



The Family Involvement Storybook:

A New Way to Build Connections with Families

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and Elaine D. Hou

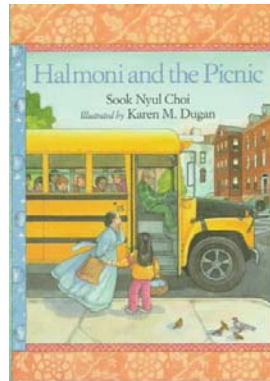
David beamed. Today his Dominican-immigrant grandfather had joined the class for a highly anticipated trip to the local museum. With obvious pride and care, David took his *abuelo's* arm and guided him enthusiastically through the exhibits, one by one. Elaine Hou, David's teacher at his New York City school, was impressed with this show of devotion. It seemed to mean a lot to David that his grandfather was there.

Ms. Hou had recently introduced her third-graders to Sook Nyul Choi's *Halmoni and the Picnic*. In this story, which emphasizes the vital connection between home and school, a young Korean American girl worries about her Korean grandmother. Her grandma is lonely and having difficulty understanding U.S. culture and the English language. Even though the girl is afraid of what her friends might think of her grandmother, she invites her to chaperone the class picnic. The grandmother is welcomed by the teacher and the children, and everyone enjoys the traditional Korean *kimbap* she has prepared. The children learn to address the older woman according to Korean custom. The granddaughter is proud to see her family's cultural background validated in the school setting, and the grandmother becomes more confident about getting involved in her granddaughter's school activities.

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The classroom reading and discussion of *Halmoni and the Picnic* prompted David to ask if his grandfather could join the museum trip. He confided to the class that he worried about his grandfather being “home alone all day without any friends in America.”

Throughout the year David, a year older and a bit taller than the other third grade students, had found it difficult to make friends. He had tried hard to fit in, but he often acted tough and would quickly get mad and withdraw. Ms. Hou was delighted to see David's usual scowl transformed into a big, bright smile during the museum visit. “David had already been making progress in self-esteem and positive behavior before the trip,” she reflected, “but I think the trip gave him a real experience of positive connection. It seemed to give him a sense of empowerment as someone who could help connect his grandpa to things outside of their home.”

Teachers want more assistance in finding strategies for involving families in their children's learning (Wright, Daniel, & Himelreich 2000). We know from research that children benefit from family involvement in learning, such as when they read together (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006).

Using storybooks to promote family involvement

Storybooks are the natural currency of teachers in early childhood and elementary school settings; we often use them to start discussions on specific subjects and find them particularly helpful in broaching issues that are new, sensitive, or challenging for children. Storybooks that highlight family involvement hold dual promise. These family involvement storybooks feature families supporting their children's learning and development, whether at home, in school, or out in the community. Teachers can

Finding Family Involvement Storybook Resources

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), in partnership with Reading Is Fundamental, launched the online Family Involvement Storybook Corner to promote awareness and practice of family involvement through storybooks. Storybook Corner (www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/storybook/index.html) provides an annotated bibliography of published picture books with family involvement themes, written for children from four to eight years old.

Several of the site's resources are downloadable, and all are free. A set of tools is available for using *Halmoni and the Picnic* to promote

involvement, including a teacher lesson plan, parent handout, and full commentary from Ms. Hou about using the storybook in her classroom, as well as a teacher training tool that uses the storybook's illustrations.

The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE), organized by HFRP, is another place for early childhood educators to find a wealth of family involvement resources. FINE is a community of educators, researchers, and practitioners interested in strengthening family, school, and community partnerships. Members have access to the latest and best information about family involvement, receive monthly updates of

new resources, exchange ideas and insights, and learn about assessment methods for continuous improvement in family involvement practice. Membership is free. Learn more at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html.

Family involvement is a key component of HFRP's concept of complementary learning, which focuses on the links between school and nonschool learning supports to promote children's learning and success. Learn more about HFRP and complementary learning at www.hfrp.org.

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use them to provoke discussion and stimulate reflection about ways in which families can and do help their children learn. By highlighting the family involvement message through the process of sharing books, teachers can build better relationships with families.

There are many creative ways to use family involvement storybooks. The following section offers teachers some possible ways to realize the potential of family involvement storybooks in their classroom practice.

Five ways to use family involvement storybooks

1. Create a classroom welcome center for families

Displaying family involvement storybooks in a prominent area is a great way to welcome families and invite them into the classroom. The families will get the message that they are valued, because the stories are about *them* and the important ways they support their children's learning. Collect storybooks that portray the children's families and cultures in authentic ways, and include some in the home languages of the children and their families.

2. Share a family involvement story early in the year to learn about the children's families

At the start of the school year, read a family involvement storybook and ask the children to share the ways in which their families support their learning. For example, ask children what their favorite thing to do with their family is, and then explain how those activities are a form of learning. This activity can help you begin to learn about the families and their involvement practices and to think about ways to build relationships with individual families.

Make sure you define *family* broadly (for example, as "the people who take part in your life and raise you") so that every child feels included. Convey that families can support learning in many different ways—for example, at home, by telling stories or helping children get organized to do homework or at school, by sharing their special cultural knowledge or by volunteering in the classroom.

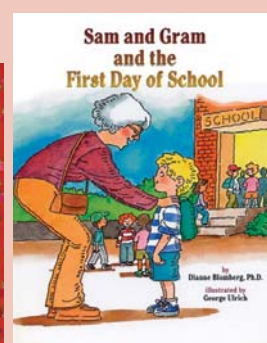
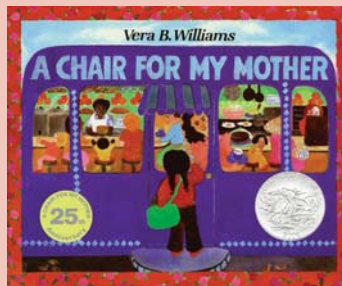
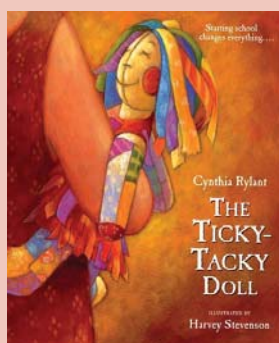
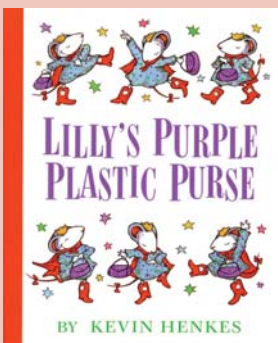
3. Incorporate family involvement storybooks into your curriculum

In planning the classroom curriculum, consider including some storybooks with family involvement content and devote some class time to talking about family involvement and how it helps children learn. For a lesson on "community," for example, you might look for a storybook that shows families introducing their children to places in the community (such as a library or post office). A family involvement storybook also might enrich the core reading curriculum, enhancing or elaborating on a concept or learning objective. In this way, you can infuse ideas about family involvement throughout all academic areas.

4. Use family involvement storybooks during family visits to the classroom

Whether parents or other family members are visiting the classroom to read a story to a group of children or quietly reading one-on-one with their child, you might suggest a family involvement storybook for the occasion. At a family literacy night the teacher could model read-aloud techniques. Families could then create and assemble individual family involvement storybooks, writing and drawing about some of the ways that adults help children learn and grow, and suggesting some new activities to try at home. Encourage adults to share stories about how *they* were helped to learn and grow when they were young.

Read about these and other family involvement storybooks at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/storybook/storybook.html.



5. Share family involvement storybooks with families at home

Consider building a lending library of family involvement storybooks. Structure a homework assignment so the children can share the story with their significant adults. By seeing the involvement practices modeled in the storybooks, the adults can learn new ways to help their children or be affirmed for the ways in which they already support their children's learning. You can even focus home assignments on involvement messages for particular families. For example, if a family is concerned about a transition to kindergarten, find a story on this topic. Develop some discussion questions to accompany the reading that focus on understanding and applying involvement ideas.

The family involvement storybook makes a difference

By reading *Halmoni and the Picnic* with her class, Ms. Hou stimulated important classroom discussions about different family compositions. She explained that when the children made personal connections to the book's young protagonist, "they explored their feelings of embarrassment related to other kids and teachers meeting their parents and grandparents. Discussing these feelings in a safe and honest space allowed students to encourage each other, brainstorm ideas for positive connection, and establish cultural pride." She said one boy acknowledged he had mixed feelings about inviting his mom to school because "she was really his grandma—his real mother couldn't take care of him, so he called his grandma his mom." He wasn't sure how the other children would react to his family. But according to Ms. Hou, as the child was journaling his response to the family involvement storybook, "he realized that no matter if she was his 'real' mom or not, she was his *family*, and he wanted the kids to meet her and learn from her."

For David, the reading helped initiate a special home-school connection and bolstered his confidence. Because David's parents both worked double shifts, Ms. Hou had not seen much of them during the school year.

She was thrilled to see David's grandfather on the day of the field trip. "I used my limited Spanish to say hello and thanked him for coming," she recalled. "I also told him that David talked about him all the time."

The big smile on David's face during and after the museum trip is testimony to the power of this home-school connection. What kinds of home-school links can you create with family involvement storybooks?

References

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- Wright, K., T. Daniel, & K.S. Himelreich. 2000. *Preparation for building partnerships with families: A survey of teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Online: www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/wright.html.

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