

How The Learning Tree Brings Parents into the Heart of Early Learning

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Parental engagement is a powerful driver of children's developmental outcomes, particularly in the early years. South African research highlights that caregiver involvement improves attendance, strengthens learning outcomes, and supports children's socio-emotional development (HSRC, 2018; DBE, 2019). Yet many ECD centres in disadvantaged areas report low levels of parental participation and difficulty securing fees, often due to economic pressures, work commitments, and limited access to communication channels.

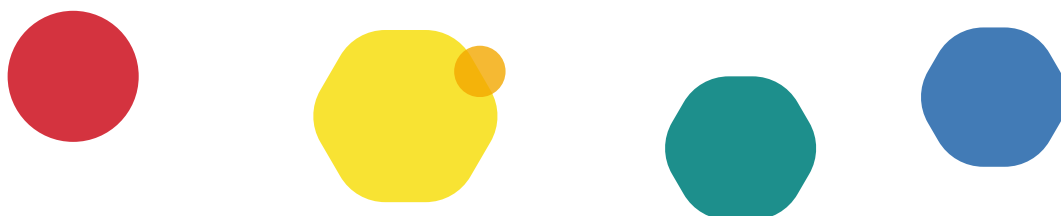
Based in an informal area of Knysna, The Learning Tree (TLT) preschool, a model preschool of the Knysna Education Trust, demonstrates how ECD sites in such contexts can establish strong, consistent engagement with parents and caregivers. Their approach blends multiple communication channels, inclusive events, and shared governance to ensure families are active partners in their children's education.

Strategies for Parent Engagement at TLT

1. Multi-Channel Communication

TLT maintains a main WhatsApp group for all parents—used solely for school-wide announcements—to prevent message overload. Each teacher runs a class-specific WhatsApp group for daily updates, open to two-way conversation. For parents without smartphones or data, a daily notebook travels between school and home to ensure no family is left out.

Why it works: Mixed communication methods are particularly effective in low-resource contexts. Research in township preschools shows that combining low-tech tools like notebooks with mobile messaging improves message reach and parental response rates (Local NGO case study, 2021). This approach also reflects HSRC findings that communication is most effective when it matches the technology access of the community (HSRC, 2018).



2. Regular, Relevant Parent Meetings

Quarterly meetings cover practical topics such as nutrition, screen time, and positive discipline. For Grade R learners, TLT also conducts one-on-one mid-year meetings to review reports and discuss home-based support strategies—an approach being rolled out across all classes.

Why it works: Studies in rural KwaZulu-Natal found that face-to-face sessions tailored to individual children significantly increase parents' confidence in supporting learning at home (UNISA, 2020). The focus on relevant, locally grounded topics keeps meetings purposeful and well-attended.



3. Inclusive Family Events

Events such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Grandparents' Day celebrate the role of extended family in child development.

Why it works: Evidence from ECD centres in informal settlements shows that culturally resonant, celebratory events improve parent attendance by up to 30% and foster positive school-home relationships (UWC ECD NGO, 2022). These gatherings also strengthen a sense of belonging among families.



4. Shared Governance and Decision-Making

The TLT management committee includes five members, four of whom are parents, ensuring that family voices shape school decisions.

Why it works: Parental representation in ECD governance has been linked to more responsive, community-aligned management practices (HSRC, 2017). It also deepens parents' investment in the school's success.

5. Parent Skills Development

Many TLT parents have attended external parenting courses. The school is planning to expand in-house workshops to strengthen parenting skills, recognising that parenting is a learned role and support is limited.

Why it works: A University of Cape Town pilot project found that peer-led parenting workshops in informal settlements led to more frequent home learning activities and more positive parent-child interactions (UCT, 2019).

Conclusion

The Learning Tree's experience shows that strong parental engagement is achievable, even in disadvantaged contexts, when strategies are intentionally designed to fit the realities of families' lives. By combining accessible communication, relevant meetings, celebratory events, shared governance, and targeted parenting support, TLT fosters a genuine partnership with parents.

Research evidence confirms that such engagement not only improves children's learning and well-being but also strengthens community trust in ECD services. As ECD sites nationwide seek to overcome barriers to parental involvement, TLT's approach offers a practical model for building lasting home-school connections.



In the end, there's no program or policy that can substitute for a parent — for mothers and fathers who simply know when it's time to turn off the TV, put away the video games, and help with homework, or to attend those parent-teacher conferences, or just sit down and read with their child.

— Barack Obama

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