

# Focus on the family as we go back to school

What if we enlisted families as guides?



BY AVIZE SABATER AND JENNIFER SHIELDS

As the back to school period is upon many and this pandemic continues, it seems like an opportune time to revisit the home-school dynamic as it relates learning. Ample research discusses the topic of schools and family engagement. In fact, thanks to the important work of Dr. Joyce Epstein and many others, the pivotal factor of 'families engaged in learning' was codified in 2012's No Child Left Behind law.

Researchers have shown how schools and families engage with each other around student learning. (We suggest the use of "family engagement" as an expansion on the term "parental involvement," given that grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, guardians, and others within the family unit can be significantly engaged in student learning.) As this pandemic continues, many families and schools have engaged in innovative collaborative activities designed to benefit student learning. It is our hope that researchers will design studies to explore some of these exciting efforts.

During COVID, schools have been forced to make significant alterations to their instructional paradigms. Yet, it is important to note that with or without COVID, student learning continues in many ways. Dr. Montessori posits that "the inner teacher, instead [of our conventional schooling process], does it (the child's natural learning) at the right time."

Now, given the forced instructional design shifts which many schools have made over the past year, what if school leaders intentionally sought to develop more collaborative ways to work with families? What if we more deliberately shifted our resources to supporting families, now that many students are spending more time outside of the school building?

Let us imagine an educational system which intentionally allocated resources

to support the exchange of information for families to be more effective collaborators with the teachers, with or without the pandemic. This year, more families engaged in "place-based" or "at-home-learning," in more ways, than any of us ever imagined. What if we innovated our current educational system's funding to equip families to be the adults to, as Dr. Montessori said, gain the "scientific knowledge of the student's development...to be collaborators with that student's nature which is creating them?"

In Montessori circles we emphasize the preparation of the adult who then prepares an "in-school" environment for a community of students at a particular plane or phase of development within

## Let us envision some creative ways families can incorporate Montessori-style activities into their homes

a particular cultural context. And this preparation of adult and environment generally is thought of as located within a school. It may be time to consider an intentional shift, to the "place" where more learning is occurring due to COVID, to focus on the prepared adult and prepared environment of the home. What would it look like if we shifted resources and attention to preparing the home adults and environment so that families are better equipped to serve as learning collaborators with their student's schools and guides?

Let us envision some creative ways families can incorporate Montessori-style activities, possibly materials, into their homes to support development. We know every family wants the very best for their child. By helping families observe and understand their child's developmental needs and characteristics, we help them trust that the child has an inner teacher who is eager to explore, to abstract, to become independent, to connect with others, and so on.

We could share with families practical ways to incorporate some Montessori materials or practices into their homes. For an infant, one can secure a bar on a wall so a crawling child can pull themselves up. For the walking toddler, we can add a low bar in the closet or low, light drawers, so the child can choose from a small selection of clothing and

have some independence dressing.

For three-to-six-year-old children, we can share care of the home environment, giving them a role in watering plants, washing dishes, etc. Six-to-twelve-year-old students can follow simple recipes and prepare meals. Schools can work systematically to prepare families as collaborators with the child's inner teacher and with our Montessori schools.

Families and caregivers can make a huge impact on children's development through supporting communication. We know that young children (birth to age six years) are in a sensitive period for developing language. This "superpower" means that they can acquire language effortlessly, simply by living. So,

Can you address the envelope?

'Sensorial' exploration is a huge need for young children. Families can once again feed this sensitive period by making much of the home accessible and safe for their child to experience and experiment with. What smells are in the home: soaps, flowers in the garden, spices in the pantry, hair oil in the bathroom, incense on the family altar, etc.? What tastes can the child experience? Children need many, many opportunities to learn to like a new taste, up to 15 times, before it is not new to them, so families can continue to offer tiny, small bites of healthy, interesting foods to their child. If a child can participate in preparation of the food and gets fascinating information about where and how it grows, they will be more likely to try it. What textures can a child experience in the home or garden or neighborhood? Which sensations does the child like? Bumpy, scratchy, smooth?

What shapes can be identified after a child has done the geometry cabinet and abstracted the key shapes? Can you find a hexagon or pentagon (hint--check out the soccer ball nearest you). Which leaf shapes from the botany cabinet can we find when we walk around our city block?

And as children move into the second plane of development, their imaginations take off. So, what stories can adults tell of their family history and culture? Would their child like to research this history? Do interviews with elders? Compare their religious background with those of neighbors and friends? What is the history of our specific community/neighborhood/social group and how did my family land here? What is unique and wonderful here? In DC where we live, go-go music is a rich cultural institution with roots in African rhythms. How did young people access go-go by using what they had in their homes? Buckets and drum sticks, busking on the streets and adapting funk music.

And math is all around us. Families can help children learn to use money, to budget, to donate funds to worthwhile causes. They can calculate amounts of ingredients in recipes, weigh the amount of dog food needed to feed their beagle for a month, estimate how many gallons of gasoline (or miles on their electric car) are needed to get to their beach vacation and back. The possibilities abound.

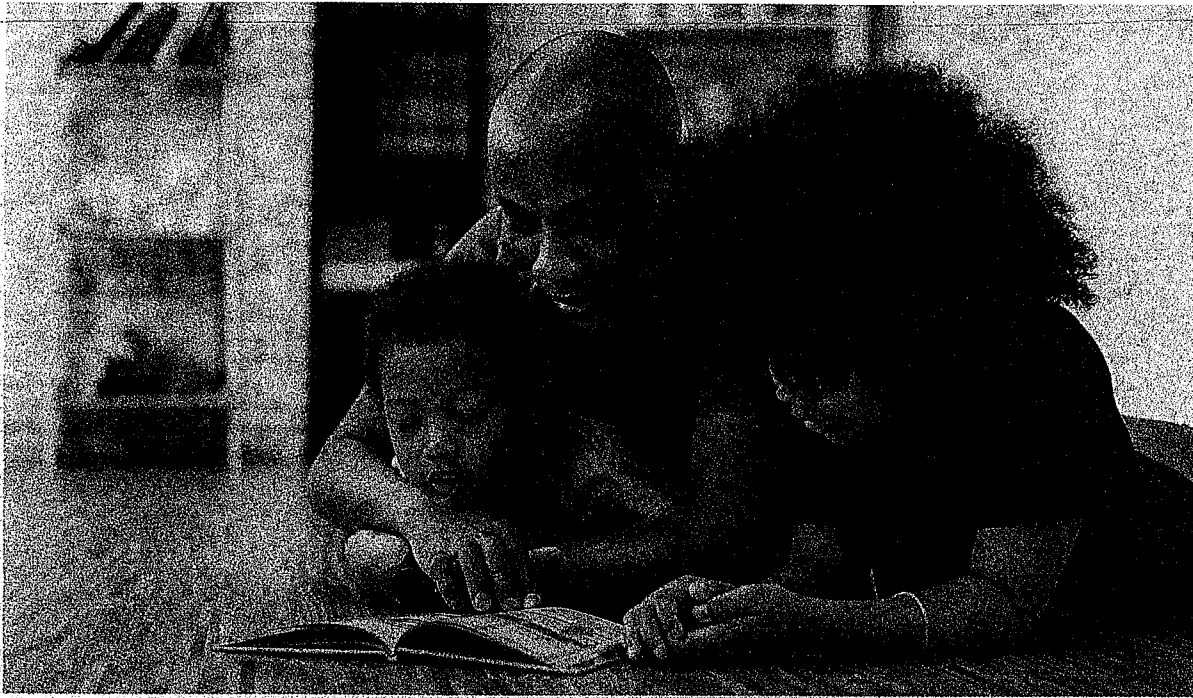
All of these areas are places where

families can feed this superpower/sensitive period by playing with language:

- Playing with sounds as in tongue twisters
- Reading books aloud (look out for books that reflect the family culture, affirming identity, as well as reality based books, books with beautiful vocabulary, life affirming stories, and books with a variety of beautiful illustrations)
- Listening to their child and responding to what the child is interested in. Tune in to the child's focus rather than imposing an adults' interest or focus at all times. See *Thirty Million Words, Building a Child's Brain*.

Adults can write in front of their child, using pencil and paper. A small chalkboard (or chalkboard paint on the wall) can be a springboard for modeling literacy. Jennifer used to write a "word of the day" or small phrase in cursive on a slate in her kitchen. Her children as early readers were curious to know what it said each day, e.g. "can you snap?"

Involve children in writing messages/notes to friends and family. E.g., should we have Abuela Mariana over for dinner on Saturday? Could you help me write an invitation? Shall we decorate the invitation? Do you want to use colored pencils or collage to decorate? Will you help address the envelope? Should we deliver it on our bikes or send it in the mail?



Reading books together can be the basis for family engagement

Montessori schools and teachers can share approaches, language, and techniques with families, who can adapt them to their own lives. We are not calling for all family members to take Montessori courses (although that might not hurt), nor advocating for homes to become Montessori schools. No, instead of the limiting concept of the role of school, let us stretch out to consider a more expansive and participatory educational construct, that intentionally seeks to share “power with” the home, so that families receive more Montessori human development information and children have one more place they can thrive and flourish.

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