

# Building a Home-School Partnership

## Purpose of Toolkit

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide parents and caregivers a guide for building a home-school partnership to support their child's education and development. This toolkit is intended for caregivers of children of all ages and skill levels, in general education and/or special education settings.

## What is a Home-School Partnership?

Children do their best when they have the skills, support, and motivation to do so. By collaborating with your child's school, you increase opportunities for your child to get the support they need in each of these areas. A home-school partnership capitalizes on your child's skills, your knowledge of your child, and educators' knowledge of learning and development. By partnering together, you can help your child achieve more than home or school could accomplish alone.



Throughout this toolkit, there are opportunities to fill in and make notes. You can also download the interactive fillable PDF form at: [triad.vumc.org/home-school-ftp](http://triad.vumc.org/home-school-ftp). More strategies and resources can be found in the *Building a Home-School Partnership* free online self-paced course. Make a free account at [triad.vkclearning.org](http://triad.vkclearning.org), then go to the *Informational Toolkits* folder.



## Where Do I Start?

It is never too early or too late to start building or improving a partnership. This process can be challenging, and emotions can run high. However, small steps can build up to big improvements. This toolkit can help you start those steps by following your COMPASS:

- C – Connect With Your Values**
- O – Openly Communicate**
- M – Monitor Progress**
- P – Problem Solve**
- A – Advocate**
- S – See It Through**
- S – Show Gratitude**



## Connect With Your Values

Values are big-picture, long-term ideals that give our actions meaning and purpose. They serve as an internal compass that guides our actions toward the role we want to play in building the type of life we want for our children.

### » Values answer questions like:

- What kind of life does your child want to lead?
- What kind of life do you want for your child?
- What role do you want to play in your child's learning and development?

### » Based on what came up for you while reflecting on these questions, complete this statement:

**I want this home-school partnership to be about**



## Openly Communicate

Ongoing open communication is key to a home-school partnership. This requires communication with both your child and their educator(s).

» **Communicate with your child.** This partnership is all about supporting your child, so make sure they have an active role in this process.

### Mark the ways in which you want to try to involve your child:

#### Learn and involve their preferences

Ask what they like/don't like about school

Observe how they spend their free time/what they choose to talk about

Give them choices between activities/items and see what they select

#### Ask specific questions

Open-ended questions (e.g., "What are the rules? What can you do if you need help? Where do you feel happiest/safest? If you had to change one thing about your school, what would you change?")

Fixed-response questions (e.g., selecting a facial expression/emoji for how they felt at school, selecting a picture to indicate which activities they did, answering yes/no to whether they earned a reward)

#### Offer choices

Personal goals (e.g., social, behavioral, or academic goals)

Ways to communicate/respond (e.g., speaking, writing, hand sign, exchanging pass)

Accommodations (e.g., how to receive instructions, seating arrangement, peer model, setting, instructional materials)

Privileges to earn (e.g., toys, snacks, activities, "special helper", free time)

#### Validate their experience

Ask how you can help (e.g., "Do you want to vent, or do you want help brainstorming solutions?")

Reflect their language back to them (e.g., "I can see how that 'sucks'.")

Label their emotions (e.g., "I see you are frustrated.")

#### Reviewing upcoming changes

Explain changes to your child using simple, direct language

Write out changes using simple, direct language and/or visuals

Preview and role-play changes with your child

## » **Communicate with educators**

**Set up a time to meet:** Introduce yourself (state your name, your child's name, and your relationship to your child). Ask to set up a time to talk about working together to support your child's learning/behavior.

**Before the meeting:** Involve your child in preparing some notes on:

1. Your child's strengths/preferences:
2. Situations/skills that are challenging for your child:
3. What types of supports are helpful to your child:
4. What you hope to work toward:

**Keep educators in the loop:** Let them know about possible influences on behavior/learning, including:

- Health considerations (e.g., illness, injury, medication changes, medical care)
- Changes in routine (e.g., sleep changes, new caregivers, change in schedule)
- Family stressors (e.g., loss, illnesses, custody changes, stressful event)

Notes:



## Monitor Progress

Ongoing progress monitoring helps us know whether what we are doing is working and whether we need to adjust our supports. It also helps you proactively support your child, reinforce successes, catch problems early, and hold partnership members (including yourself) accountable.

» **How often do you currently get updates on how things are going at school?**

- Whenever school provides it
- Whenever I ask
- Frequently enough to know how things are going without having to ask

» **Which of these progress-monitoring strategies might be helpful?**

- Document brief communications to help to paint a picture and identify patterns over time. Write down what you hear from your child and their educators (e.g., brief conversations during drop off/pick up). Save written communication (e.g., e-mails, notes sent home from school).
- Ask your child's educator how they currently monitor academic and behavioral progress and how you can get regular updates on this tracking.
- Work with your child and their educators to develop a formal progress-monitoring system involving structured daily or weekly feedback on a few specific behaviors (e.g., communication notebook, daily behavior report card).



## Problem Solve

Your partnership efforts may sometimes veer off course from your big-picture values. Your child may not respond to supports as intended, or your communication may hit a roadblock.

» **When you notice your partnership is off track, identify 1-2 actions that might help improve your partnership:**

- Focus conversations on specific, objective behaviors and situational factors rather than vague personality traits. (e.g., "Can you help me understand what that looks like in the classroom?")
- Work together to identify positive skills to teach and environmental supports to promote them rather than focusing on challenging behaviors to reduce. (e.g., "What do you think my child is trying to communicate, and how can we help them learn a better way to communicate it? Are there ways we can structure those activities to build up their success?")
- Ask how you can support school efforts rather than putting all responsibility on school. (e.g., "How can I reinforce school efforts at home and help my child practice new skills? Is there anything you need to support my child that you do not currently have?")
- Ask for and listen to the educator's perspective, even if you do not agree with all of it. (e.g., "How do you think we can help my child be successful in your classroom, knowing that they need a little extra support right now?")
- Focus on actions within your control instead of conditions outside of your control. (e.g., focus on how you communicate with others rather than external factors like your child's educator's background or personality.)



## Advocate

Speaking up on your child's behalf or helping your child use their own voice typically results in better supports. You can respectfully "press for success" by asking for more than what is freely offered.

Think about what your ideal learning environment would look like for your child, if you had unlimited resources. (Ask your child about their dream classroom, too!) Schools are not required to provide "ideal" classrooms, but they may be able to involve some of the helpful aspects you identify.

» **Now think about what would be helpful about their ideal environment in terms of:**

- Physical environment?
- Academic instruction?
- Social/emotional support?
- Daily routine/structure?
- Behavioral support?
- Other considerations?

Notes:

You and your child can and should advocate for their needs. Sometimes, advocating involves bringing in another team member to better your partnership.

» **Could any of the individuals below contribute to your efforts?**

- Trusted individuals who know your child well. (e.g., family, friend, child's therapist, or tutor)
- A family advocate, who is typically a caregiver who built a home-school partnership for their own child and/or is trained to help families build these partnerships.



## See It Through

As your child's educator(s) put in work for this partnership, you should expect to do the same.

» **How will you see these partnership efforts through with your child at home?**

- Enforce school expectations.
  - Regularly review school rules/expectations to proactively set your child up for success.
  - Practice and role-play expectations with your child.
  - Use the same language and visual cues used at school.
- Reinforce and review progress.
  - Review progress with your child while focusing on what they can do to improve success.
  - Focus on what to do next time as opposed to what went wrong or why they did it.
  - Praise appropriate behavior/effort at least three times more than correcting problematic behavior.
- Maintain open communication.
  - Keep educators informed on progress at home and anything that may affect behavior at school.
  - Check in on how things are going and how you can support school efforts.



## Show Gratitude

The process of building a home-school partnership can be challenging for both caregivers and educators. It is perfectly normal to have strong thoughts and big emotions along the way. You are the expert on the needs of your child and your family. Listen when your expertise tells you to take a break and reconnect with the people and activities that give you joy, even if it is just for a few minutes.

» **What is one small thing you can do within the next day to practice self-care?**

- Brief mindfulness activity (try the app <https://my.life/>).
- Take a break from your partnership work to spend quality family time.
- Let others know you will be unavailable briefly to regroup/re-energize.
- Reach out for support or distraction (e.g., friend/family member, family advocate, therapist).
- Spend 10 minutes doing something that makes you feel happy, relaxed, and/or engaged.
- Ignore or delay one non-urgent item on your “to-do” list.
- Other:

Remember that as you are putting in this work, so is your child and their educators. A little praise and appreciation can go a long way in reinforcing their efforts, even when things are not at their best.

» **What is one area where you can show gratitude to your child?**

- Time (e.g., “Thanks for making time to practice with me”).
- Effort (e.g., “You are working so hard to use your words when you’re frustrated”).
- Responsiveness (e.g., “I love hearing what you did today”).
- Attitude (e.g., “I’m excited you are going to try this again tomorrow”).
- Other:

» **What is one area where you can show gratitude to your child’s educator(s)?**

- Time (e.g., “Thank you for making time to talk”).
- Effort (e.g., “Your support of our child means so much to our family”).
- Responsiveness (e.g., “Your updates on how things are going in the classroom really help us reinforce progress at home”).
- Attitude (e.g., “I appreciate your willingness to try new supports”).
- Other:

### Final Thoughts

This toolkit is meant to provide a general roadmap for building a partnership, not a checklist of items to do in a certain order. Building a partnership is a process, not a goal. Even small actions can build up toward big outcomes. We wish you the best of luck on this journey toward meaningful collaboration!

## National Resources

- ❑ **Center for Parent Information and Resources**  
Each state has its own Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and/or Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs). CPIR provides contacts for each state's center in addition to general parent resources. [parentcenterhub.org](http://parentcenterhub.org)
- ❑ **Understood.org**  
Resources for families of children who learn and think differently, including resources for supporting your child, partnering with your child's school, and advocating for inclusion [understood.org/pages/en/families](http://understood.org/pages/en/families)
- ❑ **TIES Center**  
Resources for promoting inclusive practices, including specific strategies for supporting your child [tiescenter.org/resources?audience=1](http://tiescenter.org/resources?audience=1)
- ❑ **Wrightslaw**  
Information on special education law and advocacy. [wrightslaw.com](http://wrightslaw.com)

## Tennessee Resources

- ❑ **TN STEP**  
Provides support, training, and resources for parents/caregivers to empower them to advocate for their child's needs while partnering with their child's school. [tnstep.org](http://tnstep.org)
- ❑ **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Volunteer Advocacy Project**  
40-hour training to become special education advocates to provide support to other families of children with disabilities in Tennessee, free of charge. [vkc.vumc.org/vap](http://vkc.vumc.org/vap)
- ❑ **The Arc Tennessee**  
Non-profit statewide advocacy organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. [FamilyEngagementTN.com](http://FamilyEngagementTN.com)
- ❑ **Tennessee Voices for Children**  
Statewide and national source of referral, support, and advocacy for families and the systems that serve them. Offers trainings for parents, caregivers, educators, and mental health professionals, including advocacy training. [tnvoices.org](http://tnvoices.org)

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