



# How Organizations Provide Learning Opportunities for Children and Families

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*When Alma’s son started elementary school, she became friendly with a few of the local parents. They often discussed concerns they had about how to best help their children with homework and how to improve their children’s safety before and after school. Alma and her friends, though, were unsure about how to bring up their concerns with the school administrators and were hesitant to do so. Thanks, however, to a community-based organization that trained parent leaders in local schools, Alma and her growing network gradually began to form deeper relationships with one another and develop the vision, skills, and confidence they needed to initiate a dialogue with the school about their worries. With Alma and other parents at the helm, the school garnered both financial and public support for the creation of a homework club that provided children a safe place to be before and after school, and the additional learning supports that they needed. <sup>1</sup>*

As Alma’s story shows, organizations play a key role in helping to cultivate relationships among families and develop leadership capacities in the best interests of children. In recent months, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) has been focusing on the concept of anywhere, anytime learning, in which families, schools, and communities, like Alma’s, come together to share responsibility for children’s learning experiences in a variety of spaces—not just in classrooms, and not just during the school day. In this issue of the *FINE Newsletter*, we think deeply about learning spaces. Specifically, we explore how organizations—from schools, to early childhood programs, to museums and libraries—can engage families to support children’s learning and promote family well-being. We also examine how organizations can connect with each other in order to expand learning opportunities for children and families.

### What is an organization?

Researchers from the fields of sociology, organizational psychology, and management define organizations as a united set of people and practices centered on a core mission, and connected, both formally and informally, to other organizations.<sup>2</sup> Within organizations, both staff members and clientele have opportunities to interact with one another, and these interactions are characterized by prescribed ways of doing things that often define the nature of their relationships.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in a school setting, the ways that parents and teachers communicate are bound by class schedules, set times for conferences, and technologies for sharing information, to mention a few.

## KEY ROLES OF ORGANIZATIONS

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We find that organizations shape learning opportunities for both children and families in three important ways. The organizations:

1. **Provide access to resources:** Organizations can make materials and information available to families as well as help them develop the knowledge and skills they might need to use those resources effectively.
2. **Build social and organizational connections:** Organizations can help build families’ social networks and create connections among families and other support organizations.
3. **Create a climate conducive to learning:** When organizations create an environment in which everyone is a learner, children, families, and the organizations themselves have the potential to grow.

Table 1. **Ways that organizations can provide learning opportunities for children and families**

	<b>What organizations can do</b>	<b>How families can benefit</b>
Provide access to resources.	<p>Focus efforts on how families can obtain and use resources.</p> <p>Train staff members to partner meaningfully with families to effectively share ideas.</p>	Families have access to resources and can gain the knowledge and skills to use them effectively.
Build social and organizational connections.	<p>Align and partner strategically with other organizations.</p> <p>Promote connections among families and between families and other organizations.</p>	Families develop connections to other families and organizations that serve as a form of support.
Create a climate conducive to learning.	<p>Create safe and inviting physical spaces.</p> <p>Promote high expectations for learning in the context of caring, warm relationships.</p> <p>Hire and develop program staff to work competently with families.</p> <p>Adapt to the interests and needs of older youth.</p>	Families cultivate a learning mindset that carries forward into parents’ relationships with their children in all settings.

### 1. Provide access to resources.

Organizations have a stake in providing families access to the materials, information, skills, and confidence that they need to support children’s learning. *By access, we refer to families being able to obtain resources as well as the knowledge and skills to use the resources to their greatest potential.* In other words, it is not enough for organizations to provide families with resources; studies show that it is also important for organizations to provide families with ideas and training on how to use them effectively.

For example, in the library setting, the availability of books and computers is important but not sufficient for children and youth to reap the full benefits of the literacy and digital media experiences that the materials provide. Families and librarians must engage in rich conversations with children, ask them meaningful questions, and guide them to use resources that are within their level and aligned with their range of interests.<sup>4</sup> Museums can expand the impact of their hands-on family exhibits, including the nature of parent–child conversations, by offering families brief educational programs related to the exhibit theme and by providing them with conversation tips to help guide their experience.<sup>5</sup>



These findings point to two important lessons. First, to improve family access to resources, organizations don’t need to expend herculean efforts. Instead, small changes to existing programming or services can often go a long way toward making family experiences more meaningful and engaging. For example, museums can assign staff members to greet families on their arrival and ask questions in order to steer them toward exhibits they might find most interesting. Libraries can have volunteer mentors or technology specialists available to work side by side with children, youth, and families, as needed.

Second, organizations are wise to invest in developing the competencies of staff members to engage families effectively. Staff members with deep expertise in content areas often benefit from tips and strategies for how to approach families and communicate with them respectfully.<sup>6</sup> For this issue of the *FINE Newsletter*, we have compiled a list of [professional development resources](#), along with tips that practitioners in a variety of organizations can use to help prepare and develop educators for family engagement.

## 2. Build social and organizational connections.

In his book *Unanticipated Gains*, Mario Luis Small illustrates how organizations matter for family well-being, especially in poor neighborhoods. He finds that organizations make a difference in families' lives not only because they provide families with access to resources or services, but also because organizations maintain collaborative ties with other organizations that, in turn, can become assets for a family.<sup>7</sup> These organizational ties allow families points of contact and connections to people, information, services, and material goods that they might not otherwise recognize. A child care program, for instance, may partner formally with a specific food bank that families can then utilize, or an afterschool program might refer families to particular mental health organizations if the need arises. In the June 2014 issue of the *FINE Newsletter*, we featured [Cool Culture](#), an organization that partners with early childhood organizations to give families free access to New York City's museums and cultural institutions. These and other kinds of organizations are also important, according to Small, because they allow families to connect and build social ties. Even when the relationships are informal, social networks can help build family knowledge about community resources and alleviate stress and the demands on busy families' schedules (e.g., carpooling, babysitting in an emergency, etc.).

Early childhood programs, especially those in low-income communities, are in a unique position to partner and connect with various health, education, and community organizations, among others. Early childhood programs often maintain a whole-child philosophy, which centers on nurturing children in all developmental domains and supporting families at the same time. For example, [Head Start and Early Head Start](#), the nation's only federally funded early childhood programs, focus on a variety of ways to support families including helping them make connections with other families and the community.

Given that organizations play a critical role in how families develop ties to important institutions and form social networks, these groups can take a deeper and more focused look at how they align and partner with other organizations and the systems and the processes that exist to connect families to these organizational partners. Moreover, organizations can explicitly work to promote connections among families who participate within their settings. For example, organizations can design their physical spaces so that they are bright and welcoming places where families want to be (e.g., an early childhood program can create a comfortable waiting area for family members; a YMCA can reserve spaces at one of their basketball tournaments where adults can sit and interact; or a museum can establish an area where families can talk and relax at one of the exhibits).



*Sparklelab creates inviting space for parent/child activities.*

To illustrate how policy can support these ideas, in this issue we show how, through its [Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge funds](#), Massachusetts has created avenues to connect organizations that support families. These ties have the potential to broaden family networks and are giving families access to a host of resources, including child development information, assistance with meeting basic needs, high-quality referrals, and parent leadership opportunities. To complement this article, we also focus on a partnership between [Boston Children’s Museum and Boston Public Schools](#) that encourages scores of children and families to take advantage of the museum space to get families ready for kindergarten.



*Families and incoming kindergarteners at the Countdown to Kindergarten Celebration held at Boston Children’s Museum.*

### 3. Create a climate conducive to learning.

A climate conducive to learning is, above all else, an environment in which everyone thinks about him- or herself as a learner. A learning climate creates a safe space where both children and adults, all with different learning styles and expertise, can explore, take risks, and co-construct knowledge together. For example, a library or museum might have a space where families and youth can co-learn about new digital tools (e.g., 3-D printers, new apps, or coding programs). In these spaces, youth might guide adults in how to use the technology, and adults could explore these activities without fear of failure or embarrassment and then bring their new knowledge to their own work environments. Such experiences can build confidence for everyone involved.<sup>8</sup>

Research has shown that a climate that is conducive to learning includes a number of components. First, organizations that create an atmosphere that encourages and supports learning—whether they be schools, museums, early childhood centers, or libraries—emphasize physical space that is clean, orderly, and safe. These spaces are also designed to allow children, youth, and families flexibility to interact creatively with one another.<sup>9</sup> Positive learning climates promote high expectations for learners, coupled with supportive, caring, and responsive relationships that allow children, youth, and families an opportunity to co-construct knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Organizations with quality learning environments are staffed with members who reflect the culture and language of the children and families they serve and fundamentally believe that relationships with families are important.<sup>11</sup> Even more, these organizations invest in professional development by offering professionals opportunities to improve their practice.

Families benefit from a climate conducive to learning because it cultivates within parents and their children a learning mindset, which can lead to learning-focused parent-child relationships that can be carried forward into different settings across time. In the later school grades, organizations such as afterschool programs can create an engaging learning climate by focusing on a young person’s growth and by offering challenging and supportive activities that build confidence and improve skills.<sup>12</sup> These types of supports enable programs to cultivate strong

relationships between staff members and youth, offer opportunities for youth voice and leadership, and simultaneously employ strategies to engage families while respecting youth autonomy.<sup>13</sup>

Specific to the school setting, a positive school climate—often defined along the key dimensions of safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and school improvement process—is a critical component of high-performing schools.<sup>14</sup> Positive school climate is related to students’ improved academic achievement and positive social behavior, and may be one protective influence for students in high-risk or high-poverty schools.<sup>15</sup> You can learn more with Beth Schueler as she responds to [frequently asked questions](#) about a new tool that she and her colleagues have developed to gauge parents’ views of school climate.

## CONCLUSION

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In this issue of the *FINE Newsletter*, we focus on the important role of organizations in supporting families and children’s learning. We find that organizations can provide families with access to resources and the knowledge and skills to use the resources well. Organizations can also help families build social connections as well as ties with other organizations related to their specific needs and interests. Even more, organizations can create environments that promote learning among families, children, and youth. We explore these topics as a way of thinking more deeply about how families can become engaged in the different spaces where children learn. We also look further at how families can support their children’s learning in these different settings, and how doing so provides important benefits for the entire family.

## ABOUT HFRP

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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.

<sup>1</sup> To read Alma’s full story, visit <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/publications-series/fine-forum-e-newsletter-archive-family-involvement-network-of-educators-fine/social-capital>

<sup>2</sup> Douglass, A. (2011). Improving family engagement: The organizational context and its influence on partnering with parents in formal child care settings. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 13(2), 1-11; Small, M. L. (2009). *Unanticipated gain: Origins of network inequality in everyday life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. C. (Fall, 2012). [Worlds apart: One city, two libraries, and ten years of watching inequality grow](#). *American Educator*, 36(3), 13–19, 22–23.

<sup>5</sup> Haden, C. A., Jant, E. A., Hoffman, P. C., Marcus, M., Geddes, J. R., & Gaskins, S. (2014). Supporting family conversations and children’s STEM learning in a children’s museum. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 29 (3), 333–344. doi: [10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.04.004)

<sup>6</sup> Pattison, S. A., & Dierking, L. D. (2012). Exploring staff facilitation that supports family learning. *Journal of Museum Education*, 37(3), 69–80.

<sup>7</sup> See also Small, M. L., Jacobs, E. M., & Massengill, R. P. (2008). Why organizational ties matter for neighborhood effects: Resource access through childcare centers. *Social Forces*, 87(1), 387–414.

<sup>8</sup> You can hear more about how adults and children can come together as co-learners in different community spaces on a recent [Web conference hosted by HFRP](#), Creating a Conversation About Anywhere, Anytime Learning.

<sup>9</sup> Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>10</sup> Douglass, 2011; Bryk, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Douglass, 2011; Small, et al., 2008; Small, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Deschenes, S. N., Arbretton, A., Little, P. M., Herrera, C., Grossman, J. B., Weiss, H. B., & Lee, D. (2010). [Engaging older youth: program and city-level strategies to support sustained participation in out-of-school-time](#). Cambridge: Harvard Family Research Project; Hirsch, B. J., Deutsch, N. L., & DuBois, D. L. (2011). *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Deschenes, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., Higgins-D’Alessandro, A., (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357–385. doi: [10.3102/0034654313483907](https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654313483907)

<sup>15</sup> McCoy, D. C., Roy, A. L., & Sirkman, G. M. (2013). Neighborhood crime and school climate as predictors of elementary school academic quality: A cross-lagged panel analysis. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(1–2), 128–140. doi: [10.1007/s10464-013-9583-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-013-9583-5)



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