



# School Age Guide to Positive Interactions



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North Carolina CCR&R School Age Initiative

This resource guide is intended for school age professionals seeking to improve the interactions between school age staff and students. The information presented in this guide is based upon the licensing requirements set forth by the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) and the School Age Care Environmental Rating Scale Updated (SACERS-U).

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# The Power of Positive Interactions

School age students thrive with positive interactions. For children between the ages of 5 and 12, positive social interactions are instrumental to guide proper cognitive development, academic success, and social-emotional awareness. Research from Vanderbilt University highlights that early school success is directly linked to the interactions and relationships students form with teachers and peers. Students who develop strong, positive school relationships are more likely to have a better education experience and stronger academic outcomes (Vanderbilt University, Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, *Building Positive Teacher-Child Relationships*).

School age afterschool and summer camp programs provide the perfect opportunity for students to form effective, positive relationships with peers and teachers. Afterschool and summer camp programs have the advantage of setting up relationship building experiences with a broader range of creativity and depth. As a school age professional, you have an important and fun role to ensure student success with positive interactions.

## Four Reasons Why Positive Interactions Matter

### 1 Positive interactions build confidence

No one likes a bully. Negative relationships between students and other peers and adults are a leading cause of development regression. Data from The National Center for Education Statistics shows that students experiencing negative relationships with adults and peers are more likely to experience dramatic decreases in academic, physical, and cognitive development (2016). Moreover, students who have experienced persistent emotional abuse are more than twice as likely to develop negative traits like low self confidence, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Perren, Ettakal, and Ladd, 2013).

Positive peer and adult interactions counter these potential life-long challenges by helping students create self worth and personal confidence. Research by Davis and Nixon (2010) highlight that students who develop positive interactions and relationships with peers between the ages of 8 and 12 years are more likely to develop stronger senses of personal value and higher personal confidence levels. This confidence translates into better student outcomes and a higher probability of future success.

### 2 Positive interactions help students effectively adapt

Change is hard...especially for students. Child psychologist Tovah Klein notes that children younger than 12 years of age have a hard time adjusting to change because of the physical and chemical make up of their brains. She asserts that between the pivotal 7 to 12 year old mark, the brain undergoes the beginning stages of frontal lobe development. In this developmental stage, students find it difficult to adapt to scheduling transitions, changes in play, and alterations in peer relationships (Psychology Today, 2014).

Positive interactions in the form of developing effective scheduling, setting developmentally appropriate boundaries, and providing transition cues help students understand the parameters of change and adaptation in a safe and controlled manner. Students who are guided toward adaptation in positive ways are more likely to demonstrate effective coping skills and behaviors.



### 3

## Positive interactions encourage creativity

Curiosity is the key to learning. When students are challenged to ask questions and expand ideas the depth of their learning exponentially increases. One way that curiosity takes root is by asking questions. Group leaders have the special opportunity to spur new learning concepts by asking students questions and presenting learning experiences centered in play. Combining intentional learning activities with positive peer-to-peer interactions transforms afterschool and summer camp programs into spaces where students can push the limits of their creativity.



### 4

## Positive interactions help students develop resiliency

School age trauma is a national epidemic that affects everyone. In 2019 over 29,000 students personally dealt with the effects of homelessness and displacement in North Carolina (National Center for Homeless Education, 2019). Data from Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina highlights that between 2018 and 2019, the state investigated 119,339 reports of child abuse and neglect. One thing is clear, school age students are experiencing traumatic life events on a catastrophic scale. This childhood trauma directly impacts the future success of students both at school and throughout their life.

Positive school age interactions are instrumental to reduce the impact of childhood trauma. Strong relationships with school age mentors provide a safe confidant for students, and establish links to valuable trauma related resources and supports. Positive school age interactions also help students learn to develop important trauma resiliency techniques that can lead to better academic performance, smarter behavior choices, and more effective coping skills.



## Combining Positive Interactions with the SACERS-U Assessment

The SACERS-U tool devotes an entire section to rating quality interactions in school age environments. Below are four main types of interactions that the SACERS-U assessment focuses on:

- **Staff-Child Interactions:** These interactions occur strictly between ALL staff members and students. Potential interactions include staff attitude, staff-child questions, discipline, and staff-child demeanor.
- **Staff-Parent Interactions:** These interactions occur between ALL staff members and student caregivers. Potential interactions include staff-parent conferences and volunteer opportunities.
- **Peer Interactions:** These interactions occur between students in the program. Potential interactions include student play and activity collaboration.
- **Staff-Staff Interactions:** These interactions occur between staff members. Potential interactions include group leader interactions during and outside of program hours, and group leader interactions with primary school day teachers.





# Reflect On These Questions

Before your program considers going through the SACERS-U assessment, you should stop and reflect on the interactions that take place during the program day. Reflective Practice is an important process in maximizing the potential of your school age program, and finding any shortcomings that exist. To implement Reflective Practice all you need to do is:

- **STOP:** Find a quiet place away from distractions.
- **THINK:** Think about aspects of your program that are coming up short.
- **LIST:** Make a list of these issues and some potential ways to make them better.

Now it's time to put Reflective Practice into action. Take some time to reflect on these questions dealing with interactions in your school age program. Think about any shortcomings that might exist, and some ways to maximize the relationships in your program.

## What is my demeanor towards students and staff?

What is the attitude of your group leaders towards the students and colleagues? Are group leaders energetic and happy to be at work, or are they negative and judgmental? Remember, the tone of the program rests on the attitudes of the employees.

## What makes me frustrated with my students and staff?

What are your pet peeves? Is there a particular part of the day where interactions tend to become negative? Knowing what frustrates you will help you regulate when times get tough.

## How do I treat my peers?

What is your attitude as a worker? Do the interactions you have with colleagues provide a good example for your students? As a school age leader, you set the example. Having positive relationships with your peers is fundamental for the success of your program.

## How strong is my relationship with parents?

How do you view parents? Do you see them as contributors to your program? Your interactions with parents are instrumental in setting the overall culture and tone of your program. Take time to reflect on how information is presented to parents, and how your families are represented in the classroom.



# Arrival and Departure

Arrival and departure times provide school age leaders with an important chance to shape the outcome of the learning day. Meeting students with a smiling face and a warm acknowledgement has the ability to shift a child's bad school day into a fruitful experience. Moreover, a smooth and positive departure transition has the power to transform a parent's hard day at work into a meaningful chance for engagement. As with all forms of staff-child and staff-parent relationships, the success and impact of arrival and departure interactions rests in your attitude as a school age professional.

## Arrival Interactions

The first way to ensure that your arrival procedures focus on positive interactions is by properly acknowledging students when they enter your program. Personally meeting students at the door or at a set meeting space is easy and effective to ensure that students are counted in attendance numbers and safely transferred into your care. Taking time to greet each student by name personalizes their entrance in your program and highlights their value to the classroom environment.

Take time to enhance your arrival time by incorporating arrival rituals when transitioning students to your group. Potential arrival traditions like knuckle bumps and high-fives are great to personalize a student's entrance into your program and building relationships their with group leaders.

Another way to create strong arrival interactions is to help integrate students into scheduled activities. Having group focused materials like Legos, dramatic play materials, and games set up for students upon arrival allows students to fluidly enter into the classroom and mingle with friends and group leaders. Routine-focused activities like hand washing, going to the restroom, and putting backpacks up are also great arrival interaction activities that build consistency and age appropriate expectations.

While the beginning of program time can be stressful, it is important for group leaders to maintain a positive attitude during arrival times. Students notice the dispositions of those that care for them. Negative interactions like yelling, rushing students, and making harsh comments can destroy student involvement and make the school age day harder for everyone.

## Potential Routines and Activities to Help Student Integration

### Activities

- Table Centers
- Homework and Quiet Activities
- Outdoor Play
- Games and Puzzles

### Routines

- Washing Hands
- Sitting Down for Snack
- Putting Bookbags into Cubbies
- Going to the Bathroom



## Departure Interactions

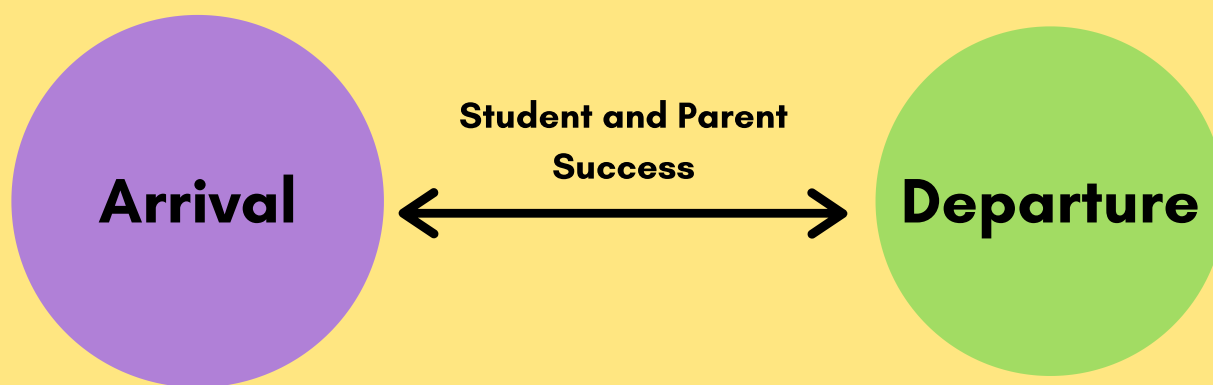
Strong departure interactions are also crucial in forming positive school age relationships. Helping children depart from your program in an effective and thoughtful way reduces potential stress on students, teachers, and parents. As with arrival, student departure needs to take place with a positive disposition with the goal of building up students and their families.

Students should first be given a gentle verbal cue that their parent or guardian has arrived to pick them up. This warning helps student internalize the transition and properly end the activity that they are working on.

After students are aware that they are about to leave, group leaders need to take a moment and help them prepare for departure. This process can be as easy as asking the student to retrieve materials and belongings from their cubby or storage bin. If time and attention allows, group leaders can personalize this step by helping students retrieve their backpacks, put their jackets on, and gather their homework. What is important during this interaction is that we assist students in the departure process warmly and thoughtfully.

After students are prepared for departure, it is essential for group leaders to share some form of information with the guardian. The SACERS-U assessment (Subscale27) highlights that group leaders need to use departure time to share information about the student's day with parent or guardian. If negative news, like challenging behaviors, has to be shared with parents, make an effort to couple this information with some form of student success. Focusing on the positive aspects of the day will help develop stronger staff-parent relationships and keep student success in the forefront.

## Interactions at a Glance



- Meet students entering program
- Greet students by name
- Have routines or activities set up
- Help students integrate into the program

- Let students know that parents or guardian have arrived
- Help students get ready to leave
- Share something good about the student's day



# Staff-Child Interactions

Staff-child interactions are the backbone of a high-quality school age program. Students who feel comfortable with group leaders and program coordinators are more likely to achieve academic and social-emotional success during program hours. Healthy relationships between staff and students also result in a stronger classroom environment that results in better behaviors and higher attendance rates (Waterford, 2019). The SACERS-U assessment places great importance on the status of staff-child interactions in overall assessment scores. Take a moment and reflect on the relationships that currently exist between your staff and students and contemplate on ways that these bonds can be strengthened.

## Showing Respect

Displaying respect for students can be difficult at times. Temper tantrums, back-talk, and arguing will push any group leaders buttons. As school age professionals, it is important to remember that extreme behaviors are developmentally appropriate for students between 5-12 years old. Taking a step back and viewing these difficult interactions as learning opportunities for students is essential for helping them blossom into successful adults.

Showing respect towards students during behavior outbursts is a great way to actively model appropriate social and behavioral skills. Students watch how group leaders react and respond to difficult situations. Modeling respectful actions like listening, keeping eye contact, talking in a calm voice, and respecting physical boundaries shows students how to handle issues in a socially acceptable manner. Even if students do not initially respond to respectful group leader interactions, constant modeling reinforces positive actions in the classroom culture.

In addition to effectively dealing with challenging behaviors, group leaders can show respect to students by having a calm and cheerful demeanor. Be excited about your job and being around your students. Students can pick up on negative body language and know when they are viewed as burdens by adults. Keeping body language and comments positive and encouraging shows students that you personally care about them. A positive demeanor also shows your group that you want to be an active and trusted participant in their life.

Take time to reflect on your body language and communication with students. Figure out which students "get under your skin" and focus on attributes that make them shine and excel. Taking time to focus on the good will shift your perspective, change your personal mood, and ultimately shift classroom stress to classroom success.



# Three Easy Ways to Show Students Respect



## Wait

Instead of leading all conversations and routines, wait for students to contribute to the direction of the classroom. Taking time to wait can open your classroom up to new ideas and learning activities.



## Listen

Students want to be heard. Granted, there are times of the day when long conversations cannot take place. However, there are always periods of program time where you can listen. Take a moment during snack or activity time to sit down with students and listen to them about their day.



## Reflect

Respect occurs when we look at the world through our student's eyes. Take time each day to reflect on how you can make your classroom more effective for your students. Is there a way to augment an activity and make it more effective? Are students "acting out" because of poor scheduling? Reflection will help mold your program to fit the needs of your students.

## Support Autonomy

School age students crave independence. The National Afterschool Association's *Standards for Quality Care* (2019) highlights that providing students with some form of autonomy is essential for their cognitive and social-emotional development. Giving students the ability to make small decisions helps them develop key traits like responsibility, trust, and follow-through. Providing students autonomy also gives them a say in their learning and play direction. This process makes learning personal, meaningful, and deep.

A great way to support student autonomy is to allow students to have a say in classroom routines. Giving students the ability to choose their daily classroom job, where to sit during snack, and what centers they want to play in are simple ways to let them test personal decisions in a controlled setting. As a group leader, you have the ability to select the range of choices that students can make. For example, rather than making students sit quietly when they get done with homework, you can give them the choice to pick from a selection of quiet toys, books, games, or puzzles. Providing students with a predetermined selection of choices reinforces autonomy while still allowing you to manage the classroom in a productive way. Take some time to stop, reflect, and determine the points of the day where students can display this type of autonomy.

Another great way to provide students autonomy is to let them contribute to the daily and weekly activity plans. Educational psychologists Douglas Fischer and Nancy Frey highlight that effective learning occurs when students are passionate about the topic at hand. Interacting with students, finding their interest, and incorporating them into your lesson plans expands their range of learning and broadens the impact of school age time (Fischer and Frey, "Speaking Volumes", *Educational Leadership*, 2014).

## Using Interactions to Discover Student Directed Learning



## Listen

Listen to what students are playing and talking about with peers and with group leaders. Students talk about their passions and interests.



## Watch

Watch students during play. What are they pretending to be? What materials do they flock too? Watching students can help you integrate ideas into your lesson plans.



## Ask

Asking for student input into lesson plan development is the easiest way to promote student directed learning. These conversations can happen during the program day or during planned classroom meetings.



# Interactions and Conversations

Students yearn to communicate. Current research shows that the typical 5 year old school age student entering kindergarten knows close to 20,000 words (Merriitt, 2016). This word bank increases by 2000-3000 additional words each year until the age of 12 (Nagy and Scott, 2000). Constant communication is great for developing language skills, building cognitive development, and mastering problem solving skills. Staff-child directed conversations can take place at any point of the program day. However, it is important to remember that the key to effective communication interactions is active listening and frequency.

Effective staff-child communications begin with frequency. Reflect on parts of the program day where you can sit down with students and hold meaningful dialogue. These conversations can occur during organized periods of the day (group time, snack time, reading activities), or during more relaxed time slots (activity time, transitions, outdoor play).

Make these conversations relevant to the ideas and thoughts of your students. Talk to them about their day, problems that they might be facing, or new ideas that they are learning in class. These interactions provide great opportunities to build credibility with students and helps develop trust and confidence.

It is also important to make sure that students and group leaders take turns talking during conversations. Many times school age conversations are dominated by group leaders. This often takes the form of group leaders giving classroom directions, dictating routine care, or guiding learning. This process is necessary, but must be limited by the group leader. Make an effort to take turns with students and listen to their opinions and interjections. Actively listen to students as they talk, and give attention to conversations when appropriate.

The easiest way to create turn-taking conversations is by asking questions. SACERS-U Subscales 22, 24, and 29 highlight that high quality learning experiences are directly linked to question-centered problem solving. Asking students questions spurs them to build upon their ideas. It also challenges them to justify their thoughts especially during learning activities.

When holding conversations with students, focus on HOW or WHY questions. These types of questions stimulate frontal lobe brain development and help students practice rational thinking skills. Take some time to reflect, and think about where academic focused question can best be integrated into your program.



## Questions and SACERS-U

Staff-child questions are an essential component of the SACERS-U assessment. Here are some times when question asking is advised:

### Science Activities

Involve students in the scientific method by asking them to come up with hypothesis and theories. Help the students dive deeper by testing these questions with experiments.

### Language Activities

Build reading comprehension by incorporating questions into classroom book readings. Why did a character make a specific choice? What could they have done differently? Questions like this help build literary character development skills.

### Math Activities

Integrate math questions into everyday routines. During snack, ask students how many place mats or cups need to be passed out. Have students be the scorekeeper during a game, or ask for their help to divide teams into equal groups.



# Staff-Parent Interactions

Developing strong relationships with parents and guardians is an essential prerequisite for high quality school age care. Positive staff-parent interactions help reinforce student development by creating common academic goals and learning accountability. Parents and group leaders are able to work together on the same page to help students with school work and assignments.

For students exhibiting challenging behaviors, positive staff-parent relationships help ensure student success and common approaches to behavior expectations. This collaboration is perfect for establishing the consistency many students need to thrive in group settings.

From a program standpoint, a strong relationship with parents creates a stable volunteer force that can share outside experiences and cultural perspectives. Having solid interactions with families can also potentially reduce the stress associated with other program issues like fee collection and pick-up tardiness.

Reflect a moment on how your program views the contributions of parents and guardians. Are there any ways that you can make these interactions stronger?

## Interactions and Parent Communication

The easiest way to increase the effectiveness of staff-parent interactions is to have a strong communication system in your program. Make sure that group leaders take time each day to share information with parents about their child's day. This interaction can occur verbally during departure time, but also can take place in the form of staff-parent communication notebooks and communication via approved classroom chat apps. It is important to make sure that any classroom apps used are approved by parents and use credible encryption systems.

Staff-parent communication can also take place in the form of a parent wall or table. This designated area is a great place to share resources about your program, resources from help-based organizations, pictures of student artwork, and a regular program newsletter. Take time to develop this area, and make it a focal point of your program. A good idea is to have students help decorate the parent wall/table, and update the space weekly with new materials and classroom news.



# Parent Involvement

Involving parents and guardians into the daily happenings of your school age program is essential in developing healthy staff-parent relationships. While many parents might have difficulty scheduling time to volunteer, there are many ways to integrate families while still respecting their schedules.

One way to easily encourage parents and guardians participation is to promote an open-door policy. The DCDEE highlights that parents of enrolled students must have access to a licensed center during program hours "for the purpose of contacting the child or evaluating caregiver space" (Chapter 9 Childcare Handbook, 09 .2005). Encouraging parents to drop in and spend time with their child builds credibility between parents and your program. It transforms your program into an extension of the family unit and an active member in the overall development of a parent's child. Make sure to cover your program's drop-in policy with parents during enrollment. Information about parent involvement and volunteer opportunities should be included in the program handbook and discussed at the start of each program year. Some school age programs, especially those operating in a school setting, might have special considerations dealing with building procedures and checking students in and out of care. Be sure that parents know these procedures when planning to drop-in and visit their child's group.

Another way to build positive staff-parents interactions is by setting up regular staff-parent conferences. Conferences provide a personal method to update parents on the progress of their child and any changes associated with your program's structure. Use these meetings to discuss concerns that you might have with parents, as well as any advancements that their child is making. It is important to center staff-parent conferences on a positive footing. Focus on student progress, and concentrate on finding solutions to any particular challenges. The SACERS-U assessment highlights that high quality programs should have "regularly" scheduled staff-parent conferences. Holding staff-parent conferences quarterly or twice a program year is optimal for charting growth and developing learning goals.

Reflect on other ways that your program can build strong interactions with families. You can create a volunteer schedule with specific support tasks for parents with time to help. You can also host family events where students showcase their work, perform science experiments, or conduct a dramatic play performance. The possibilities of incorporating families into your program are boundless. For more information on great parent volunteer ideas check out the National Afterschool Alliance at [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org).

## Three Steps to Promote Parent Interaction

1

### Encourage an Open-Door Policy

Let parents know they can drop in and participant any time

2

### Communicate with Parents

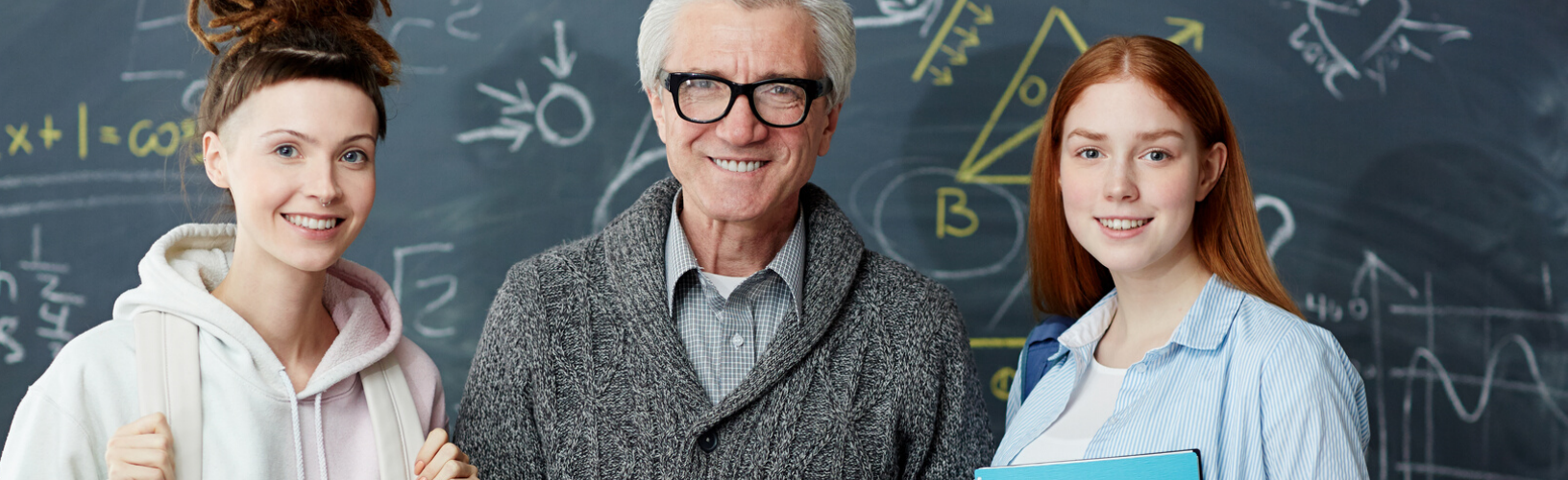
Integrate conferences, parent-tables, and departure conversations into your program

3

### Provide Volunteer Opportunities

Have parents share with the class, help with classroom preparation, and have some influence in the direction of the program





# Staff Interactions

A strong school age program depends on supported staff. Staff who feel valued are more likely to have reduced stress levels and better interactions with students and families. Programs that focus on strong staff support are also less inclined to deal with turnover, negative attitudes, and low morale.

The most efficient means to build strong staff interactions is to provide group leaders with paid time to create and develop strong lesson plans. The SACERS-U assessment (Subscale 34) highlights that some time should be set aside for group leaders to lesson plan. For groups that have more than one teacher, it is recommended that both teachers have joint planning to develop lesson plans and activities.

Regular, scheduled planning time helps maximize the effectiveness and intentionality of activities and lesson plan goals. Setting these planning periods outside of program hours or away from student interactions allows group leaders to maximize planning opportunities and focus on learning ideas without interruptions.

If your program structure allows, consider molding staff planning interactions into larger, collaborative meetings. Program-wide collaborative meetings with all group leaders is an effective way for staff to share learning ideas, work through classroom problems, and share expertise and insight. Program coordinators can easily integrate collaborative meetings into wider staff meetings to help with work-time constrictions. Administration can also include professional development activities into these meetings like book readings, DCDEE approved trainings, and technical assistance consultations by Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) staff. Holding collaboration meetings in monthly or quarterly intervals reinforces staff interactions and provides a degree of professionalism to your program's overall work.

Take some time to reflect on the development time staff have to interact, share ideas, and create learning opportunities for students. Is there a way to shift your program's schedule to allow staff interactions to flourish?

## Creating Strong Relationships with Primary Teachers

School age care is a direct continuation of school day learning and development. Having a strong relationship with your student's primary school teachers builds upon this continuity, and strengthens the academic and social-emotional growth of the students in your care.

While daily conversations with primary teachers might not be viable, frequent check-ins are recommended. Below are some topics that should be discussed periodically with primary classroom teachers:

- **How is the student doing academically in class?**
- **What academic goals are currently being covered in the school classroom?**
- **Are there any social-emotional issues happening during the school day?**
- **Does the child have any Individualized Education Plan (IEP) considerations?**
- **How is the child's family life?**
- **Does the child need special assistance or tutoring afterschool?**

# Reflection Sheet

**How can arrival and departure interactions be strengthened?**

**What are some current student interests that can be included into lesson plans?**

**What ways can staff-to-staff relationships be strengthened?**

**What ways can staff-parent relationships be strengthened?**

**Parent Volunteer Opportunities**

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