



Alaska Strong

Taking opportunities to connect with families and adults who support our students is important in establishing connections and building stronger support systems to help our students succeed in all aspects of their lives. Our students face many challenges and the more connected their support systems are, the better they will be.

The following resource provides a series of discussion questions around key topics including ones that can be used in informal settings with families. When gathering with families, sometimes it is challenging to engage beyond the activity in ways that will lead to stronger support systems and create next steps that will support ongoing relationships and student success. By creating intentional conversations that will help school staff and families discuss family strengths and needs they can begin working together to support students both in and out of school.

The importance of creating a space where families feel comfortable and safe to share their strengths and their challenges is critical. This begins by recognizing that families are children's first teachers and their most influential role models. While not all families look the same and some may have more challenges than others, each family still plays an important role in the life of the student and can be a valuable asset to you as an educator.

Creating connections when out on the land:

Use the following principles as you work to create and strengthen cultural activities meant to engage families and bring in their knowledge. Approach families with respect and humility and follow best practices for ensuring that meaningful relationships are built when spending time together doing cultural activities.

(Source: *Stronger Together*, pages 11-12: <https://aasb.org/wp-content/uploads/StrongerTogetherUpdated.pdf>)

- APPROACH FAMILIES WITH HUMILITY AND RESPECT.** A foundation of genuine respect is essential to any successful relationship between a child's school and family. Families usually know their own child best. Listen and learn.
- FOCUS ON STRENGTHS.** Every family has something to offer. Make an effort to see and build on each family's assets and strengths.
- RESIST ASSUMPTIONS.** Families come in every size and shape. With few exceptions, families love their child and have hopes and dreams for their child.
- SEEK UNDERSTANDING.** Seek to understand a family's cultural traditions, expectations of their children, and their own past experiences with the education system. Families may "show up" for their child in places outside of the school. Meet families where they are, metaphorically and physically.
- ESTABLISH STRONG COMMUNICATION.** Establish systems for two-way communication beyond the traditional family-teacher meeting. Seek to learn the communication norms and preferences of your students' families.
- UNDERSTAND FAMILY STRUCTURES.** Extended family members can play a key role in education and discipline. Set up structures that help you learn more about your families and get permission to reach out to the caring adults in a student's life.
- CELEBRATE CULTURE.** Incorporate culture into each aspect of family outreach. This may mean participating in cultural and community events outside school.
- BE PATIENT.** Relationship-building takes time and persistence. Keep looking for opportunities to build trust and common understanding. Don't take setbacks personally – know that you are part of a larger context and keep trying.

Introductions

To start the dialogue, go around the circle and have each person introduce themselves:

What would you like to be called during our time together?

Where does your name come from?

If you have a traditional Native name would you like to share it with us?

Family activity question prompts:

Cultural activities are an opportunity for deep learning and connection with our families. Use the following question prompts, which are based on Alaska Native values to create dialogue and discussion with families when out in the community or the land.

Knowing Who You Are

As parents, aunties, uncles and caring adults we play an important role in supporting our children and helping them reach adulthood. When we come together we are able to use our shared/collective knowledge, experience and wisdom to support our kids and each other.

Prompt participants to think about the power of this group of parents coming together and how we are a thread that runs through the past generations to the next generation.

Together, we become stronger: as a community, as parents, as a partner/spouse and as an individual. Family and community values ground us and build our mental, emotional, spiritual, cultural and physical strength.

Your family makes our community strong.

- What's one life lesson that still resonates with you today that you learned from your family?
- What is your favorite activity to do with your family?
- How does knowing your family history help you navigate life today?
- What is one value or life lesson you hope to pass down to your children?

Closing: Choose Just One Word

What is it that makes your family and/or this community strong?

Student and Family Strengths

As parents and other caring adults, we set expectations and provide support to help our young people be successful. Support comes in many different forms. We can figure out how to best support our young people by thinking about our experiences as well as our strengths and the things we need to work on. Taking the time to think about what your child needs and what you might need to best support them can help them develop their own goals and expectations and help make navigating life a little easier.

- What cultural strength/value do you see within yourself and your family?
- What are your child's strengths, abilities and interests outside of school? What does your child do well?
- How does your child learn best at home (not just in school learning)? How do you support your child in learning outside of school? (For example: subsistence activities.)
- What hopes and dreams do you have for your child/children in life? At school?
- What kinds of things could you do to help them achieve those hopes and dreams? What can the school do?
- What actions can we take to work together for success?

Closing: Choose Just One Word

What is one word that describes your child?

Working Together – Responsibility to Family and Community

As parents, families, caring adults and communities we can really influence and shape who our children become. Working together we can support our young people and help them learn and grow and overcome the challenges they may face at different points in their lives.

Let's think about how we influence the children in our lives:

- What do you hope your child learns from you?
- How do you help to reinforce these values to your child?
- What is one thing you do well as a parent?
- What would you like to change about your relationship with your child?
- What is one thing you would like to get better at as a parent? Or what would you like to help your child with?

Building and Maintaining Trust

Trust is an important part of building a strong relationship with our children. For kids and teens, knowing their parents and adults trust them can deepen their sense of safety in the world, support their self-esteem and confidence as they try new things. It also assures them they have someone to go to when things don't go according to plan. For parents and caregivers, having a trusting relationship with your child means you're more likely to have an open dialogue and a strong relationship. This can help your child come to you when they have something that is bothering them or need supporting navigating a difficult choice or situation. When we think about building and maintaining trust we can draw on our past experiences.

- How might you define trust?
- Think back to when you were a kid. Who was one person in your life that you trusted and made you feel safe? What did they do to create that trust?
- If trust is broken between you and your child what do you do to help rebuild trust?
- What specific areas do you want to work on to build trust? What steps can you take to intentionally build trust with your children?

Closing Takeaway: What is one thing you can begin doing now to help build trust in your relationship with your children?

Resilience and Self-Regulation

Children build resilience skills from those around them, especially their families. Resilience is the ability to recover from difficult life experiences, and often people are strengthened by and even transformed by those experiences. Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage our behavior and how we respond.

A child first learns to regulate with others and then is gradually able to use these regulation tools more independently. Resilient parents can understand the feelings of others, solve problems and find ways to deal with life's events and help their child build these skills too.

- **Helping yourself stay regulated is the key to helping your child.** How do you know when you're stressed? Where do you feel it in your body? Who is the first person to notice when you're stressed? You, a friend, spouse, or child?
- What are some big obstacles that you have overcome in your life? What lessons from these experiences would you want to share with your children?
- How do you role model being **strong** for your children?
- How do you keep from getting overwhelmed?
- What are positive ways to manage emotions and how can we model that for our children?

Co-Regulation

Emotional self-regulation, or managing our emotions and behaviors, is a critical factor in success at school and beyond.

Co-regulation is when one person helps another manage their emotions through warm and responsive interactions. Learning and practicing co-regulation can help build healthier communities for our students and families.

- What are your child's stressors?
- How well is your child able to express their emotions and communicate their feelings?
- What are some self-regulation strategies that your child is already doing in order to successfully wind up or wind down their energy levels?
- What do you notice your child needs from you when they are not able to regulate themselves?
- How do you or others like an Elder co-regulate with your child?
- What can we do at school to help co-regulate with your child?
- What actions can we take to work together for success?

Closing Takeaway: What is a skill you want to practice and model for your child this week to help cope with stress or emotions?