

Family Engagement in Anywhere, Anytime Learning



M. Elena Lopez and Margaret Caspe
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Harvard Family
Research Project



“Rising income inequality seems inevitable, but it doesn’t have to be.”¹—David Leonhardt

Consider applying Leonhardt’s¹ point to education: “Rising education inequality seems inevitable, but it doesn’t have to be.” The inequality of school experiences is well publicized, but the inequalities that exist before children enter school and that persist in out-of-school time learning are less widely recognized.² Tackling inequality of educational opportunity means that we must broaden our understanding about where and when children learn. This broader understanding reveals often unacknowledged but major opportunity gaps that play a large role in educational inequality.

Families living in neighborhoods with low-performing schools, crime, and poverty often have diminished access to high-quality early childhood and afterschool programs, summer learning experiences, and cultural institutions. Even when these out-of-school time resources exist, they are often financially out of reach. Research shows that families with high incomes spend nearly seven times more money on out-of-school time enrichment activities, such as music lessons, summer camps, and travel, than families from low-income homes.³ The stresses of poverty and long work hours make it hard for families to actively participate in their children’s learning and development. Families that suffer from economic adversity spend less time with their children, from even the earliest ages, in places like zoos, museums, and libraries, and less time engaged in the types of literacy activities that are associated with school success than families who are economically stable.^{4,5}

We also know from research and evaluations from several fields that learning experiences outside of K–12 schooling help children get the skills and experiences they need to develop to be successful in school and life (see appendix). For example, more time spent in afterschool activities during the elementary school years is linked to academic success, fewer behavior problems, and higher self-esteem.^{6,7} Consistent participation in afterschool programs narrows the math achievement gap and is associated with better work habits among students and gains in their self-efficacy.⁸

Additionally, an array of summer learning experiences can prevent summer learning loss.^{9,10,11} Parent training in shared reading techniques, coupled with efforts to bring more books into the homes of young children, improves early language and literacy abilities.¹² Early childhood programs can boost children’s cognitive and social-emotional development, which can last into early adulthood and often set families on a trajectory of involvement in children’s learning.¹³ When family involvement levels are high from kindergarten through fifth grade, the achievement gap in average literacy performance between children of more and less educated mothers is nonexistent.¹⁴ These findings make it clear that efforts to close opportunity gaps must go beyond learning that happens only in school. There is a pressing need to broaden the conversation about learning, and where and when it takes place, if we are going to close opportunity and achievement gaps and ensure that all children develop the skills and character traits they need to succeed.



ADDRESSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP: ANYWHERE, ANYTIME LEARNING

Decades of research make it clear that children and youth—in fact, all of us—learn anywhere, anytime, not just in school. Children and youth thrive when, in conjunction with their school experiences, they engage in interest-driven learning in summer and afterschool programs, in the home, and at early childhood centers, libraries, and museums, to name just a few. Today, digital media have added a new dimension to learning opportunities. Children and youth can access information and connect with others instantly, anywhere and at any time.

This issue of the *FINE Newsletter* launches a yearlong strand of work that will look at what we call “anywhere, anytime learning.” Research shows that children spend only 20 percent of their waking time annually in formal classroom education, leaving 80 percent of their time to explore and enhance their learning interests in nonschool settings. Through our work, we see an explosion of creativity in learning outside of school, as many different organizations take on the challenge of closing the opportunity gaps and making sure children and youth get the skills and experiences that they need to succeed.

However, we also recognize that the notion of family engagement has been largely absent from the growing conversation about expanded nonschool supports. Afterschool programs, museums, and other institutions typically focus on getting parents to enroll their children in their programs or to sign permission slips rather than emphasizing how parents can manage and sustain their children’s learning and development in and across different settings.¹⁵ Simultaneously, much of the research and dialogue about family engagement to promote children’s academic success are about formal schooling and the home–school relationship, and not the broader settings, such as afterschool programs and libraries, where families might be involved.

So, in this issue of the *FINE Newsletter*, we explore family engagement in anywhere, anytime learning. We offer examples to help you imagine what this broader view of learning is and how you can better connect and engage families with these anywhere, anytime learning opportunities.

What’s in a Name?

Different labels—complementary learning; connected learning; learning ecology; anywhere, anytime learning—capture this constellation of expanded educational spaces and resources. Beyond the labels, the terms share a common viewpoint: Children from even the youngest age can thrive when they participate in a network of learning opportunities—in and out of school—that meets their interests and needs.

Where Do You Learn?

*Is it at the park? On the train?
At the post office?*

The [National Writing Project](#) is bringing students, parents, and educators together to answer the question: “Where do you learn?” Join the conversation by tweeting, using the hashtag [#wherewelearn](#), to share examples of where you learn and to share your reflections about how you support anywhere, anytime learning.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN ANYWHERE, ANYTIME LEARNING

Whether in conversation over dinner or on a swing at the playground, learning happens most readily within the context of supportive relationships with families, friends, and teachers. The social nature of learning begins at birth and continues throughout life. Infants' brains grow when caregivers make eye contact and repeat babies' words and smiles. Young adults succeed when adults are there to listen, monitor, and encourage new ideas.

For this reason, families have an important role to play in anywhere, anytime learning. Families can uncover and nurture children's and youth's growing interests and match children's strengths to various opportunities. But how can families and other adults provide conditions that will most effectively promote growth? How can families help a child to develop his or her full potential and establish a pathway of lifelong learning? How can families and adults create a climate for children that provides them with information; stimulates their imagination; enhances their motivation and creativity; and helps them discover the value of a work ethic?¹⁶

In line with the expanded definition of family engagement—a shared responsibility among families and educators, continuous from birth to young adulthood, and reinforced across multiple learning contexts—we offer three processes by which families, schools, and community institutions can achieve the vision of anywhere, anytime learning:

- Family engagement in anywhere, anytime learning involves the support that families provide to learners to pursue interests. It also includes the knowledge, skills, and encouragement that schools and communities offer families to do this well.
- It involves the ways families, schools, and communities connect children to learning opportunities across different community settings and the ways families and local organizations are coordinated to increase family access to nonschool learning resources.¹⁷
- It involves the efforts that families, schools, and communities make to create learning pathways that last over time, and the capacity of communities to sustain and bridge these paths.

Families supporting interest-driven learning anywhere, anytime

Children and youth develop through opportunities to explore, learn, and cultivate their interests both in and out of school. Families are important in helping children uncover and expand these interests and in encouraging them to try out new paths to learning. Singing songs, reading books, and telling stories are important parent–child activities that support learning when children are young. Early childhood educators have long noted that these interactions are most beneficial when they center on children's natural inquiries. These parent–child activities need not take place only at home or school, but can occur at the grocery store, the Laundromat, or anywhere and anytime children and families are together. As children get older, parent–child relationships remain important. Families play a critical role in communicating the value of education, setting high expectations for children's educational attainment, and encouraging children's pursuits. Conversations about educational possibilities and expanding interests can take place anywhere and anytime through text messaging, at exhibits and events, and during regular morning and evening routines.

Teachers and other school personnel, youth development workers, and museum docents, to name just a few, can provide age-appropriate opportunities to support parent-child interactions around interest-driven learning. As one example, museums might develop exhibits for young children where families and children together can explore in hands-on ways different materials and scientific principles. In such cases, the museums might provide parents with interesting, open-ended prompts to ask their child as they work on the activities together. We offer an example of this kind of creative opportunity in our *FINE Newsletter* article on *Imagine That*, a child interactive play space. In addition to free play areas, [Imagine That](#) offers various family-engagement workshops that are designed to nurture children's development while providing fun and easy activities that can be replicated and further explored at home. One of these activities involves families and children making pizza together, beginning with rolling dough and discussing its properties, and ending with a delicious shared meal.

For older children, museums might develop exhibits in which parents and their youth need to jointly solve problems that have ambiguous and open-ended solutions, forcing both the parents and youth to reason together. Examples of these types of activities can be found at [MAKESHOP®](#), located at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh. Designed for children between the ages of 8 and 12 and their families, MAKESHOP is a work space that encourages children and families to come together in a variety of open-ended experiences using physical and digital materials, tools, and processes. For example, participating together, families and children might take apart recycled toys or appliances and discover the inner circuitry of these items. The "co-learning" that takes place when family members work side by side on projects builds relationships and encourages important conversations.



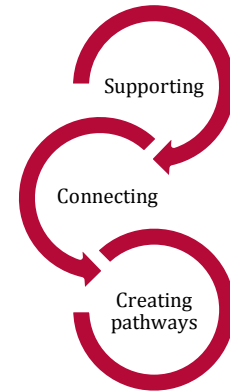
Photo credit: Anthony Musmanno

Consider:

- In your community, in what settings do you see families supporting children and youth in interest-driven learning?
- How are schools and community-based organizations guiding families to be engaged in children's learning?
- How can you work together with families to imagine new learning opportunities for your community?

Families, schools, and communities connecting children and youth to learning opportunities

Children and youth thrive when they have choices, along with opportunities to participate in different learning settings and test new ideas within them. It is valuable for learners, especially high school students who become increasingly specialized in their talents and interests, to connect and apply ideas across various community spaces.^{18,19} This connection helps students broaden and deepen their learning. It takes them on a journey from being a novice to becoming an expert.



Families and institutions such as schools, libraries, and youth-serving organizations can guide children in managing connections across locations, at least until children are mature enough to make choices and take advantage of opportunities by themselves. For example, families share their children’s interests and challenges with teachers. Teachers, in turn, suggest to families websites that extend classroom learning into the home. School–parent liaisons also inform families about afterschool programs that offer recreational and enrichment activities keyed to a child’s interests and needs. Families return to children and offer them choices about what activities they might like to participate in. In this respect, both families and institutions process, manage, and coordinate information and resources with each other.

When schools, communities, and networks of families and institutions guide families to navigate and access community opportunities, especially those at no or low cost, families are better able to ensure children’s safety and promote valuable learning opportunities. For instance, in this issue we explore how the [Maryland Library Partnerships](#) project has not only bolstered family engagement in children and youth literacy but also facilitated information sharing among community members about local resources. In another example from this issue, [Cool Culture](#) is an organization that helps New York City’s income-eligible families enjoy the city’s rich cultural life by offering free passes to museums, along with resources and training on how to make the most of every visit.

Consider:

- In your community, how do schools and youth-serving organizations create awareness about the importance of their engagement across many learning settings?
- How do they guide families to access children’s opportunities to learn and develop across many settings?
- What can you and families do together in your community to promote family engagement in anywhere, anytime learning?

Families, schools, and communities creating learning pathways

With support and guidance, children and youth are more likely to maintain their interests over time and to expand into related pursuits. Together, families, schools, and communities can create avenues through which children and youth can explore their interests across grades and transition points. Depending on



the student's age and interest, adults with different areas of expertise might play different roles at different times across this learning pathway. However, families remain a constant resource about students' strengths and continue to have an important role along this learning continuum. Families might become active teachers of certain skills and knowledge or regularly participate in planning meetings or exhibitions.

Photo credit: Cool Culture

For example, a young girl might show a keen interest in building with blocks and gears. Families might support this budding interest in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) by collecting boxes and other construction materials from the local recycling center for her to play with at home. Early childhood teachers might read books like *Rosie Revere, Engineer*, to encourage the child to tinker with different materials. As the child enters kindergarten, a family member or early childhood teacher might communicate this interest to the teacher and afterschool staff, who might develop related projects around video games, apps, and robotics. As the child grows older, families, schools, and other adults might help link the child to summer and afterschool programs designed for girls interested in STEM, such as [Techbridge](#), in California. In this program for girls from 5th through 12th grade, afterschool and summer staff support girls in applied STEM projects and help them to see engineering as a viable college major and career option. The program spans a large age range to ensure that girls' interests can be picked up early and cultivated over time. Moreover, families are considered co-learners in Techbridge, and they receive tips and ideas on how to support their daughters and prompts for how to extend their STEM learning.



Consider:

- What kinds of pathways exist for interest-driven learning over time in your school and community?
- What kinds of pathways could you build in your community?
- How can you work together with families in developing these pathways?

Anywhere, Anytime Learning—A Shared Responsibility

Research is clear that children learn anywhere, anytime. The challenge now is to make sure that all families can enable their children to have access to a full array and network of school and out-of-school opportunities from their earliest years on.

Families, schools, and communities share the responsibility for promoting anywhere, anytime learning. Three ways to do this are by:

- Supporting learning anywhere, anytime
- Connecting children to learning opportunities
- Creating learning pathways that last over time

CONCLUSION

We need to broaden our notion of family engagement and of learning beyond school. We know that educational policy does not provide incentives for anywhere, anytime learning yet. It is at the community level and through private funds that we are seeing efforts to connect resources. The examples from this commentary show how communities are beginning to disrupt narrow thinking as they begin to plan and act differently. The power of these ideas will begin to affect the national conversation and policy change. As David Leonhardt reminds us, “Rising inequality is a trend, but it is one that we have helped create and one we can still change.”²⁰

As you reflect on the questions we have posed, we are looking to you to share your examples of what family engagement in anywhere, anytime learning looks like; what places are making it work; and what policies are supporting it.

Please email us at fine@gse.harvard.edu to share ways that you are expanding your definition of family engagement to include anywhere, anytime learning.

ABOUT HFRP

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a leading national organization whose purpose is to shape 21st-century education by connecting the critical areas of student learning. Our focus is on anywhere, anytime learning approaches that extend from early childhood through college and connect families, schools, out-of-school time programs, and digital media. We build strategic partnerships with policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders to generate new thinking, stimulate innovation, and promote continuous improvement in education policy, practice, and evaluation. Our research and tools provide timely, relevant, and practical information for decision making. Addressing issues of access and equity in children’s learning and identifying meaningful, effective family engagement practices that reinforce success for all children are central to our work.

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APPENDIX

The Federal Role in Out-of-School Learning: After-School, Summer Learning, and Family Involvement as Critical Learning Supports

Heather B. Weiss, Priscilla M. D. Little, Suzanne M. Bouffard, Sarah N. Deschenes, Helen Janc Malone
Harvard Family Research Project, May 2009

Nearly a third of America’s children, disproportionately from racial and ethnic minorities or from low-income or recent immigrant families, are being left behind. They are not going to graduate from high school, go on to postsecondary schooling, or have the skills that they need—and that the country needs them to have—to succeed in a global economy and society. National concern about the serious implications for America’s future of this growing loss of human potential is causing many to question the dominant assumption behind much current educational policy and practice: that school is *the only place* where and when children learn. This assumption is wrong. Forty years of steadily accumulating research, in fact, show that learning opportunities and support in the family, after school, and during the summer months are major predictors of children’s development, learning, and educational achievement. The research also indicates that economically and otherwise disadvantaged children are less likely than their more-advantaged peers to have access to these out-of-school or “complementary learning” opportunities, and that this inequity substantially undermines their learning and chances for school success.

Research Highlights:

- Parenting affects school readiness and achievement across ages.
- Family–school relationships and involvement promote learning.
- Family involvement can facilitate access to learning opportunities (e.g., afterschool).

- Afterschool programs promote youth development.
- Afterschool programs can support educational attainment and achievement.
- Afterschool programs can promote social, prevention, and wellness outcomes that contribute to in-school success.

- Summer programs can support academic achievement.
- Summer programs support other outcomes (e.g., social skills, identity development) that enable learning.
- Summer programming can support family involvement.



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hfrp_pubs@gse.harvard.edu

Harvard Family Research Project
50 Church Street, 4th Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138

www.hfrp.org
Tel: 617-495-9108



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