

# Introduction

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If you have picked up this book, you are probably concerned about supporting children's learning both inside and outside the classroom. As a classroom teacher, your main focus is or will be on effective curriculum practices during school hours. But you know that teachers are not the only influences on children's knowledge, skills, and dispositions, or even the most important influence. You may wish that parents and other family members would be more involved in helping children learn, and you may have tried different strategies to encourage their participation. Maybe you have talked to parents about what they can do with their children at home. Perhaps you assign homework to extend classroom-based lessons and expect families to supervise it or at least make sure children complete and return it. But if you are like most teachers, you probably have experienced less parent participation than you would like.

This book is about encouraging learning at home and engaging family members, especially parents and others who have primary responsibility for childcare, in helping children develop academic knowledge and skills and intellectual dispositions, so they will do well in school and beyond. It contains research-based information about why and how to support children's learning at home. It also includes a large collection of developmentally appropriate activities to make it easier for you to enlist family support in complementing and enhancing classroom instruction.

You can think of these activities as homework, but they are not of the traditional type. Rather than relying on pencil-and-paper assignments, which many children—and families for that matter—find dreary or stressful, the activities encourage children and family members to spend time together in informal, play-based interactions that reinforce and augment classroom instruction. They constitute what has sometimes been called *interactive homework*.

The first three chapters provide the research background and rationale for learning-at-home activities. Chapter 1 describes what we know about how children learn. Chapter 2 summarizes what have learned about effective strategies to overcome barriers to family involvement. Chapter 3 addresses issues and research findings related to homework, particularly for young children. In Chapter 4, there is a nuts-and-bolts description of how to apply this information through specific strategies to support learning at home.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are “make-and-take” chapters consisting of thematic school-to-home “kits” to encourage informal family interactions that complement, deepen, or enhance classroom instruction in language and literacy (Chapter 5), mathematics or science (Chapter 6), and the expressive arts (Chapter 7). While the activities are organized according to these subjects, most integrate developmental and content areas, including the social sciences.

Each kit in these chapters includes several activities appropriate for children in designated grade levels along with directions about how to make or assemble the necessary materials. However, because it's as important to differentiate learning activities at home as it is in the

classroom, you may find activities suited to your own students' needs in any of the kits. There is also a list of children's books that are related to the theme of the kit. Whenever possible, the lists identify literature that is especially relevant to particular cultural groups, ones with characters or situations with which families from those groups can identify. Each kit also includes ideas for additional ways families can encourage children's learning. These suggestions do not depend on any items provided by the school. Because of their interactive nature, they enable families to use everyday experiences as educational opportunities.

In addition to the thematic kits in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, Chapter 8 has even more learning-at-home activities to share with families. These activities either require no materials at all or are based on materials that families commonly have on hand. But unlike the suggestions in the Chapters 5-7, they are not thematic. They are particularly appropriate for inclusion in school newsletters, Web sites, or vacation calendars. Chapter 9 expands interactive homework possibilities through suggestions for longer-term family projects that result in some sort of product that highlights each child's or each family's unique characteristics.

The Resources includes several games and activities that are ready for duplication. It also includes samples of letters and forms you can send home. There is a list of online resources through which you will find additional ideas for home-school activities as well as parent- and child-friendly Web sites you can recommend to families. As with other learning experiences, the educational value of electronic media for children can be enhanced when parents and other care providers participate and/or extend the lessons provided.

A characteristic of teaching effectiveness is resourcefulness. The materials in this book are intended to guide you in selecting and adapting activities to suit your own situation and accommodate the characteristics of the children you teach and their family circumstances. In the process, you may be inspired to modify activities you already use in your classroom to cultivate family participation in strengthening children's learning at home.

As a result of the drumbeat for early academics, teachers, parents, and children alike are feeling the pressure of higher academic expectations at earlier ages. Certainly, we want all children to acquire the academic skills needed to succeed in school but to do so without sacrificing their eagerness to learn or confidence in their own abilities. Homework—learning-at-home activities—should be considered in relationship to these goals. What if homework turned children on, rather than turned them off? What if it was something to look forward to, rather than a chore? What if it bridged home and school cultures? What if it encouraged, rather than discouraged, family togetherness? I have seen these things happen through the kinds of learning-at-home activities you will find in this book—ones that are based on children's real-world experiences with concrete materials and with others who can capitalize on interactions as teaching and learning opportunities. I hope it will help you make these things possible in your own classroom.