

# ENHANCING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGAGING IN OPEN-SCHOOLING PRACTICES

## ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of an Erasmus+ project implemented in a rural public pre-school in Greece. This study focuses on the effects of family engagement activities organised during the project, specifically the activities during which parents visited schools under the umbrella term 'open-school days'.

The main topics approached in this study are: (a) parental preferences in family engagement activities; (b) the feelings parents experienced when they took part in open-school days; and (c) the effects of family engagement during open-school days on routines in the home-learning environment. Parents were interviewed, their discussions were transcribed, and their answers were categorised.

Results revealed that families preferred open-school days to other activities, and that they experienced many positive feelings during their participation. Additionally, changes in the home-learning environment were mentioned. This study revealed the importance of engaging families in their children's early development stages and emphasised families' willingness to engage. It also stressed the importance of hosting family engagement activities at schools. Limitations of the study are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Family engagement; open-school; preschool; home school environment.

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## INTRODUCTION

Families have a major influence on their children's achievements in every aspect of their lives, both at home and at school (Henderson & Mapp, 2011). Research over the years has shown that family engagement in children's education benefits children's performance and social skills, and also improves quality in education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The evidence is positive and convincing; when families, schools, and communities collaborate, children tend to have higher academic performance, improved behaviour, and enhanced social skills (Smith et al., 2013). Actually, family engagement is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach, according to which every child is affected by family, school and the community, and all these three elements should share common goals.

The earlier parents are engaged in their children's education, the more the benefits are for children and for themselves (Epstein, 1995). In fact, it seems that if parents engage in education-related activities starting from kindergarten, then they tend to be alert earlier in their role as parents. They also seek to engage in their children's education in later school years (Goff et al., 2012). Of course, allowing parents to be engaged in education can certainly be a challenge for both parents and teachers. Parents have apparently not been exposed enough to family engagement activities, but wish to feel welcomed at schools (Ward, 2013). Sometimes parents are even viewed as '*hard-to-reach*', though Evangelou, et al., (2011) questioned whether it is parents or services that are hard to reach. Of course, it is true that educators tend to feel unprepared for engaging parents appropriately, and may have developed a 'deficit mindset' (Epstein, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge the ways parents and school can build warm relationships. According to Epstein's framework (1995), there are several ways to conceptualise family engagement; specifically, six types: (a) parenting; (b) learning at home; (c) communication with school; (d) volunteering; (e) decision-making; and (f) collaborating with the community. Epstein (1995), also underlined the importance of providing parents with a variety of activities, so that all find a way to engage. If a variety of activities is provided, parents meet fewer barriers to engagement. Beyond the activities, the key element for successful family engagement is creating warm relationships with parents. Mapp & Bergman (2019) underlined the importance of developing trusting relationships between home and school, and declared that when trust is built between schools and families, families tend to engage more often.

Gains in learning are most prominent when parents and teachers work together to facilitate a supportive learning environment in school and at home. While the home learning environment remains critical to a child's education, dialogue between parents and school has to occur, not only to keep parents informed of children's achievements, but also about curricula, courses, school routines and learning techniques that can also be implemented at home. Building this kind of communication, parents and teachers can share conversations about optimal home learning environments that in turn benefit both parents and children (Emerson et al., 2012). Inviting parents to school seems to be a practice in this direction, as parents have the opportunity to understand more about their children's abilities and achievements, but also to be inspired by learning techniques they can use at home.

A series of activities for parents were introduced in the context of an Erasmus+ project in a public pre-school in Greece. Entitled: "Parents and teachers: Together for quality education", the project lasted one year, and its main goal was to find means of effective collaboration with parents, so that preschool teachers can support their efforts in parenting, not just in implementing individual actions. During the project, one of the teachers also attended a 5-day seminar in Sevilla, Spain. During this seminar, psychodrama techniques were used, supporting teachers in the use of appropriate ways of communicating with parents.

Emphasising both parents' and teachers' wellbeing, our school offered several activities for parents, not only online, but also in-person. One part of the activities referred to organising open days at school, in which parents were invited to the school. It is worth noting that it was a period of Covid-19 restrictions, in which there were restrictions during the winter that were withdrawn during the spring and summer. In the present study, we focused on activities welcoming parents to school, under the umbrella term "open-school days". More specifically, parents joined our school program in three different ways:

(a) Open-class days: Quite often (and usually at the end of our projects), parents were invited to the school. Usually, at the end of a project with children, a game was made by teachers and children. Creating games with children was a way of reinforcing what children had learned and transforming their knowledge into a game. Game-based learning uses games (often existing board, social, or video games) to teach in an engaging way, and allows students to explore relevant aspects of games in a learning context designed by teachers (Ham, 2021). For example, a question game was made after focusing on dinosaurs, or a colour game after studying the rainbow. Games were made out of materials that could be easily found, so that parents could be inspired to create their own games as well. Games using Bee-Bot or other STEAM materials were also used in playing. The classroom was organised like a "museum " during open-class days, where children's learning achievements were distributed, and then parents and children had the opportunity to play the game that the children and teachers had prepared.

(b) Parents as experts in the school: During our thematic approaches, we invited some parents to school as experts, and they presented something related to their job. For example, during our project named "bees and insects", a family of beekeepers showed us the secrets of beekeeping. They visited the school with a beekeeper's tools and uniform and explained everything about their job to the children. During Christmastime, a pastry-chef parent showed us how to make biscuit houses, while a parent who owned a bakery welcomed children to his workshop to make Easter cookies.

(c) Parents as playmates in the school: At the end of the school year, parents were invited to school to play traditional Greek group games with their children. Children had chosen the games with teachers, and surprised the parents with their choices. Parents were excited to play their children's traditional games, which they also used to play when they were children. That was a single activity, part of the school end-of-year celebration.

The purpose of the present study was initially to find any preferences on family engagement activities. Focusing on open-school days (as these activities were mostly preferred by parents), two more issues of interest arose. First, to highlight how parents experienced their engagement during open-school days, as this was considered successful by teachers but also demanding, as parents' physical attendance was required. Finally, the reflection of family engagement in family routines was also a question for research.

Consequently, 3 research questions arose:

- (1) Do parents prefer open-school days to other activities? (e.g., receiving useful parenting notes, using the school website, attending single meetings with experts, etc.)
- (2) How did parents experience their engagement in open-school days?
- (3) How did family engagement in open-school days affect parent's routines in the home environment?

## METHODOLOGY

The sample of the present research consisted of 15 parents of 15 preschool children (9 girls, 6 boys; mean age=60.16 months;  $Sd=6.09$ ), in a public kindergarten in Greece. At the beginning of the 2021 school year, parents were informed in a parents' meeting about our schools' participation in an Erasmus+ project concerning family engagement. They were informed that several activities would be offered to them; they were also informed that their participation in the offered activities was voluntary.

Activities for parents were divided in four major categories based on how parents were engaged: (a) online activities (e.g., online meetings with experts); (b) receiving information activities (e.g., receiving useful notes at home); (c) open-school days (e.g., visiting school to play with children) and (d) out-of-school activities (e.g. attending short excursions with children and teachers). During winter, measures by the Greek Government against the Covid-19 pandemic were active, so parents were involved in online activities, or received notes at home. During spring and the beginning of summer, parents were allowed to come to school. These activities are reported in **Table 1**.

At the end of the Erasmus+ project, parents consented to be interviewed. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was assembled by teachers to reflect project goals (see Annex: Parents' semi-structured interview). More specifically, the interview focused on: (a) preferences among the offered activities (questions 1-3); (b) feelings when engaged in education (questions 4-6) and (c) changes in the home learning environment (questions 7-8). Interviews were conducted from June until July of 2021, and lasted approximately 30 minutes for each parent. Parents first consented to recording of the interview and were then asked about their experience of family engagement activities.

At the end of the interviews, parents' discussions were written into transcripts, and their answers categorised. For the first research question, a checklist was made containing all the offered activities, and the two first choices by parents were entered (see **Table 1**). Following the research procedure of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as it was more appropriate for the purpose of the present study, there were some coding stages before concluding at the final themes for the second and third goals of the present study. First, interviews were transcribed and read carefully, several times. Initial codes derived from transcriptions, and then codes were classified into themes. More specifically themes referred to:

1. Feelings:
  - 1.1. positive
  - 1.2. negative
  - 1.3. feelings concerning the future

2. Changes:
  - 2.1. concerning buying new supplements learning materials for home
  - 2.2. concerning adoption of new practices
  - 2.3. creating bonds with children

Themes were looked at more carefully, they were divided into more themes, and then finalised. Final categories can be seen in **Tables 2 and 3**, concerning parents' feelings and also changes in the routines parents use at home.

## RESULTS

### PARENTS' PREFERENCES IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

During interviews, parents were asked about their preference on the activities they were provided. Of course, parents did not have only one favourite choice, and they referred also to other activities they enjoyed. Provided activities are listed on four major categories: (a) online activities; (b) receiving information activities; (c) open-school days; and (d) out-of-school activities. In Table 1, the provided activities in every category are presented in detail. It was considered necessary to reveal parent's two first choices, as most of them did not have a single choice, but referred to two or more favourite activities.

*Table 1. Parents' preferences in family engagement activities.*

Family engagement activities		Parents (n=15)	
		First choice	Second choice
<b>Online activities</b>	Online single meetings with experts (e.g., book writer, archaeologist)	0	4
	Visiting the parents' section in school website	0	0
<b>Receiving-information activities</b>	Receiving useful notes at home (e.g., suggestions about creating learning environments at home, or a relaxation area for children)	0	0
	Single group meetings in school with experts, (e.g., psychologist, nutritionist)	0	2
<b>Open-school days</b>	Visiting school as experts (e.g., a beekeeper parent explained his profession and the importance of bees to children)	3	0
	Open-class days: Visiting school for project activity demonstrations	8	6
	Visiting school for outdoor play with children	4	3
<b>Out-of-school activities</b>	Taking part in excursions with children and teachers	0	2

As shown in Table 1, parents declared that they preferred open-school days to taking part in other activities. Their favourite activity was visiting school for demonstrations of project activities, and playing games children had prepared for them, which was preferred either as first or second choice. Another favourite activity ( $n=4$ ) was coming to school for outdoor play with their children. Although it was a single activity at the end of the school year, parents enjoyed the process. More specifically, they declared that playing with their

children made them feel like children too, and they wish they had the chance to play with them more often.

Parents' next favourite activity was coming to school as experts. Parents who came as experts ( $n=3$ ) were the ones who preferred the specific activity; they declared that they came to school with some anxiety, but ultimately they left school very excited. In contrast with parents, children whose parents visited school as experts were excited from the beginning and for many days after the visit! Of course, there were many other children who suggested that we also invite their parents.

Some parents ( $n=4$ ) chose online activities as a second choice, while only a few ( $n=2$ ), declared they enjoyed attending a single excursion with children and teachers. Though only two families attended the excursion that was organised, both declared that they wish something like that would happen again. Online activities are also mentioned as a second choice, but only by a few parents ( $n=4$ ). Parents mentioned that online or one-on-one meetings were needed when there was no other choice, such as during the Covid-19 period. Covid-19 restrictions during the winter defined a period with few opportunities for common activities, so parents declared that they enjoyed the sense of meeting an expert online. They also noted that it was a chance for them to meet people who did not live in their area. For example, an invited book writer lived in another city, while an archaeologist who talked to parents and children about dinosaurs lived in Germany, so an online meeting was the only chance to meet them.

*"I think online meetings should also be included in family engagement activities. Parents work, usually they both work, and it's a bit difficult for them to be at school. It is more relaxing to participate from home. It is ok, if we came for two-three times (...per year), but not more often... it's a bit difficult." (Parent 1- henceforth Parent P).*

*"I was excited about a lot of things. I have a strong memory of our online connection with the archaeologist from Germany and all that we discussed. I didn't know any of what we were talking about and I was excited!" (P4).*

It is worth mentioning that there were activities that almost none of parents preferred. For example, none of parents declared they visited the parents' section on the school website. Also, most parents declared that they didn't have the time to read the useful notes they were given. There was only one mother who declared that she used the notes, to organise a relaxing area at home.

*"Not yet unfortunately, I haven't seen it (...the envelope with the notes inside)... what was in it?" (P2).*

*"To tell you the truth, I haven't opened it (...the envelope with the notes inside) yet..." (P6).*

During the interview parents also mentioned their other choices, which are not included in the present article. The main conclusion stemming out of our talk is that they enjoyed the times they came to school, and wish they could visit school regularly. Their favourite activity was coming to open-class days, where they had the chance to step into their children's kindergarten life. Coming to school as experts was, as expected, preferred by parents who visited school as experts. It is encouraging that they enjoyed the process. Visiting school for outdoor play also interested many parents. They were also pleased with online and 'receiving information' activities, but these activities were classified as

necessary only when there were no other options. In general, open-school days were the most popular activities for parents.

## PARENT'S EXPERIENCES DURING OPEN-SCHOOL DAYS

All parents declared that they enjoyed most of the activities they participated in. It is worth noting that although their participation was voluntary, there were parents who engaged in most of the activities, and only two parents attended only one or two activities. Table 2 shows the main feelings that were mentioned by parents when participating in open-school days.

*Table 2. Parents' feelings during parental engagement activities.*

	<b>Parents (n=15)</b>
Happy/enjoyed visiting school	15
Appreciated the benefits of preschool education	8
Confident about using new learning techniques at home	7
Inspired by school routines and learning techniques used at school (e.g., games, library corner)	6
Proud of their children's achievements	12
Created bonds with children	9
Created bonds with teachers	5
Created bonds with other parents	3
Worried about the lack of continuity of family engagement in the next school levels	3
Stressed (mentioned mainly by parents who visited school as experts)	4

It seems that most parents wish to engage in some way. Parents also stated that they wish to cooperate with the school because they ultimately benefit, not only their children. Of course, they enjoyed those times when they came as guests to our kindergarten the most; open-school days were definitely their favourite part of the activities.

Many parents underlined that they appreciated the work that is done in kindergarten. Some of them also stated that they were inspired when they came to school. They understood much better the skills and the abilities their children have. Visiting the class made them feel welcomed, and supported the creation of warm relationships with teachers.

*"We have no idea what is going on in kindergarten and it was a nice opportunity for me to see a little bit of all the wonderful things you do! You are doing very well in kindergarten."* (P9).

*"I loved coming to school to see all the things you made! And of course I see that the children have learned a lot of things. Antonia (her daughter) often told us what she has learned. It was a way to get a little closer to you to see what you're up to in kindergarten."* (P8).

It seems also that they enjoyed the kindergarten routine of creating games as a result of a project. They looked forward to seeing the new game that we had prepared for them. Two parents declared that they tried to make games with children at home. More

specifically, one created a small puppet theatre out of a shoe box to help her child increase narrative ability, and another created a colour board to help her child learn colours.

*"I was inspired by seeing the games you created! Dimitris (her son) asked me to also create games at home. He knows I can do it, and he wanted me to help him make storyline cards for his dinosaurs!" (P13).*

Parents who visited the school as experts were excited. Although they were stressed at the beginning, as they didn't have the experience to communicate with so many preschool children, they then relaxed with the process. They enjoyed that children were so interested to hear what they said. They also noticed that their own children were very proud of seeing their parents at school.

*"To tell you the truth, I was a little bit scared when you invited me to come to school. I thought... Will I really be able to talk to all these children? But, when I finally came, and I realized that the children listened to me carefully, all the stress was gone! Andreas (his son), was excited... he was telling everybody for days, that me and his mother came at his school with my bees! (beekeeper tools)." (P12).*

Visiting school for outdoor play with children was also one of the favourite family engagement activities. Parents declared that they wish they could play with their children again. Being a parent made them forget they were also once children who loved to play outdoors.

*"It was very nice! These games are not only for kids, they are for us too... Usually parents just enjoy their kids playing... now we joined. I didn't find it bad!" (P11).*

*"It was amazing! I had never done this before and I loved it! With my other children, I had never experienced this before! I felt that we communicated in a different way with the children." (P4).*

*"It was nice that we got in touch with the kids like that. I haven't done it years now, to play like that with the children!" (P12).*

Parents even stated that they would like to contribute to continuity of family engagement activities in the next school levels as well. They reported that family engagement activities (for example in primary schools) are not offered very often. Finally, they emphasised some very useful components of family engagement. They underlined that the professionalism of teachers makes them feel safe. Apart from that, kindness, the friendly atmosphere, and the respected communication between parents and teachers are some more important factors that make parents feel welcome and scaffold their engagement in activities. Parents also said that coming to school made them feel more comfortable with not only teachers but also other parents. Warm and trusting relationships were created when parents visited schools.

*"You inspire confidence in me. You seem to know well what to do, and every time you suggested something, it was something that worked for us. There is nothing to think about (...when we talk together). It seems like you've put some thought into what you're suggesting. and it feels good for me" (P15).*

*"I did not feel that there was any matter that I could not easily discuss with you" (P10).*



*"Coming to school helped me know you (teachers) better... You inspire confidence in me. You seem to know your job well, and every time you suggested something, it was something that worked for us. There was nothing to think about. It seems like you knew well what you're suggesting, and it feels good for us" (P5).*

*"Yes, I felt absolute confidence talking with you (teachers). I felt that no matter what, you would tell me the truth. You inspired me with this" (P1).*

*"I was happy to know better other mothers also! Especially with C., and M., (two mothers). I live a little far from them, but after coming to school we gradually started to exchange home visits, so that our children could play together (P6).*

## CHANGES IN PARENTAL STRATEGIES AT HOME

Parental interviews revealed eight different categories of changes in parental strategies. Table 3 shows the number of parents who declared a change in strategies they use at home; parents declared more than one change in their strategies, so it was considered more convenient to report the total number of parents who reported changes in each category in Table 3.

*Table 3. Declared changes in parental strategies at home learning environment.*

<b>Changes in parental strategies</b>	<b>Parents (n=15)</b>
Buying new books	12
Buying new toys/games	13
Creating new learning spaces at home (e.g., book corner)	8
Creating new games with children	2
Adopting practices they saw at school (e.g., helping their child become more independent)	8
Changing the ways they approached children	10
Increasing time and quality of play with children	9

According to results, parents bought new books ( $n=12$ ), as they were inspired by school libraries. Also, parents bought new toys and games for children ( $n=13$ ). It seems that visiting school had a direct effect on parents, as they had the chance to explore the school environment and identify what works. The fact that they had the chance to see what kind of games and toys are suitable for preschool age during open-school days motivated them to change the criteria they use when they choose children's toys. As they declared, seeing the school environment motivated them to make changes at home, and they created creative learning spaces at home. It is encouraging to note that there were some parents ( $n=2$ ), who tried to create games with their children.

*"The truth is that we searched more and created more crafts (games). My older girls also participated. We also searched the internet for what we needed and constructed it" (P12).*

School influence was also seen in the fact that parents adopted practices they saw at school ( $n=8$ ); they changed the way they approached children ( $n=10$ ) and increased the time and quality of play with them ( $n=9$ ). Most parents mentioned that coming to school helped them to find new ways to support their children at home. It is encouraging that parents were willing to become agents of change.

*"I wasn't sure about many things. For example, I worried about my son's delay in using strength in his hands. Talking with you (teachers) made me feel more relaxed and confident, you gave me new ideas on how to support him at home, and as a result I created a new learning area for him at home" (P7).*

*"Coming to school gave me new ideas! I created a book library for children, with bookshelves placed down on the floor and a carpet, so that they could sit there and relax!" (P13).*

*"I feel that we have reduced the time we watch tv. We play together more often, we talk, we read books" (P14).*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Working with parents leads us to the conclusion that it is worth promoting family engagement activities in schools. Based on the first two research questions in the present study, it was clear that parents were willing to engage. Even more, they indicated a preference for visiting the school, and experienced positive feelings during and after their visits. Parents also reported that they enjoyed the process overall, felt more confident, and seemed to realise that they can be agents of change. This is not an odd result, as previous findings indicate that parents are usually willing to engage in their children's educations, and they enjoy the whole process (Emerson et al., 2012). Previous findings also indicate that it is important to provide parents in a variety of activities, so that they find the most suitable ways to engage (Epstein, 2018). The present findings confirm the above statement. Parents were indeed offered a variety of activities, and as a result they managed to engage in a way. Parents of the present study declared that they preferred to be guests at our school. Almost all parents were present at open-school days, meaning that parents are willing to engage in their children's education. The way teachers choose to engage with parents (with physical attendance or not), as well as the content of the activities, must stem from parents' needs and be meaningful for them; there are no recipes for an educator to work successfully with parents.

The third research question concerned the effects that occurred in routines parents use at home as a consequence of their engagement in activities. The present findings indicated that when parents engage with education, they start to make changes. As Mathis and Bierman note (2015), they probably realise that the integration of a home learning environment, the use of new techniques when they play or study with their children, and the changes in their own habits have a huge impact not only on their children's academic achievement but also on their emotional welfare. The fact that most of them were inspired by school actions is a very hopeful result, as it provides motivation to properly support their children.

Beyond the above results, we realised that it is important to build a relationship of trust between teachers and parents in advance. The already-existing warm relationship with parents probably led them see the possibility of engaging in the suggested activities positively. Our participation in the Erasmus+ mobility seminar familiarised us with more techniques to create bonds with parents; the Four Agreements (Ruiz, 1977), were introduced to us there. We realised that as hosts in school, we need to be prepared and protected. According to the Four Agreements, we as teachers should: (a) not take anything personally; (b) be impeccable with our word – speaking with integrity and saying only

what we mean is important for clear communication with parents; (c) avoid assumptions – communicating with parents clearly can assist in avoiding misunderstandings or sadness; and (d) always do our best – we avoid self-judgment, self-abuse, and regret under all circumstances. Keeping these agreements in mind made us teachers feel more confident and stronger when we met with parents.

Of course, there are some limitations to the present study that must be mentioned. The present article should be considered a case study because there was a small group of participants. Activities took place in a rural school in Greece, where relationships of trust between parents and teachers had already been developed. Finally, it is important to note that parents lived close to the school, and most were able to change their daily plans to join the planned activities. So, there were not many barriers to their participation, as there might be in other schools.

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## ANNEX

### PARENTS' SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

1. How often do you prefer to communicate with your children's school? Why?
2. Do you prefer actions where your physical presence is required, or actions where you receive information either in writing or digitally?
3. Of all the activities you participated in, which was the one that pleased you the most? Were there other activities that you found useful?
4. How did you feel when you visited school to participate in our activities?
5. Are you interested in learning things that kids do at school?
6. How did you see the children react after your visit to the school?
7. Did your participation in the actions make you understand a little better the needs of a preschool child and the way we manage situations?
8. Did you adopt practices at home that you saw implemented at school?

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