



# Engaging families in homework clubs

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Families play a crucial role in children's learning. Family involvement and interest in children's education improves the child's confidence, their attitude to learning and their academic outcomes. There is increasing evidence that family involvement in education is the main indicator for children's success at school, and that this is particularly true for children who come from low income families and whose parents have low levels of education.

There are substantial benefits to involving parents and families in homework clubs, and many ways they can be involved.

## Why engage with families?

- Parents and families are eager to support their children's education. Many parents, especially those with refugee backgrounds, find it difficult to help their children with homework and may welcome the chance to be involved in their homework club, actively supporting their children's education.
- Families can be a fantastic support for coordinators. Families are often well placed to identify the needs of students. They may have good ideas about how problems with the program can be resolved and may be able to participate in committees. Families will be well placed to help promote the program within communities. The more parents know about the program and the more involved they feel, the more likely they are to actively support the program and coordinator.
- Being engaged with homework club may help families become more familiar with the Australian education system and the sorts of school work that their children do. Parents may start to feel more confident to help with their child's school work.

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The Centre for Multicultural Youth is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

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- Many young people from new and emerging communities describe a lack of role models in their community. Having family members perform important roles at homework club can create strong role models for young people and children.
- Many tutors volunteer because they want to make a difference to young people. Having contact with families at homework club and hearing from them about the difference they are making to their child's schooling will strengthen tutor satisfaction and may lead to greater retention of volunteer tutors.

## Ways to engage – possible strategies

It is a good idea to have some purposeful strategies to engage students' families in your program. Establishing good communication and relationships with parents and families is an achievement in itself, and is the first step in allowing families to have more in-depth involvement in the program. Remember that building trust and relationships takes time, and that there may be many other factors in families' lives that might make it difficult for them to be involved. Don't worry if you're not achieving things straight away.

Think about what strategies will work best in your program and be as creative as you like.

- Use any opportunity you can to talk informally with families. If parents drop off or pick up their children, try to make time to talk with them then. Introducing yourself, learning family members' names and having a chat will help families feel welcome and comfortable at homework club.
- Invite parents and families to visit homework club. They could visit during an ordinary session or you could plan a special event once a term or semester. You could:
  - » Hold an open day and display student's work for families to view. Use this as an opportunity to explain more about the program, answer questions and find out parent's views of the program.
  - » Hold a social event for families, tutors, homework club staff and students to come together. You could run a cooking or art session (some parents will be delighted to show their cooking, music or dance skills.) or have an educational theme (for example invite someone to speak to the group about career pathways, or borrow some educational games from the Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre for families, tutors and students to play together).

Think about the best way to invite families to these events. You could put an advertisement in your students' school newsletters, or you may want to send an invitation home with students. If you are unable to translate invitations or if parents are not literate in their first language, you could think about sending cards home with welcoming pictures or symbols, and ask students to explain the event and invite their parents. However, often the most effective way to communicate with parents is to speak with them in person or on the phone.

It is also important to think about the community you are working with when planning events and try to make sure that activities and catering are religiously and culturally appropriate.

If your program is based in a school or if you have a partnership or close relationship with a school, try working with school staff, and especially Multicultural Education Aids, to communicate with parents. School staff may already have good relationships with the families you want to contact.

- Ask to see the school's calendar of events and attend and promote the homework club to families at these events.
- If possible, phone parents occasionally to give positive feedback about their child.
- Consider running a program for parents at the same time as homework club. You could run a parents' conversation club (where parents practice their English conversation skills) or invite parents in to receive tutoring themselves. You could run activities and information sessions

about settlement issues, parenting strategies, or ways parents can support their children with literacy and numeracy at home. You may want to consider partnering with other organisations to help you run these sorts of programs.

***Lessons from the sector:  
Flemington Homework Club***

The coordinator of a program in Flemington worked hard over a year to improve relationships with parents and families. At first, she made use of the first ten minutes of the program to chat with parents who were dropping children off. Parents began to talk about their children's progress at school and mentioned subjects their children most needed help in. This helped the coordinator to match tutors to students and parents saw that their comments were having an effect on the program. They started to suggest other ways to improve the program and many suggestions were taken up by the coordinator. The coordinator was also careful to explain when suggestions may be difficult or not appropriate to act on.

Once a term the coordinator holds a special event to bring families, tutors and students together. These are social events that also have an educational theme. At one event the coordinator invited past students to speak about the paths they had taken into tertiary study. This helped parents and their children talk about their career and study plans for the future.

Parents and tutors get to know each other and develop good relationships at these events – so much so, that parents now hold a traditional tea ceremony to thank tutors for their time and help.

Offer parents the chance to run activities for students. For example, at the East Preston Islamic College homework club parents take it in turns to run cooking classes. Many parents may have skills that they would enjoy teaching children.

- Think about creating a buddy-system amongst parents, pairing new parents with parents whose children have been attending homework club for a long time.
- Consider employing a parent to coordinate or assist with the planning and running of the program.
- Seek regular feedback from parents about how the program is going and whether they have noticed any changes in their child's confidence, attitude, or study skills. You can do this informally, by simply chatting with parents in person or on the phone, or through more formal interviews or focus group discussions. Make sure to include parents and families when evaluating your program.

***Lessons from the sector:  
Cambridge Primary School Homework Club***

A homework club for students with refugee backgrounds in Hoppers Crossing runs a Parent's Program at the same time as homework club is running. While students are studying in one part of the school, parents attend information sessions and workshops about settling in Australia in another. The homework club coordinator asks parents what issues they would most like information on, and then invites local settlement service providers or the school Principal to run a session and answer parent's questions.

After the information session parents take a lot of pleasure in preparing a snack for their children and parents, tutors and students then eat together and discuss what they have done at homework club.

- Invite parents to join the homework club reference group or committee. Try to hold committee meetings at times and venues that will suit the families in your community. Some people are keen to be involved in committees, but there are many reasons families may be reluctant to be involved in decision making. Parents may not be used to formal meetings, may not feel comfortable voicing opinions amongst professionals and may feel that their English skills are inadequate. Talk with parents and try to reassure them about these concerns when inviting them.
- If you are starting a new homework club, think about running it in a community setting that is already well used by families.
- Ask students and ask families. Students may have great ideas about the ways their families could get involved. You'll also get a good idea of what level of family involvement students feel comfortable with. Be open and honest with parents and families and ask outright how they would like to be involved – this will give you the best indication of how best to engage with them.

## Challenges in engaging parents and families

It is important to keep in mind some of the factors that might restrict parents' involvement in their child's homework club.

- It is largely women who are involved in their children's education. Parental involvement in education is largely made up of women. Women juggle competing responsibilities including child care, domestic work, and often paid work and study. These responsibilities limit the time mothers, older siblings, aunts or grandmothers can dedicate to homework club.
- Parents, especially women, may not have a driver's licence and may find it difficult to attend homework club. Instead, sometimes fathers will pick up their children. The involvement of fathers should be encouraged, especially as they are important role models for boys to stay engaged with school and learning.
- The Australian education environment, including homework clubs, may be unfamiliar to parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Parents may consider these places off-limits to them and best left to teaching professionals. It is important to reassure families and create a welcoming, informal environment.