Positive Parent Contact: Can this method enhance family-school partnerships?  
Sarah Fefer, Ph.D., Caitlin Virga, M.Ed., Meme Heineman, Ph.D., & Katsiaryna Aniskovich, M.Ed.

University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Contact sfeger@educ.umass.edu for more information**

### Abstract and Rationale

Family-school partnerships are a critical factor in building effective educational practices (Esler, Godber, & Christianson, 2008; Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). Family engagement in children’s academic and social lives is associated with increased positive behavior and academic achievement (El-Nokali, Bachman, & Votrub-Drzal, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2012). Unfortunately, efforts to engage parents (e.g., through conferencing, joint planning, or home-based interventions) are demanding with little reinforcement. This does not help sustain engagements over time and typically consists of asking parents to support efforts of school rather than mutual benefit (Kim, Sheridan, Kwon, and Koziol, 2013). This study will explore a school-based intervention that encourages parent support without placing additional demands on the parents.

### Current Practices

**One directional (school to home) communication**
- Purpose: share updates on school programs, reports on child’s academic or behavioral functioning (Epstein, 1992)
- Examples: school newsletters, handbooks, school-based discipline reports (May et al., 2000)

**Volunteering**
- Purpose: Assisting school personnel or students either in the building or by doing work on half of the school at home
- Examples: Chaperoning, attending parent nights, classroom assistant (Garbacz et al., 2016)

**System of support for students and families**
- Purpose: during critical school transitions (pre to elementary, middle to high school) (Middle, Lines, Fleming, 2014)
- Examples: Moving up day, parents attend abbreviated schedule, send materials home prior to instruction

**RTI & PBIS: Tier II & III Supports**
- Purpose: increased instructional and behavioral supports to match students’ level of need (Batsche et al., 2005)
- Examples: Behavior Education Program, Check-in Check-out, home school notes, progress reports on IEP goals

**Curriculum of the home**
- Purpose: promotion of student learning activities in the home environment, support child development aspects that prepare the child for the academic demands of school
- Examples: Leisure reading, monitoring homework, joint tele-viewing (Redding, 1992; Walber, 1984)

### Barriers

**Communication only during crisis, will sometimes only be negative** (Christenson, 2004; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001)

**Problems with logistics such as transportation, childcare, or scheduling** (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008; Colton, 2002)

**Unwelcome school environment, power differentials, “labeling” families** (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, 2008; Colton, 2002)

**Confusion over the roles of school personnel and families** (Colton, 2002; Bang, 2009)

**Cultural issues: unclear roles, unfamiliar rituals, language barriers** (Bang, 2009; Gestwicki, 2007)

**Parents negative attitudes or own bad experiences with school** (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997)

**Teachers lack preparation and expertise on working with families** (Christenson, 2004; Colton, 2002)

**Some educators may not wish to have parents “complicating” their schedule** (Colton, 2002)

**Low sense of efficacy for helping children learn, self-perceptions of inadequate skills and knowledge** (e.g., Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997)

### Positive Parent Contact Pilot Project

**Purpose**
- Implement a high reinforcement low demand strategy for parents and teachers to increase reciprocal communication and family-school partnerships

**Method**
- Identify a student in their class who may potentially benefit most from increased family partnership strategies (e.g., due to behavioral concerns, strained parent-teacher relationships, etc.)
- Teachers’ top 3 preferred methods of contact offered to parents
- Adding two weekly positive contacts (brief email, text through Google Voice, note, or phone call sharing student success) with parents to current practices
- Used a contact log to document any communication with the parents (in hopes that that teacher initiated contact may lead to increases in parent initiated contact)
- Teachers collect daily behavior data on their student based on PBIS expectations
- Parents and teachers were asked to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; Goodman (SDQ; 1997) and the Parent-Teacher Relationship Scale; Vickers & Minke (PTRS; 1995)

**Initial Results**
- One teacher offered email, note home, and text sent through Google Voice as contact options; the parent chose email
- The other teacher offered email, note home, and call as preferred contact options; the parents chose note home
- One teachers contact log noted seven total contacts in 5 weeks (4 emails and 3 follow-up conversations).
- PTRS and SDQ scores were comparable across teachers and parents (mean PTRS = 3.35 on 1-5 scale; mean SDQ 1.65 on 1-3 scale)

### Can Technology Make a Difference?

- Teachers indicate that emails, texts, websites, electronic portfolios, online surveys, video chat, Skype, and Google Hangout are making communication between parents more timely, efficient, productive, and satisfying for both parties (Pearson’s Teaching in a Digital Age, 2014)
- Use online calendars so that parents can schedule meetings, conferences, or volunteer at school
- Online homework schedules, homework logs, and online grade books allow parents to check on their student’s academic progress (Fusco, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Weinstein, 2008)
- Provide an opportunity for parents to praise or intervene with students at home for things going on in the classroom
- Parents reported that it is difficult to get information from their uncommunicative children about what happened during school (Beverly, 2003; Kasprzowicz, 2002) but online sites can provide daily updates about grades, attendance, and homework

### Future Directions

- Study to be carried out 2016-2017 in Western Mass with 4 different schools with a total of 20 student/educator/parent triads
- Direct observation of student behavior in each classroom will be used in addition to the data collection methods used in the pilot study
- Focus groups will be conducted, one with parents and one with educators to determine current practices and perceptions related to family-school communication