

Workshops for Parents

SHARING CHILDREN'S LEARNING WITH FAMILIES

by Sue Gainsley



Parent workshops help parents understand how and what their children learn in the HighScope classroom.

The following article is adapted from *Bringing Active Learning Home: Workshops for Preschool Parents*, the latest in the Teachers' Idea Series. *Bringing Active Learning Home* is a book of 27 workshops to give parents an introduction to active learning and ideas for extending their children's learning at home. The book includes a CD of PowerPoint slides and take-home worksheets (see the sidebar on p. 15 for more information).

Each day at pickup time, Jordan's mother Kim would approach me and ask questions such as "Was she good today? What did she learn?" I would always answer her by describing what I had seen Jordan do — how she seemed to be able to follow our daily routine, had been playing with Levi, or had built with the unit blocks and checked out the seashells in the toy area. I viewed Jordan's activities as positive accomplishments for the beginning of the school year and thought that Jordan's mother would appreciate the news. But when I looked at Jordan's mother, I

could see that she was waiting for more. So I explained what my observations over the past few days told me about Jordan's social skills, initiative, and independence. In the days following, Jordan's mother continued to ask the same questions at pickup time, and I realized that she still needed more information than I was providing. I guessed that she had unspoken questions about whether Jordan was learning her letters and numbers. Like all parents who want the best for their children, she wanted to make sure preschool was helping her child get ready for kindergarten and the rest of her school years.

It was clear that I needed to give Kim more information about active learning and the HighScope key developmental indicators (KDIs), which are descriptors of the learning that takes

place throughout the preschool day and provide the foundation for the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that children develop throughout their early years and into adulthood. The next time I spoke with Kim, I said, "Frankly, it is hard to measure from day to day what or how much a child learns. Learning happens over time, through many different experiences with materials and concepts. I plan large- and small-group times around specific curriculum content areas and expect different outcomes from each child." I explained that children may be able to parrot back what we teach them, but that kind of learning doesn't stick with them or mean very much. I went on to explain that children are motivated to learn about something — including colors, numbers, letters, and shapes — when it is connected to what they are interested in. "Jordan may want to know how many blocks she can stack before her tower falls down," I told Kim, "or she may want to write *MOM* on a card she is making for you." I described how, in HighScope classrooms, teachers take

advantage of these opportunities to introduce children to the knowledge and skills they need to know, and how they also plan experiences that help stimulate children's curiosity so they can explore and learn more.

Introducing HighScope Through Parent Workshops

Children's family members often picture learning as going in one direction — an adult providing information to the child — and it's a challenge for many to think of learning as a partnership between an "intentional teacher" and a child who is pursuing his or her initiatives. For many adults, the HighScope Curriculum is a departure from the more traditional school experiences they remember. Therefore, HighScope teachers need to articulate more clearly for family members how their children learn in our HighScope classrooms and the curriculum content the children experience. One way to do this is through parent workshops, which are

designed to enable family members to apply the principles of the HighScope approach to situations at home and in the community with their young children. Teachers can use workshops as a tool to explain the HighScope Curriculum (including the KDIs) to family members and to suggest ways for families to support their children's learning in specific curriculum areas in the home environment.

A workshop about active learning can help parents understand all the learning that can be found in their children's play.

There are many curriculum concepts to explore with children's family members. How do you know which one to

pick? One strategy is to consider the interests, educational goals, or expectations that family members express for their preschool children. Parents typically want their children to learn their numbers and letters, develop friendships, begin to think independently, and enjoy their time at school. These are, of course, the same goals that we as educators have for children, and workshops in each of the eight HighScope Curriculum content areas can support parents as they extend their children's learning in these areas at home (see the sidebar describing *Bringing Active Learning Home* on p. 15).

Understanding *how* HighScope programs help children accomplish these goals is often not clear to family members. How many times have you been asked by children's family members, "What do you do besides play?" An introductory workshop (see the excerpt

Instead of presenting information via a lecture, keep family members actively engaged through small-group discussions.





Teachers can use parent workshops to suggest ways for families to support their children's learning at home.

on p. 14), which explains the key principles of the HighScope approach and the ingredients of active learning, may be just the place to start!

Teachers tailor their workshops to meet parents' learning needs.

Parents as Partners in Active Learning

Through the active learning workshop, family members become acquainted with the principles of active learning and learn how they can help their children have “hands on” and “minds on” learning opportunities throughout the day. HighScope teachers apply the ingredients of active learning in all activities with children in the classroom. The same holds true for workshops for children's family members. It is important to give family members the opportunity to create their own understanding of the workshop topic. So, rather than presenting the main ideas in a lecture, keep family members actively engaged with ideas and materials throughout the workshop. Encourage them to “construct” their own knowledge and come to their own conclusions and insights. Family

members who come expecting to passively sit through a presentation may be surprised to discover that they are instead expected to participate in discussions and activities — and that this is how their children learn in school.

It is also important for teachers to take into account the backgrounds of the family members in their program in order to tailor workshops to meet their learning needs. For example, it may be necessary to translate materials, particularly handouts, into other languages. A family volunteer may be willing to take on this task. Some family members may come to parent meetings with an initial reluctance based on previous negative experiences with teachers or the educa-

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Tips for Successful Parent Workshops

Before you dive into planning your workshops, consider these tips:

- Announce workshops at least a week in advance, and e-mail a reminder on the day of the meeting. In the announcement, give a brief description of the topic to be covered, and remind family members to sign up for child care. For any families that don't have a computer at home, be sure to give a reminder phone call.
- In advance, set up your training room with tables that seat five or six each, to facilitate small-group discussions and provide a workspace for activities. You will need chart paper or a chalkboard or whiteboard for each workshop, and if you are using a PowerPoint presentation, you will need a computer, projector, and screen.
- Check your materials list to be sure you have everything you need, including any sample materials you are bringing from the classroom.
- Provide nametags for adults, including all staff members, and for children, so family members and staff can greet one another and children by name. You can also suggest that family members write the name of their child on their nametag (e.g., Cheri Hayes, Devin's mom).
- Give workshop participants an opportunity to introduce themselves to one another. Depending on the number of family members attending, you can do this as a whole group or have participants introduce themselves to the others at their table.
- Provide paper and pencils at each table so participants may take extra notes or exchange information, such as phone numbers or addresses, with others.



Join the HighScope Membership Association!

Educators using any active learning curriculum will benefit from the resources included in a HighScope membership:

- In-depth articles from early childhood experts
- Videos of real classroom experiences
- Ideas for planning your classroom's daily routine

Visit highscope.org to register for free and start receiving your benefits immediately!

An Excerpt From an Active Learning Workshop

Note: The complete workshop (as well as 26 other parent workshops and their corresponding PowerPoint slides) can be found in *Bringing Active Learning Home: Workshops for Preschool Parents* (available spring 2014).

Workshop Activity	Agenda	Materials
Welcome and Objectives 5 minutes	<p>Welcome participants, and introduce yourself. Explain that you would like to talk about how to support children's active learning.</p> <hr/> <p>Tell participants that, in this workshop, they will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Learn about HighScope's philosophy of active learning ■ Discuss the five ingredients of active learning ■ Learn and share ways to support active learning at home 	
Opening Activity 20 minutes	<p>Fun With Play Dough</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Give each participant some play dough. Have participants follow your directions to make a snowman with their play dough. Tell participants that they should make each of the three balls of play dough the same size as yours. Talk about the concepts of size (e.g., small, medium, and large), and quiz participants on the different sizes. <p>Instruct participants to use toothpicks to create the snowman face and to place the small buttons down the front of their snowman as you direct. Make sure that participants follow your directions and do not work ahead.</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Next, ask the participants to set aside their snowman. Give them another ball of play dough and the buttons, beads, or dried beans. Invite them to take a few minutes to use the play dough in any way they would like. Interact with the participants by showing interest and making comments about what they are doing. ■ Have participants break into groups at different tables; ask the participants to compare their two play dough experiences. Which was more enjoyable? From which activity did they learn the most about how to use play dough? ■ Using two pieces of chart paper, create lists of the concepts participants learned during each activity (e.g., in the first activity, participants learned how to follow the teacher's directions and about the concepts of small, medium, and large). ■ If needed, help participants "see" the learning that took place during the second activity. Make connections between what you saw participants doing with the play dough and curriculum content (e.g., math concepts, problem solving, cooperative play). 	<p>Play dough</p> <p>Toothpicks</p> <p>Buttons, beads, or dry beans</p> <hr/> <p>Chart paper</p> <p>Markers</p>
Main Ideas 15 minutes	<p>Active Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In comparing the two different experiences in the opening activity, it should be clear to participants that more learning occurred when they were able to manipulate the play dough in their own way. Summarize by making the following points: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning is not simply a process of adults giving children information to memorize or telling children what to do. • Children learn when they are actively engaged with materials and ideas. • Through exploring and playing with materials, children build knowledge of the things around them (e.g., adding water to dirt makes mud; if you stack blocks too high, they fall down). Keep in mind that not all children will learn the same thing at the same time. 	

Teachers' Idea Series: Bringing Active Learning Home

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tion system in general. Therefore, it is important to keep these workshops informative yet casual. See the sidebar on page 13 for additional tips on holding successful workshops.

The Home-School Connection

Explaining how children learn in our classrooms and describing the curriculum content is only part of our mission in serving families and children. Forming partnerships with family members around our goals for young children helps us develop consistent ways of approaching their care and learning. In its landmark publication, *Eager to Learn*, the National Research Council

(2001) recommends that “Early childhood programs and centers should build alliances with parents to cultivate complementary and mutually reinforcing environments for young children at home and at the center” (p. 18). And the annual review of preschool education by the National Institute for Early Education Research (Barnett et al., 2010) shows parent involvement is a universal component of program quality standards. Becoming partners with parents to foster children’s learning makes perfect sense. Teachers are experts in child development and parents are experts on their children. Offering workshops for children’s family members is one way to strengthen this partnership.

The 27 workshops and accompanying CD in *Bringing Active Learning Home: Workshops for Preschool Parents* (available spring 2014) are designed for meetings with adult family members that last approximately one hour.

Following an introductory workshop on active learning, the book offers workshops organized by eight curriculum content areas:

- Approaches to Learning
- Social and Emotional Development
- Physical Development and Health
- Language, Literacy, and Communication
- Mathematics
- Creative Arts
- Science and Technology
- Social Studies

Each workshop includes an agenda that you can use as a guide for presenting the workshop. On the CD that is packaged with the book, you will find PowerPoint slides that highlight the main ideas of each workshop as well as take-home sheets that you can print and distribute to all the workshop participants.

(See opposite page for a sample from this book.)

At the end of this parent workshop, family members were offered apples that their preschoolers had picked at a local orchard earlier in the week.



It is helpful to let family members know that their opinions are valued and their questions welcomed. Some family members will be more than happy to share their own experiences, but others may need to attend several workshops before they feel comfortable enough to share ideas or ask questions in front of the whole group. To encourage participation, at the beginning of each meeting, it may be helpful to set some ground rules that all agree to so parent participants feel comfortable and supported when speaking up. You might begin by reminding the participants that everyone comes from a different background, has had different educational experiences, and may have family traditions and practices that differ from those of others. Emphasize the importance of listening to others without criticizing; keeping an open mind; and acknowledging that, sometimes, in order to move ahead in discussions, people may have to agree to disagree.

Offering workshops for families is one way to strengthen the home-school connection.

When parent participants discuss things in small groups at tables, circulate among the tables to listen to participants' comments. You may find that more reserved family members feel more



To encourage participation, set ground rules at the beginning of the workshop so everyone feels comfortable contributing.

comfortable asking questions in the small groups. Listening to participants' comments and questions lets you know which ideas you may need to clarify or expand upon with the whole group.

Following Up After the Workshop Is Over

After the workshop is over and family members go home and practice applying what they learned, it is helpful to provide follow-up support. Ideas for follow-up include summarizing the main points of the workshop, along with comments and ideas generated by family

members; these can be posted on your website or in a newsletter. You can also post photos that illustrate specific concepts or ideas discussed in the workshop. Feature these on your website, in a newsletter, on your family board, or through photo sharing websites such as Snapfish or Flickr. ■

References

- Barnett, W. S., Epstein, D. J., Carolan, M. E., Fitzgerald, J., Ackerman, D. J., & Friedman, A. H. *The state of preschool 2010*. Retrieved from nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook.pdf.
National Research Council (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academics Press.

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