively involved in their learning at home, in early years services and schools (CCCH, 2008).

## Parents as partners in children's learning

Respectful and meaningful partnerships between services/schools and parents/carers underpin all the LSEY activities. LSEY activities focus on supporting parents to feel welcome and comfortable in their children's learning environments, which is central to building parents' confidence and capacity to be partners in their children's long-term learning and development.

To help understand how parents can be partners in their children's learning, the LSEY community partnerships use family and service consultation information, local data and LSEY evaluation information to identify focus areas for local action:

- The way that parents engage with school differs if they have one child or multiple children at the school.
- Parents reported feeling more comfortable in early years services than schools.
- Parents reported wanting more information about their child's day-to-day activities at school and how they can help children.
- Services acknowledged that meaningful family engagement requires a culture change to recognise parents' role as partners in their children's learning.
- Asset mapping identified opportunities to fill gaps where parents are not active partners.

The LSEY communities worked collaboratively to develop and implement actions that responded to local data and the voice of local families. The partnership approach led to more respectful relationships and better information sharing between services/schools and families across all three LSEY communities.

***“Relationships [with parents] are helping us support families in a coordinated and responsive way instead of reactive...but engaging families is not just about running activities for families. It's about an attitude change, it's about thinking about how you do things, listen to parents and work with them... It's hard to change attitudes.”*** — School principal & prep teacher

## What has LSEY found?

The LSEY external evaluation has found positive practice change in the way that early years services and schools approach family engagement, highlighted below (SPRC, 2008 & 2010):

	2008	2010
Schools provide opportunities for parents to be involved	43%	73%
Child and family services share information about early years settings with families	64%	86%
Child and family services share information about school with families	44%	59%

46% of parents indicated that they spend time in their child's school other than pick-up or drop-off times. Of these parents there was a:

- ↑ 39% increase in parents attending cultural/community events.
- ↑ 14% increase spending time in the classroom.

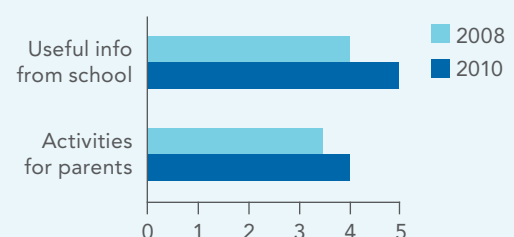


Parents with one child at school were more likely to participate in classrooms and group activities.



Parents with more than one child at school were more likely to work in the canteen and participate in parent committees.

There have been slight increases in parents' average responses to questions about key elements of parent engagement in schools:



## Practice change in LSEY communities

**Hearing parent voices:** Early years services and schools now engage in more consultation (formal and informal) with parents. This raises awareness and responsiveness in regards to the impact of environments and communication on parents' engagement in children's learning and development.

**Diverse and regular participation opportunities:** Early years services and schools now provide a more diverse range of formal and informal opportunities for families to spend time in their children's learning environments.

**Earlier engagement:** Schools now meet and engage with children and their parents throughout the preschool year to become familiar with families and to develop relationships that will support and encourage parents as partners in their children's learning.

## Contributing activities

Actively engaging with families requires action at different levels.

**Professional development:** Joint learning around engaging respectfully with families and encouraging them as partners in their children's learning informed many initial approaches and activities in LSEY communities. The nature of professional development varied. In one community the focus was engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families, in others it was on engaging socially isolated and vulnerable families.

**Consultations with families:** A continuous review process involved seeking and responding to feedback from families across topics such as service/school education programs, preferred communication methods, opportunities for participation and family friendliness of environments. Regular consultation and communication aimed to encourage families to voice their opinions and participate in decision making.

**Welcoming and family-friendly spaces and activities:** These aimed to provide formal and informal opportunities for families to spend time in early years services and school environments. Activities included spending time in services/schools, such as playgroups in schools, social events and 'open door' classrooms. Other activities supported open communication, such as sharing information about the learning programs with families in accessible ways, greeting parents/carers by name, and school staff having a visible presence in the grounds before and after school. These and other actions aimed to make the most of all formal and informal opportunities to welcome families and provide a space where parents can interact with each other and educators and to offer a 'soft' entry into more formal school/service activities and programs.

## Implications:

### Policy, research and communities

- Targeted and universal approaches to family engagement ensure active and meaningful engagement of all families.
- Meaningful family engagement requires a strong foundation of mutual respect and recognition for the role parents and educators have in children's learning.
- Ongoing communication and information sharing between services/schools and families supports parents/carers to feel comfortable and informed, and supports children's learning.
- A change in perception and culture within services/schools is often required to start thinking about how families can be active partners in their children's learning.
- Services and schools have the capacity to rethink how families are involved in co-design of education programs and practices.
- Further action research is required to better understand how early years services, schools and community services can meaningfully and effectively engage families in service and program co-design.

## About LSEY snapshots

The LSEY snapshot series aims to share findings from LSEY's approach and activities. Findings are based on the experiences of three Victorian communities: Corio-Norlane in the City of Greater Geelong, Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong and Hastings in the Mornington Peninsula Shire.

The LSEY pilot has a cross-sectional external evaluation being conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. Data was collected in 2008, 2010 and 2012. These research snapshots explore the 2008-2010 data.

This time-limited series of snapshots will run from 2012 into early 2013 to communicate evaluation findings and highlight examples of good practice from six years of community implementation.

The series will explore:

- The LSEY approach
- Supporting smooth transitions
- Engaging families
- Responsive schools
- Sustainability
- The final findings

For more information about the LSEY project see:

[www.rch.org.au/lsey](http://www.rch.org.au/lsey)

## References

Centre for Community Child Health. (2006). *Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services*. The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

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