



EDUCATION CAPITAL:

Our Evidence Base
Defining Parental
Engagement



Minister's Message

Parental Engagement in the ACT

I am pleased to provide the *EDUCATION CAPITAL: Our Evidence Base Defining Parental Engagement* report.

This report, prepared for the ACT Government by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, provides the evidence base that will inform future and ongoing policy and practices in ACT schools to maximise parental engagement.

The report highlights the importance of a consistent definition so that parents and teachers have a shared language to talk about parental engagement, why it is important and its positive effects on children's long term outcomes.

The content of the report underpins the publication: *EDUCATION CAPITAL: Progressing Parental Engagement in the ACT* and the fact sheets that provide information about parental engagement for parents and teachers.

These publications are key to ensuring ACT parents, families and teachers are equipped and supported to strengthen and sustain productive partnerships focused on children's learning and wellbeing.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joy Burch', written in a cursive style.

Joy Burch MLA
Minister for Education and Training

Defining Parental Engagement

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Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

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Background and context

The *Progressing Parental Engagement in the ACT* is a two year project (2014–2015) intended to provide a strong and evidence-informed foundation for parental engagement in ACT primary schools. It involves:

- producing a definition of parental engagement that is evidence-informed and reflects the priorities and perspectives of ACT parents;
- fostering the development of a shared understanding between families, schools and administrators about what parental engagement is and why it matters;
- developing a framework for measuring parental engagement, including a survey schools can use to measure current levels of engagement in their community and track progress over time; and
- producing evidence-informed resources for families and schools to equip them to strengthen their parental engagement practice.

This work will help ensure that future policy and practice in parental engagement in the ACT is grounded in evidence and based on a shared understanding of what parental engagement is, why it matters, how it works, how best to foster it and the outcomes it can contribute to. The model is intended to be used across government, Catholic and independent schools.

This paper outlines the approach and rationale for the first of these deliverables: a technical definition of parental engagement, and the evidence and theory of change underpinning it. It presents the first iteration of a conceptual model encapsulating the key components of parental engagement, a model that will continue to develop as the evidence-base grows.

The technical definition is intended to establish the parameters of parental engagement to guide the work of researchers, schools and policy-makers. In particular, it proposes core constructs and elements that can be utilised to establish a consistent approach to measuring parental engagement and can inform policy and practice.

This project includes the development of more 'plain language' versions of this definition, intended for use by parents, teachers and principals. These definitional documents are based on the same underpinning logic, but are expressed in terms that are more accessible and appropriate (see ACT Government parental engagement factsheets).

Methodology

The conceptual model outlines the specific behaviours, processes and outcomes proposed central to parental engagement. The model was developed through an iterative process exploring common themes in the key theoretical frameworks (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007) and a review of the most robust empirical evidence available on parental engagement.

Literature review

The researchers conducted an extensive, strategic literature review, focused on recent peer-reviewed studies. This literature includes:

- Theoretical models and frameworks;
- Intervention studies (of various levels of rigour and quality) measuring the impact of specific programs and approaches;
- Longitudinal studies or analysis of large existing datasets; and
- Narrative reviews and meta-analyses aggregating findings across studies.

The literature was sourced through previous work undertaken by ARACY; a scan of academic and best practice databases; a scan of government publications (predominantly in Australia, UK, New Zealand, Canada, and USA); and a scan of research organisations, academic departments, and other organisations engaged in parental engagement studies (Harvard Family Research Project, Educational Evidence Portal). A 'snowballing' process identified other important sources through examining reference lists of key articles.

Primary research

ARACY also conducted primary research with ACT parents, teachers and principals. A series of qualitative focus groups and interviews were conducted with a range of parents of primary school aged children, teachers and principals at ACT government, Catholic and independent schools. Participants were consulted about their views on the role of families in childhood learning, the role of schools, barriers and facilitators to parental engagement and barriers and facilitators to family-school relationships. The data was professionally transcribed and analysed for areas of convergence and divergence with the conceptual model. Similar themes were found across the qualitative data and conceptual model. However the qualitative data also identified areas of stress and concern for parents and teachers, providing insight into the barriers and facilitators to parental engagement and family-school partnerships in the ACT. These findings contributed to the fact sheets accompanying this technical paper.

The core concepts identified in the conceptual model were also focus tested with parents and representative bodies for ACT parents. This process of stakeholder engagement enabled a simplification of the research language and assisted in the development of the conceptual model and plain language fact sheets.

Quality of the evidence

The parental engagement literature is of variable quality. There are a number of robust longitudinal studies and meta-analyses that show a clear connection between parents' engagement and improved academic outcome (Jeynes, 2003, 2012). However, the evidence-base around the specific aspects of engagement and the processes through which engagement translates into improved academic outcomes is less consistent.

The evidence on specific parental behaviours and attitudes that support children's learning largely shows that engagement is important for achievement. However, many of the studies have been small scale, involving lower-quality study designs and using broad and inconsistent range of measures of parental engagement. This means that few studies are robust enough to determine direct causal relationships between specific behaviours or strategies and specific outcomes.

Early theoretical models of parental engagement proposed a very broad range of types of engagement, many of which were concentrated on 'involvement' in school rather than 'engagement' in learning. These models led to diverse and often imprecise measures of parental engagement, with measurement often concentrating on school-based involvement which, more recently, has been shown to be one of the less effective and important elements of engagement. Over time, these measures (and the associated theoretical frameworks) have been refined, leading to study designs and data of improving quality.

There is also an extensive grey literature in the parental engagement space, including 'good practice' guides, non-peer reviewed reports (of various levels of rigour and quality), and case studies of the experiences of schools. This literature was consulted, but did not directly inform the development of the conceptual model.

To the greatest extent possible, the behaviours, processes and outcomes identified in this conceptual model are grounded in and informed by solid evidence. However, only several of the elements can be considered to be supported by the highest evidence standards.¹ Other elements are supported by specific, reasonable quality evidence.

As such, this model should be understood as a solid basis for policy and practice that will necessarily develop, change and be strengthened over time, as more robust evidence is developed and as the model is tested in ACT schools.

¹ i.e. supported by multiple randomised controlled trials with long-term follow up, tested in diverse contexts, strong and statistically significant effect sizes, and proven through systematic reviews.

The importance of a consistent definition

Definitions establish boundaries and parameters. They define what should and should not be considered 'parental engagement', drive which elements of engagement are measured, and can influence what is prioritised in policy and practice.

The lack of a consensus-based definition of parental engagement has led to significant difficulties for both research and practice:

- **Research:** different definitions of parental engagement has led to a diverse array of behaviours being evaluated and measured, making it challenging to specify the types of engagement that are most effective.
- **Practice:** different understandings of what parental engagement is and which elements are most important has led to misunderstandings between families and teachers; resistance from some; and investment of time, resources and effort into strategies and approaches that are less effective.

This section outlines the range of definitions evident in research and practice.

Definitions used in the literature

The impact of not having a consistent, shared definition of what parental engagement is (and equally, what it is not) is consistently and persistently noted in the literature:

"Although much research attests to the positive effects of parental involvement on student academic success, the effects of parental involvement on student academic outcomes have been differential depending on which aspects of parental involvement were investigated and which academic outcomes were studied. These mixed findings might be due in part to the lack of a clear operational definition of parental involvement, as this construct is often defined in a non-specific manner" (Fan & Williams, 2010).

"Parent Involvement has been defined and measured inconsistently across studies depending on the needs and limitations of individual studies. No consensus with regard to the relevant dimension and the specificity of the dimensions to be assessed has been achieved" (Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000).

The lack of consistency and clarity in literature, and the challenge of identifying the specific aspects of engagement that have the greatest impact, is a product of this inconsistent approach to definition: "researchers have defined parent involvement differently or so broadly that it is difficult to understand how to measure it consistently" (Nye, 2006).

Table 1 illustrates this challenge, highlighting various definitions used across recent studies.

Table 1: Approaches to defining parental engagement

Definition	Study
A multi-dimensional construct that refers to the engagement of significant caregivers into the education of their children at home, such as helping their child with homework, and at school, such as communicating with their child's teacher and supporting their child in school.	Hoglund, Jones, Brown, and Aber (2014)
Parent involvement "foster[s] the psychological resources necessary for children's optimal academic functioning"	Monti, Pomerantz, and Roisman (2014)
"Any interactions between a parent and child that may contribute to the child's development or to direct parent participation with a child's school in the interests of the child"	Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, and Nagengast (2014)
"For this [Campbell Collaboration] review, parent involvement is defined as the active engagement of a parent with their child outside of the school day in an activity which centres on enhancing academic performance."	Nye (2006)
Parents' involvement in children's schooling is parents' commitment of resources to the academic arena of children's lives.	Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994)
"Researchers have often characterized involvement in two sub-types, home-based and school-based... Home-based involvement is generally defined in the literature as interactions taking place between the child and parent outside of school. These parental behaviours generally focus on the individual child's learning-related behaviours, attitudes, or strategies, and include parental activities such as helping with homework, reviewing for a test, and monitoring the child's progress. ... school-based involvement activities generally include activities typically undertaken by parents at school which are generally focused on the individual child, such as attending a parent-teacher conference, observing the child in class, and watching the child's performance in a school club or activity".	Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler (2007)
Parent involvement is defined as families and communities who take an active role in creating a caring educational environment. It involves six categories of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with the community	Epstein et al. (1997)

Although there are consistent themes here, each definition has slightly different parameters, different levels of specificity in the types of constructs involved, and different levels of emphasis. There are also differences in how these definitions have been operationalised – the specific measures they have used to quantify these aspects (i.e. the survey questions they have used).

Kohl et al. (2000) suggest that "creating dimensions of parent involvement that are specific in behavioural scope, capture the variety of parent involvement behaviours, and are consistent with enough content items to reliably measure the construct, will improve the likelihood that the findings are useful in future research". The intention of this project is to develop a definition of parental engagement for the ACT that is, as Kohl et al suggest, grounded in specific behaviours, capture a range of key priority behaviours, and are able to be used consistently across studies and settings.

Perspective of ACT parents, teachers and principals

The variability in definitions of parental engagement amongst academics is reflected in the attitudes and opinions of parents and teachers consulted during this study. While consultations with parents and teachers in the ACT revealed attitudes and behaviours consistent with the conceptual model, there was also confusion and tension around what parental engagement is and whose role it is to teach children.

“I don’t think generally schools want to put barriers up but if we don’t know what we don’t know then we will put barriers up. Having that courage to go through and having the confidence to go through is what we’ve got to work on”. (Principal)

“The parent is the first teacher to the child and the child learns a lot from the parent in terms of behaviour ... gradually they do all the other learning skill, literacy, numeracy, and, you know, other science ... from the school ...” (Parent)

“I think it’s crucial that the learning is happening at home early on and you are setting those ground rules and how you socialise and fit into society and so on ... I think slowly over time, less of the learning is coming from Mum and Dad and more of the learning is coming from school and probably the peers”. (Parent)

In particular, there is confusion around the definition of, and value placed on, ‘parental involvement’ as opposed to ‘parental engagement’. Many parents and teachers emphasise the value of ‘parental involvement’ (such as parents attending classrooms, school events and contributing to parent representative bodies).

“... the challenge is that 30 years ago parental engagement was fund-raising, reading, coming and listening to kids read, helping out at school events, attending parent teacher interviews and that’s just some basic ones and we had parents involved with the management and running of schools”. (Principal)

“I do canteen duty, I do the carnivals, you know, I get quite involved with all the plays and disco and all that sort of thing”. (Parent)

Furthermore, parents and teachers identified barriers to parental engagement. Many were aware of the key behaviours attributed to successful parental engagement, but felt that they were under-skilled and/or under-resourced to enact these behaviours.

“Probably parents from non-English speaking origin ... if you missed the education from your own country now you come to this new country ... it is not easy to digest a whole schooling system ...” (Parent)

“A lot of families say time. So those parents that we were talking about before who are engaged at home, send their children with nice lunch boxes, they’re clean and everything has been done for the child, they’re engaged, but they just not physically present at the school because two parents often work ... a big thing is time ... for the parents”. (Teacher)

“But because the children spend a lot of time in school ... the teachers are much more of a role model than the parents because the parents have very little time. After work most of them are tired. Not every parent has time to even speak a few words with the children”. (Parent)

Development considerations

The development of the definition involves a number of technical considerations, including:

- Ensuring that the definition is based on a coherent theory of change and grounded in the available evidence; and
- Developing a definition that captures the aspects of parental engagement that are likely to be important, but is also sufficiently specific to provide guidance for policy, practice and research.

Theory of change

A theory of change is a reasonable and evidence-informed narrative of how a set of actions/activities/approaches is expected to lead to the intended change. A theory of change:

“articulates the assumptions about the process through which change will occur and specifies the ways in which all of the required early and intermediate outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about and documented as they occur” (Harris, 2005, p. 12).

There is some evidence that programs with strong and coherent theories of change are more likely to achieve their intended outcomes (Segal, Opie, & Dalziel, 2012).

One of the challenges in the parental engagement literature has been identifying those process factors – such as why parents become engaged in their children’s learning and the processes and mechanisms through which parents’ engagement behaviour results in academic outcomes – that are underpin the academic outcomes evident in the literature (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

The conceptual model developed for this project draws on work from Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) and Pomerantz et al. (2007), among others, describing why parents engage and the mechanisms through which engagement improves children’s outcomes.

- **Why parents engage:** primary drivers of parental engagement include: what parents believe their role is in terms of supporting their children’s learning (role construction); their confidence in their ability to make a difference (self-efficacy); invitations and expectations communicated by children, teachers and school; and contextual factors (time, energy, resources) that enable or inhibit engagement.
- **How engagement influences academic achievement:** recent evidence suggests that engagement influences academic outcomes indirectly rather than directly (through direct instruction, academic coaching or help with homework content, for instance). It appears that parents’ greatest influence may be on: children’s motivation and engagement; their sense of academic competence and self-efficacy; whether they believe education is important; and broader social and emotional wellbeing.

Accordingly, in addition to identifying specific behaviours, the conceptual model highlights the short-term parental beliefs and attitudes that are likely to be predictors of engagement and short-term changes in children’s beliefs and attitudes that may predict improved academic outcomes.

Uni-dimensional or multi-dimensional definitions

Parental engagement necessarily involves a broad set of beliefs, behaviours and processes. It cannot be reduced to a single behaviour or practice (reading to children or having high aspirations for children) and appears to derive its impact from the interplay and mutually reinforcing nature of a range of factors; what Jeynes (2012) terms “a general atmosphere of involvement” (p. 262).

As such, “researchers have supported the use of a multidimensional definition and have argued against a uni-dimensional understanding of parental involvement” (Fan & Williams, 2010), partly on the basis that a multi-dimensional approaches are able to include emotional, attitudinal and personal aspects of engagement as well as school and learning based activities (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997).

However, while it is clearly necessary to conceptualise parental engagement broadly and measure the range of factors involved in it, Fan and Williams (2010) note that “the definition and measurement of parental involvement in research examining student achievement motivation has been fragmented referring to a range of variables,” leading to an inconsistent and similarly fragmented body of evidence.

Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, and Lloyd (2013) explain that:

“Composite measures of parental involvement ... confound separable types of involvement and confuse the reasons that parents communicate with teachers or use their time and talent to assist teachers and children at school. Similarly, composite outcome measures often confound and muddy our understanding of whether and which parental involvement actions contributed to specific learning outcomes” (p. 76).

As such, there is a growing suggestion in the literature that future research focus on measuring the different dimensions of parental engagement separately, in order to disentangle the lines of influence in parental engagement and gain greater clarity around which behaviours contribute to which outcomes (Fan & Williams, 2010).

In order to take into account both of these perspectives, ARACY has developed a model of parental engagement with two broad core constructs:

- Family-led learning; and
- Family-school partnership.

Each of these constructs is underpinned by several specific elements or behaviours. This approach captures the multidimensionality of parental engagement, while enabling the measurement of specific behaviours. This follows Pomerantz et al. (2007) who:

use this distinction because it is a **concrete, parsimonious one that may be used with ease by researchers, policy makers, educators and parents**. As such, it allows for continuity across these often separate, albeit related, stakeholders in children’s lives. Moreover, the distinction between involvement on the school front and that on the home front is of import because the two may embody distinct ways that parents become involved in children’s schooling, with distinct effects on children (p.374).”

Parental engagement conceptual model

The conceptual model developed for this project provides a synthesis of evidence in relation to:

- The aspects of parental engagement that matter most for children's outcomes;
- Short-term changes in children's beliefs and capabilities that are the primary targets for parental engagement and the mechanisms through which parental engagement is most likely to result in improved outcomes for children; and
- The long-term outcomes for children that parental engagement can contribute to.

Following the evidence review of effective approaches and strategies for improving parental engagement and the review of indicators and measures of change/improvement in parental engagement, additional components will be added to the conceptual model in future documents. These will include:

- The 'how' of parental engagement – the enabling conditions and specific strategies and approaches that are most effective in influencing parental engagement (including actions that schools and families can take); and
- The short-term changes in parents' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that indicate progress, which can be thought of as pre-conditions or enabling factors for improved engagement.

The conceptual model is not intended to include all parent and school actions that have an impact on children's learning and wellbeing. Rather, it is a pragmatic and evidence-informed model of the types of parent behaviours and family-school connections that have been demonstrated to be important and effective within the context of parental engagement and family-school partnership.

It provides an initial framework for priority areas of focus that are appropriate for policy (i.e. the aspects of parental engagement that government and schools could focus their efforts on) and measurement (i.e. how the effectiveness of parental engagement strategies could be measured and evaluated in order to enable a consistent approach to measurement). It is intended to contribute to a shared understanding of what parental engagement is, how it works and the outcomes it contributes to, and establishes pragmatic boundaries around a traditionally contested concept.

The aspects of parental engagement that appear to matter most

Family-led learning

- **High expectations and aspirations for children:** parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's achievement and participation in further education is consistently identified as the strongest and most influential aspect of parent engagement. It is theorised that parental expectations shape children's own beliefs about their potential, the value they place on education and their sense of academic competence (Eccles, 1989; Fan & Chen, 2001; Flouri, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Gutman & Akerman, 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005b; Singh et al., 1995)
- **Shared reading:** parent-child reading is one of the most strongly evidenced aspects of parental engagement. In the early years, it can have a substantial impact on emerging literacy skills and the supporting the development of specific skills, but it continues to be important throughout the primary years by helping build confidence and enjoyment of reading and learning (Jeynes, 2012; Nye, 2006; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).
- **Parent-child conversation:** family conversation is one of the simplest forms of parental engagement and there is emerging evidence suggesting it can have a strong influence on children's cognitive skills, the value they place on learning and their enjoyment of learning. The literature suggests that different themes of conversation and types of communication can be beneficial: conversations around *learning* (what children are learning, problem-solving around challenges, relationships with teachers, exploring areas of interest); conversations about *social issues* (politics, things in the news, culture and religion, science and nature, 'big ideas'); and *telling stories and family stories* (reminiscing about times the family spent together, stories about the child and the parents when they were young, about other family members, about the family's home country) (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Jeynes, 2005b; OECD, 2012; Powell & Peet, 2008; Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2010; Singh et al., 1995; Taumoepeau & Reese, 2013; Weizman & Snow, 2001).
- **Positive environment for homework:** the evidence around parent involvement in homework is very mixed, with some studies showing that it can have negative impacts on children's motivation, self-efficacy and academic achievement. More recent studies, however, have demonstrated that there are particular aspects of parental engagement that support children's learning and development and others that have a detrimental impact (which explains the mixed evidence). The types of parental engagement in homework that appear to lead to improved outcomes for children are:
 - Ensuring children have an appropriate space for homework;
 - Having rules around homework that are consistent with the expectations of the school (and invitations from the school that enable parents to ask questions, provide feedback and negotiate the parameters of homework);
 - Positive interactions between parents and children around homework (negative interactions having a detrimental impact on children's motivation, confidence and sense of self-efficacy); and
 - Supporting children's development as autonomous and independent learners, enabling them to take responsibility for homework completion and their learning (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Dumont et al., 2014; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Pomerantz et al., 2007).

- **Cognitively stimulating environment:** A cognitively stimulating environment incorporates a range of aspects, such as: having books and other learning resources at home; participating in cultural and community events; limiting screen time; visiting libraries, museums, art galleries; enabling learning around children’s enthusiasms and interests; or talking about books, movies, documentaries and television programs (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Jeynes, 2005b; Reynolds & Gill, 1994).
- **Support for children’s social and emotional wellbeing:** Social and emotional wellbeing is an important contributor to children’s learning, reflecting the ecological model of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In particular, child-teacher relationships is an important driver of academic outcomes (Hattie, 2008), while peer relationships have a significant influence on children’s enjoyment of school. Parents also play an important role in children’s behaviour at school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Family-school partnership

- **Parent-teacher communication:** Positive and trusting parent-teacher relationships, and opportunities for regular communication, are the most important aspects of family-school partnership. The evidence suggests that communication around individual children’s wellbeing and progress is important, along with class-wide communication about what children are learning and the provision of specific strategies (that are practical and achievable) parents can use to help support their children’s learning. There is emerging evidence around the provision of training or workshops around specific aspects of learning (such as developing early literacy or demystifying the curriculum) and outreach to families who experience barriers to engagement (such as home visiting, partnerships with community agencies, or home-school liaison officers)(Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 2005; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).
- **Engagement in the school community:** School-based involvement, such as attending school events, volunteering or participation in governance, can have a strong impact on the culture and resources of the school. Yet these types of engagement have been consistently demonstrated to have a comparatively low impact on children’s academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2005a), especially compared to the elements of family-led learning outlined above.

However, a sense of belonging to the school community and participation in school activities can indirectly impact children’s academic outcomes by conveying to children the extent to which parents’ value and support their education. Engagement in the community can also help build parental social networks, facilitate the development of positive relationships with teachers and other school staff, enable parents to understand school norms and build their knowledge about the curriculum; these factors are particularly important for parents who did not have positive experiences of school themselves, come from different cultural backgrounds, and experience barriers to engaging in their children’s learning (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2014; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Pomerantz, Wang, & Ng, 2005; Ritter, Barnett, Denny, & Albin, 2009).

Short-term outcomes for the child

The short-term outcomes for the child effectively outline the mechanisms through which parental engagement is thought to translate into improved academic outcomes. There is little evidence that parental engagement has a direct impact on children's learning; rather, its effects are indirect and primarily work through influencing children's orientation towards learning – their beliefs and confidence about learning and their motivation and engagement to learn.

These underpinning mechanisms are important for defining parental engagement because they relate to the issue of what parental engagement is and how it works, helping to establish appropriate parameters around parental engagement for policy, practice and measurement. For instance, a definition of parental engagement that focused on academic outcomes, and a measurement approach that focused solely on tracking test scores, would be likely to miss a great deal of nuance, especially as changes in academic outcomes are more likely to be seen over time.

The key underpinning mechanisms identified in recent literature include children's:

- **Belief in the importance of education**, which influences the importance they place on learning, their engagement in learning, persistence in the face of difficulty, and their own expectations about participation in further education (Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002).
- **Sense of self-efficacy**, reflecting their sense of control over their academic progress; the extent to which they believe they are able to influence their progress through hard work, seeking help or persisting in the face of difficulty; and whether they attribute their success to their own efforts and abilities (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Weiser & Riggio, 2010).
- **Sense of academic competence** and confidence in their ability (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Emerging evidence suggests that children who perceive they have low academic competence benefit most from parental engagement.
- **Motivation and engagement in learning**, which is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Gutman & Akerman, 2008; Hattie, 2013).
- **Social and emotional wellbeing**, including children's behaviour, peer relationships and relationships with teachers (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010).
- **Skills for learning**, including early literacy and numeracy, the development of learning strategies (being organised, being an independent learner, organising information through narratives, linking learning at school to the everyday, problem-solving) (Fantuzzo et al., 2004).

Children's long-term outcomes

- **Academic achievement:** Multiple studies show that parental engagement (variously defined) has a moderate but consistent impact on children's learning outcomes (Dearing et al., 2006; Flouri, 2006; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Nye, 2006; OECD, 2012; Singh et al., 1995; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Sylva, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).
 - For instance, a 2005 meta-analysis of 41 high-quality parental engagement studies over the past 30 years found an overarching effect size of 0.74 for the impact of parental engagement (where 0.5 is considered a moderate impact and 0.8 a large impact), while a more recent meta-analysis of parental engagement programs, conducted by the highly respected Campbell Collaboration, found an average effect size of 0.43 (Jeynes, 2005a; Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2006). This means that the academic performance of children whose parents receive a parental engagement program or intervention is consistently and significantly higher than the academic performance of children in the control groups.
 - Importantly, parental engagement isn't only important for children in the early years of school (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007; Shute, Hansen, Underwood, & Razzouk, 2011). For example, Dearing et al. (2006) found that increases in family involvement between kindergarten and fifth grade were associated with improvements in low-income children's literacy achievement, with the children most at-risk benefiting the most.
- **Socio-economic status and cultural background:** Research shows that parental engagement in children's learning is a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socio-economic status. That is, students with engaged parents, no matter what their income or background is, are more likely to do well at school, graduate from school and go on to higher education (St Clair & Jackson, 2006; St Clair, Jackson, & Zweiback, 2012). Parental engagement in learning is one tool that can help to close the gap in achievement between children of different socio-economic backgrounds (Monti et al., 2014).
 - For instance, there is "overwhelming evidence that children living in low-income families display lower levels of academic self-efficacy and achievement relative to other children" (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Dearing et al., 2006, p. 655), but Pomerantz et al. (2007) found that parental engagement had the strongest impact on children with lower self-efficacy and sense of academic competence. Similarly, one study of children who had experienced early insensitive/unresponsive parenting in the early years (an established risk factor and predictor of child vulnerability) found that those children whose parents were involved in their education had similar levels of achievement to children who had not experienced insensitive parenting (Monti et al., 2014).
 - Although lower SES families experience barriers to increasing and sustaining parental engagement (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), it has clear benefits for their children (Dearing et al., 2006).

Parental engagement conceptual model

	What aspects of family engagement matter most for children’s outcomes	Short term outcomes for the child	Longer term outcomes for the child
Family-led learning	High expectations	Belief in the importance of education Self-efficacy Academic competence/confidence Motivation and engagement in learning Persistence Skills for learning Social and emotional wellbeing	Academic achievement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • literacy • numeracy Mental health and wellbeing Mitigating the impacts of disadvantage on educational outcomes
	Shared reading		
	Parent/child conversation, especially around learning, social issues, family stories		
	Homework support that provides an appropriate environment, rules that are consistent with school expectations, that encourages autonomous learning and fosters positive parent-child interactions		
	Cognitively stimulating environment		
	Support for social and emotional wellbeing, peer relationships, teacher relationships		
Family-school partnership	Communication about children’s wellbeing and progress		
	Communication about what children are learning and specific information about what families can do to help		
	Engagement in the school community and positive attitudes to school		

Definition of parental engagement

The proposed technical definition of parental engagement is grounded in the elements identified in the conceptual model. As noted, the purpose of the technical definition is to

- establish the parameters of parental engagement, based on current available evidence; and
- specify the core components that are central to measuring parental engagement.

It can also provide guidance for policy and practice and provide the basis for the development of a shared understanding of parental engagement between families, schools and administrators.

Definition: Parental engagement in learning

Parental engagement involves partnerships between families and schools to promote children's learning and wellbeing. It involves:

- *family-led learning* focused on high aspirations for children, shared reading, a positive environment for homework, parent-child conversation, a cognitively stimulating home environment and support for social and emotional wellbeing; and
- *family-school partnerships* that encourage positive parent-teacher relationships, communication about children's progress, and engagement in the school community, while equipping parents to effectively support and encourage their children's learning and wellbeing.

Parental engagement recognises the important role that both parents and teachers play in children's learning and development. It is most effective when it is focused on developing positive attitudes towards learning and education for children, building their motivation and confidence as learners, and fostering their enjoyment of learning.

The proposed definition establishes that:

- Parental engagement involves partnerships between parents and schools, that children's learning is a responsibility shared by both parties, and that parents and teachers play different but important roles in children's learning;
- There are two core domains of parental engagement (family-led learning and family-school partnerships), and a range of specific, measurable components within these domains; and
- Parental engagement works by influencing children's attitudes towards learning and their confidence as learners, with some (more direct) impact on their cognitive development and development of skills for learning.

This technical definition forms the basis of more accessible definitions for parents and schools produced for this project.

Next steps

The next steps for this project involve:

- A review of effective practice and key approaches to improving parental engagement and production of resources for families and schools;
- Identification of short-term changes in schools' practice and parental knowledge, attitudes and behaviour;
- Development of key indicators and measures for the outcomes identified in the conceptual model and development of a survey measures; and
- The piloting of the measurement framework and survey measures.

The conceptual model and definition will inform each of these stages, and it is likely that the conceptual model will develop over the course of this work as evidence for effective practice is reviewed and the survey measures are developed. Such an iterative process is important, given that the majority of the high-quality literature in this space is from overseas and that the intention of this project is to develop an approach to parental engagement that reflects the context and priorities of the ACT.

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