

# Understanding Family Involvement

## Statement of Purpose

*NASA believes that students, **families**, educators, and institutions **are partners in the educational process**, and that they must be respected and appreciated for their individual needs and roles.*

Overwhelming evidence from research suggests that when families get personally involved in education, their children do better in school and grow up to be successful in life. Yet, family involvement is one of the most overlooked aspects of American education. Today, many programs are designed without recognition of the role of families, and consequently many families remain unaware of the significance that their role can have on their child's education.

Family involvement is an important component of NASA educational programs. The purpose of the family involvement component is to engage families as partners in the educational process. The family involvement program herein was developed to give families, regardless of their own educational experience, the tools needed to become more actively involved in their child's day-to-day education.

## Defining the “Family” in Family Involvement

There has been a major paradigm shift in education from a focus on parent involvement to a focus on family involvement. The “family” in family involvement is defined herein as any supportive adult role model who is committed to the academic, social, emotional, and physical development/empowerment of a child. By definition, “family” may include a parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle, neighbor, caregiver, etc. Such an inclusive definition is necessary if we are to embrace all of the diverse family structures commonly serving as the support systems of students today.

## Why is Family Involvement Important?

By age 18, children have typically spent only 13% of their waking lives at school; **families have a role in shaping the remaining 87%.**

*(Education Policy Studies Laboratory—School Reform Proposals:  
The Research Evidence)*

Families are children’s first and most influential teachers, both by example and conversation. At home, families can instill such values as responsibility, hard work, and commitment to school success. Children have numerous teachers during their school career. No one teacher is responsible for a child from kindergarten through high school. Therefore, families are responsible for working with educators to help their children reach their greatest potential. The nucleus of the family involvement program is to empower families with strategies, techniques, and information to be involved in the education of their child on a daily basis.

## Role of the Family

- To realize their full potential as a child’s first and most influential educator
- To become central in their child’s engagement in life-long learning
- To desire the best for their child

## Needs of the Family

- To feel welcomed and valued as partners in the educational process
- To be informed of their child’s educational opportunities and responsibilities

## Expectations of the Family

The most commonly reported barrier to family involvement is the family's busy schedule. While it is important that participation in all family involvement activities be encouraged, it is not recommended that it be mandated.

***A participation policy that is too strict/rigid is likely to preclude the family's involvement altogether.***

Each NES may determine the level of participation they desire from families. The Family Coordinator will need to verify participation guidelines with their NES Team and supervising school officials prior to the recruitment of families.

General expectations for participation are as follows:

- Participates in NES family involvement activities
- Supports children's interests in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)
- Supports and promotes NASA's educational programs efforts
- Contributes feedback and recommendations to provide continuous improvement of NES student and family involvement programs

## Goals for Family Involvement

It is recommended that each NES develop and establish their own unique goals for family involvement, as aligned to their overall NES Strategic and Implementation Plans. For a worksheet on how to get started developing your school's goals, refer to appendix A.

Possible goals for family involvement may include, but are not limited to

- Empower families to assert their role as a partner in the day-to-day education of their child.
- Provide families with strategies to motivate and mentor their children.
- Introduce families to NASA resources and technology that are available to support their children's education and career choices.
- Connect family members with other families and resources that are available for their children.

## What is the NES Family Involvement Program?

The NES family involvement program consists of three core components, as identified in the chart below. All programs and activities are designed to be “family friendly,” where families are made to feel welcomed, valued, and a partner in the overall NES environment.

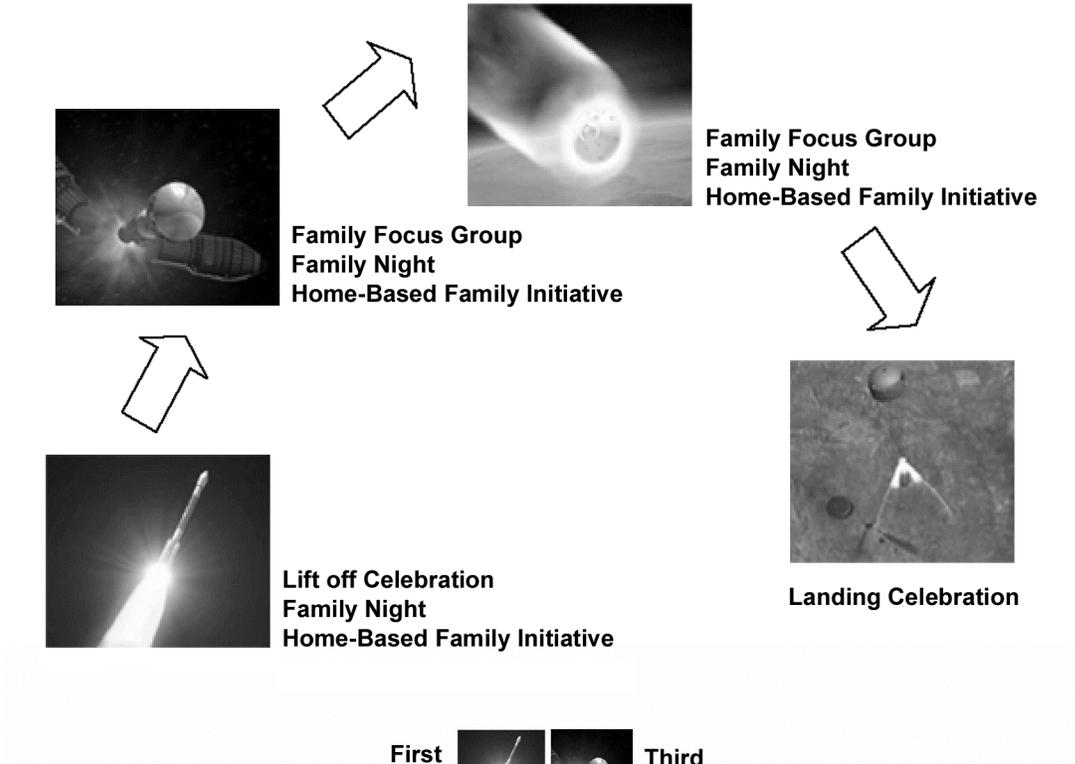
<b>Family Involvement Model</b>	
<b>Core Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>1. Family Nights</b>	Hands-on, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) focused activities for the family and child to work on together, within the school setting.
<b>2. Home-Based Family Initiatives</b>	Hands-on, STEM-focused activities for the family and child to work on together, within the home setting.
<b>3. Family Focus Groups</b>	Focus groups for the family, recommended to take place simultaneous with a student activity/project/competition in an adjacent classroom environment within the school setting.

It is recommended that each NES combine these three components into their own, unique family involvement program, as relevant to their specific program goals/objectives.

Consideration should be given to a program that promotes sustained family involvement throughout the entire school year. One such program is depicted on the following page:



**Sample NES Program Demonstrating Sustained Family Involvement**



# Overview of the Start-Up Process

A well thought-out and organized approach to developing a family involvement program is critical to the program's overall success. ***Families will become advocates for the program when they are well informed and can appreciate the benefits that the program has to offer.***

This handbook contains important, basic program information to help you get started. When developing your program, special attention should be given to the unique and specific needs of your students, families, schools, and communities.

The following key considerations for developing a family involvement program are discussed in depth within this section of the handbook:

- Partners/Stakeholders
- Family Coordinator Roles and Responsibilities
- Operating Principles
  - The program is designed and implemented as only NASA can!
  - The program provides participants with a “family friendly” environment.
  - All aspects of the program are inclusive to the target population.
  - The program provides participants with exciting, interactive, and fun learning experiences.
- Timeline
- Recruitment
- Retention
- Family Orientation
- Budget
- Evaluations
- Checklist

## Meetings with Partners/Stakeholders

A partner is defined herein as any stakeholder (group/individual), internal or external, who has made (or is expected to make) a demonstrable contribution towards the advancement of the NES mission. All partners/stakeholders located within the NES itself and/or directly responsible for the NES, hereinafter referred to as internal stakeholders, should meet collectively to discuss and approve the family involvement program goals and design. These internal stakeholders may include, but are not limited to, the NES Team, the NES building principal, the superintendent, or school district designee, etc.

Involving internal stakeholders in the initial planning and design of the program will strengthen the overall foundation of the program in several ways. First, the commitment and contributions of the internal stakeholders themselves will be greater given their personal investment in the plan itself. Second, working with these stakeholders will help you in leveraging existing resources within your NES

to support your family involvement goals. Existing resources may include, for example, the use of science and math teachers as facilitators for family night programs; the use of school materials, supplies and/or equipment; the use of the school's media connections/resources for marketing the program; etc. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, working with these stakeholders will ensure the program's welcome and successful integration into the NES itself. ***The intent of the family involvement program is to supplement the NES' current family involvement efforts, not to supplant them.*** Working through these key, internal stakeholders in not only the design but the implementation of the program will keep this message clear.

## **Family Coordinator Roles and Responsibilities**

After establishing your unique family involvement program goals and design, it is recommended that an NES Family Coordinator be identified to begin the planning and implementation of all aspects of the program. The roles and responsibilities of the Family Coordinator are as follows:

1. *Serve as the family liaison for NASA Explorer School opportunities*
  - Introduce families to NASA resources and technologies that are available to support their children's STEM education and career choices.
  - Connect families with other local resources and programs that are available for their children.
  - Communicate school/district math, science, and technology initiatives to families.
  
2. *Organize and manage the Family Involvement Program*
  - Develop workshops and activities that provide families with strategies to motivate and mentor their children.
  - Establish rules for communication to ensure opportunity and respect for all families' ideas.
  - Recruit volunteers and guest speakers/presenters.
  - Recruit families to participate in sessions.
  - Serve as a facilitator for discussions.
  - Order refreshments.
  - Arrange field trips for families.
  - Communicate upcoming events.
  - Assist in the planning and implementation of recognition programs and special events.
  
3. *Manage evaluation process for the Family Involvement Program*
  - Keep statistics on program attendance.
  - Solicit participant feedback through approved evaluation tools.
  - Prepare reports, as required

4. *Involve partners/stakeholders in the Family Involvement Program*
  - Solicit the involvement of partners/stakeholders in the Family Involvement Program.
  - Disseminate family program successes to NES partners/stakeholders.
  - Contact the media to share NES family success stories, whenever possible.

## **Family Involvement Operating Principles**

The following family involvement operating principles should be considered in the planning and implementation of all family involvement activities:

1. ***The program is designed and implemented as only NASA can!***

All NASA family involvement programs must be designed and implemented “as only NASA can.” “As only NASA can” refers to the utilization of content, resources, and/or technologies that are unique to NASA. “As only NASA can” may be reflected in the topic/theme of the activity, set up of the environment, use of NASA speakers, etc.

You should always decorate your family meeting area with posters and have NASA-printed materials available as handouts to families. Although, materials are limited, you may request brochures, periodicals, posters, lithograph, and other printed materials from your NASA center. Requests for NASA materials should be made 4 to 6 weeks prior to the activity.

2. ***The program provides participants with a “family friendly” environment.***

- *Always* provide complimentary food/refreshments.
- Create an informal, fun, and relaxing environment.
- Tables should be set up for group activities.
- Adult-sized furniture should be utilized when available.
- There needs to be plenty of room to accommodate families comfortably.
- Make sure there is easy access to restrooms and telephones.
- Make sure audio-visual equipment is sufficient for large group settings.
- Maintain a safe and cooperative atmosphere. Set ground rules for communication, which demonstrates value and respect for all participants’ input.
- Allow time for families to socialize.
- Listen to families’ suggestions and ideas for improving the program.
- Invite families to drop in, per their availability. Let families know that even if they have other obligations that may prevent them from joining you for the entire meeting, they are welcome to drop in for as much time as they can.
- Select returning families to assist in workshops.
- Provide feedback on program evaluations.

**3. *The program is inclusive to all families.***

- Participation in family involvement programs should always be encouraged, but *never* mandated.
- Be appreciative of families' busy schedules in the scheduling of your activities (i.e., duration of program, scheduled time for program, etc.).
- All aspects of family involvement planning should be inclusive to all ethnicities, cultures, and differently-abled individuals represented in the school population (i.e., marketing, program content, set up of the environment, etc.).
- Be responsive to the interests/needs of your unique population (i.e., survey families to ascertain topics of interest/need and request).  
feedback on each session via evaluation forms, track participation, analyze patterns of involvement, etc.

**4. *The program provides participants with exciting, interactive, and fun learning experiences.***

- Variety is the key...provide a variety of workshops and activities to stimulate broad interest.
- Build in additional incentives for continued participation (i.e., door prizes, extra credit for Home-Based Family Initiatives, competitions, etc.).
- Provide fun, interesting titles and enticing descriptions that will peak participants' interest (i.e., Turning Stumbling Blocks Into Opportunities, Families Helping Each Other, and The Yellow Brick Road to Math & Science).
- Select speakers that are able to motivate and interact with families.

## Timeline

The following timeline has been provided as a general tool to assist you in the implementation phase of each of your family involvement activities:

### *Two months in advance*

- Identify the audience you want to reach.
- Assist with recruiting efforts.
- Devise a strategy for marketing/publicizing the family involvement activity. (flyers, newsletters, school and community direct mail, signs/posters, educational television channels, etc.)
- Choose themes/topics for activity.
- Draft a list of potential speakers, if desired. Contact speakers.
- Draft a schedule.
- Secure room/facilities for the activity.
- Prepare budget for approval.
- Order supplies and materials.

### *Three to four weeks in advance*

- Finalize the schedule.
- Organize and prepare materials/supplies and evaluations.
- Market the activity.

### *One to two weeks in advance*

- Send a reminder to families preregistered for the activity.
- Confirm guest speakers.
- Arrange for food/refreshments.
- Arrange for audiovisuals.

### *After each meeting*

- Send thank you letters or cards to speakers/presenters.
- Follow up on families' comments/suggestions noted on evaluations.

## Recruitment

Recruitment should be conducted collaboratively with the NES Team and internal stakeholders. The direction of your recruitment efforts should be based on your target family population.

All marketing information should make reference to the importance of family involvement and the NES Family Involvement Program and should reflect all of the family involvement operating principles. Family involvement marketing samples have been included for your reference in appendix B.

## **Retention**

Simply stated, “Make sure families have a wonderful experience at each meeting”!

If families are treated with the utmost respect and feel that their needs are being met, retention will not be an issue. As the Family Coordinator, you are challenged to design exciting, interactive learning workshops that will encourage families to make the NES Family Involvement Program a schedule priority.

Follow the model, operating principles and strategies outlined in this handbook, and you’re on your way to success.

## **Family Orientation**

It is recommended that you host a family orientation to answer any questions that families may have about the NES program. Give your orientation a catchy title like “Liftoff Celebration/Open House.” If possible, integrate your orientation with your school’s scheduled open house. The Family Coordinator should be available to greet families and make a presentation highlighting the opportunities available through the NES Family Involvement Program for the upcoming academic year.

## **Budget**

It is important to develop a detailed budget identifying all of the resources needed to implement your NES Family Involvement Program. Once you have developed your budget, share it with your NES Team and internal stakeholders for support and approval. You should never market any family involvement activity until all resources necessary to conduct the activity have been secured/provided for.

Budget considerations include, but are not limited to

- Food/refreshments
- Printing costs for marketing and other communications with families
- Postage costs for marketing and other communications with families
- Materials and supplies
- Honoraria for guest speakers (if applicable)

## Evaluation

Evaluation is critical to the success of your NES Family Involvement Program. Taking the time to ask families for their input after each family activity (whether it be a Family Night or Family Focus Group) will provide timely information to accomplish the following:

- Assess program for continuous improvement
- Identify areas of strengths/weaknesses
- Assess family satisfaction
- Provide families an opportunity to comment and/or make suggestions

Make sure to allow time for the completion of evaluations *within* the program's scheduled hours. If you have door prizes, you may want to save them for the end of the program, and distribute tickets to participants as a reward for having completed the evaluation.