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Publication #2007-16

June 2007

BUILDING, ENGAGING, AND SUPPORTING FAMILY AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

Research has long shown that parents' positive involvement with their children's schooling is related to many positive outcomes.¹ However, less research has been done on the involvement of parents and families in out-of-school time programs. Nevertheless, the research that does exist suggests that family involvement can be an important component of such programs and may lead to a range of benefits for children, families, and programs. This brief discusses elements of family involvement and why it matters for out-of-school time programs. The brief also examines some of the issues that programs face when attempting to engage parents, and it offers suggestions for how programs and staff can encourage family and parental involvement.

WHAT IS FAMILY INVOLVEMENT?

Family involvement is a broad term that refers to the participation of a child's or teen's family members in any aspect of an out-of-school time program. This participation need not be limited to a young person's parents, but also may include any or all adults in a household.² Some programs also extend the term to include the involvement of a program participant's siblings.³ Family involvement can take different forms. One form is the direct participation in a program's day-to-day activities, such as stuffing envelopes for a mailing, helping children with homework, or coaching a sports team. Some programs include parents in program design and planning, and others ask parents to serve on advisory committees or the board of directors. Still other programs define family involvement as participation in special events, parenting classes, or support groups.⁴ While it is hard to be sure about cause and effect, studies suggest that family involvement can provide benefits to children and youth, as well as to programs.

WHY IS FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS IMPORTANT?

- § **Family involvement can help children's relationships and academic performance.** Children and teens whose parents are engaged in out-of-school time programs report higher levels of trust and lower levels of lying to and arguing with parents.⁵ Parents also report greater appreciation of their children's talents and increased attention to their children's schooling.⁶ Additionally, children whose parents participate in after-school family literacy initiatives show larger gains on measures of math and reading than do children whose parents do not participate.⁷
- § **Family involvement can help reduce teens' risky behaviors.** Positive parent involvement with teenagers is associated with lower rates of risky sexual behavior, tobacco use, drug use, alcohol use, delinquency, and violent behavior.⁸ Moreover, compared with teens in similar programs without parental involvement and with teens who are not enrolled in any program,

youth enrolled in some after-school programs with a parental involvement component have been found to be more likely to refuse alcohol and marijuana, to better understand the dangers of marijuana, and to better understand the health consequences of drug use.⁹

§ **Family involvement can lead to better programs.** Family members who become involved in programs may offer suggestions for improvements, and studies suggest that programs that respond to such ideas have higher attendance, improved activities, higher youth and family satisfaction, and increased child or teen engagement.¹⁰

§ **Family involvement can help parents do a better job of parenting.** Getting parents involved provides opportunities to educate parents about child and adolescent development and parenting strategies, such as ways to reduce risky behaviors and support positive development. Because family-based programs have higher and more consistent parent attendance than do programs directed solely at improving parents' skills and behaviors, out-of-school time programs for children and youth may be uniquely positioned to gain parental participation.¹¹ In addition, parents who volunteer with programs report feeling closer to their children, offering further support for the idea that program participation improves relationships between parents and children.¹²

WHAT BARRIERS DO PROGRAMS FACE WHEN INVOLVING FAMILIES IN PROGRAMS?

§ **Other Responsibilities.** Many out-of-school time programs are held when parents are at work and cannot participate in activities. One study found that 91 percent of parents and 89 percent of program coordinators reported that work schedules precluded parents' regular participation in the program.¹³ Additionally, families may be unable to find child care for younger children, which may prevent family members from attending program events.

§ **Access.** In addition to time constraints, which limit *when* family members can access programs, family members often do not know *how* to do so. For example, they may not have easy access to a car or to public transportation.

§ **Comfort Level.** Family members may not feel comfortable at out-of-school time programs. Some parents may not be familiar with the program environment; others may not know English and, therefore, may be reluctant to attend program events. Parents may not feel comfortable with public speaking and may lack leadership skills. As a result, they might avoid attending meetings. And some parents simply may not find a program's events that interesting. Another barrier to participation is that staff members may not know how to work with families and may inadvertently treat parents' contributions and skills as unimportant.¹⁴

WHAT CAN PROGRAMS DO TO ENCOURAGE AND SUSTAIN FAMILY INVOLVEMENT?

1. **Define involvement.** Programs can define and explain involvement and share this information with families because family members, like programs and staff, may be unclear about what involvement actually means.

§ Providing family members with a list of ways in which they can participate—whether by telling a story, attending a class, serving on a committee, planning a special event, or typing a newsletter—may help them become aware of opportunities and recognize skills that they can share. This kind of information can also serve to answer questions, such as: What does an individual program mean by family involvement? Who will be able to participate? Parents? Siblings? Other relatives? What do programs want families to do—and *not* to do?

§ Once a policy is in place, all staff should be made aware of it.

2. **Address barriers related to responsibilities and access.** Many programs find it difficult to involve parents because of obstacles that may stand in the way. Yet there are steps that staff can take to help parents overcome these obstacles.

- § Meetings, classes, and various tasks can take place at night or on weekends, when many parents are not at work.¹⁵ Moreover, some activities can take place off-site. For example, volunteers can take home the materials for a mailing and assemble the mailing there.
 - § If the program site is not easily accessible by public transportation, program staff can consider holding events at places that are—such as public schools or churches. In this way, families that do not have a car may have less difficulty arranging transportation.
 - § Programs can offer families incentives to participate. These incentives might include transportation (or transportation vouchers) and child care so that family members do not have to make alternate arrangements. Providing food—dinner at evening events and snacks at afternoon events—may also motivate family members to attend.
 - § Since programs may serve immigrants or the children of immigrants, program staff members may consider speaking in and using families’ first languages whenever possible. Speaking with parents in their first language may help them feel more comfortable at the program, help them build relationships with program staff, and allow them to express their opinions about the program more freely. A bilingual parent might be recruited to translate materials for a program.
- 3. Take steps to increase families’ comfort level at program events.** Making families feel comfortable at programs involves connecting to families in a number of ways, including culturally and personally.
- § Programs may want to encourage staff to interact with families in environments where the families already feel comfortable, such as at churches or community events.¹⁶ Going into the community provides staff members with additional opportunities to interact with program participants and their families and to show families that staff members are interested in their lives.
 - § Programs can survey families to learn more about topics that should be addressed in classes and at meetings. A common way of attracting parents to programs is to offer them educational and other similar opportunities, although turnout for such classes generally is low. However, program staff and families might have very different ideas about what issues are important. Choosing topics of interest to the families being served may increase the number of people who attend.
 - § Programs can also survey families about what times are best for events. Even if families are interested in a topic or an issue, they will not attend if they have other responsibilities, such as work, community activities, or family responsibilities that take place at the same time.
 - § Programs can begin attracting parents by offering a one-time session or a short series of sessions aimed at improving parenting skills without requiring parents to make a long-term commitment. Because parents are concerned specifically with how to influence *their* child or children, programs can focus on providing family members with concrete examples of strategies and language to use with their children around difficult topics. After offering such sessions, programs can give “homework assignments” to ensure that parents begin to apply skills learned. Programs can also follow up with parents after such sessions to discuss any difficulties that parents may have encountered.¹⁷
- 4. Engage families regularly.** Programs can build relationships that encourage involvement. Engaging families may be as simple as ensuring that a staff member speaks briefly with someone from each family (in person or by phone) at the end of the day, or it may be as time-consuming as weekly home visits. Programs also can assign homework to children and teens so that parents are aware of what the program is doing even if they do not attend activities. Or programs may include regular conferences with family members or organize events that

celebrate families. Such interactions can help families and staff members build stronger, more trusting relationships.

§ Staff may not be used to engaging families meaningfully on a continual basis. Program staff members often speak to parents about problems, but they may not speak to parents simply for the sake of building relationships. These interactions require certain skills, including cultural sensitivity, respect, and inclusiveness. In some programs, staff training involves discussion of how to develop and utilize these skills. In others, staff members share appropriate information about themselves with family members in the hope that this exchange will help families become more open.¹⁸ The program might also have specific hours during which a program staff member can always be reached by phone so that parents are able to easily get in touch with staff. Whatever the specific approach used, staff should know how to interact frequently and respectfully with families.

§ Some programs require family members to volunteer with the program for a certain amount of time a year.¹⁹ Such a requirement guarantees some level of family involvement. Moreover, it ensures a given number of interactions between program staff and families that may encourage strong relationships.

5. Recognize that engaging families will take time. Even if programs take steps to encourage family involvement on a frequent basis, sustained engagement will not happen overnight.

§ Building relationships to the point where family members are willing to participate regularly in programs takes time. Family members need the opportunity to participate in varied ways and on a number of occasions before they feel comfortable.

§ Once family members become involved, programs need to maintain successful practices, address issues facing families, and adapt to families' needs and interests so that family members remain involved and engaged with the program.

AN ADDITIONAL THOUGHT

Since involving families takes time and energy, it may be valuable to provide staff with time and resources for this, so staff don't "burn out" and are able to fulfill their responsibilities.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM

§ **Harvard Family Research Project—Out-of-School Time Learning and Development Project/OST Evaluation Database.** This project and its associated database provide information and research findings about out-of-school time programs, as well as a number of out-of-school time program evaluations; see, <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/about.html>.

§ **The Child Care Partnership Project—A Guide to Engaging Parents in Public-Private Child Care Partnerships.**

Although this report is geared specifically towards child care programs, it provides information that can be applied to multiple types of programs. The report provides tips on how to engage parents, an assessment that programs can use to evaluate levels of parental engagement, and a self-assessment tool with which parents can evaluate their talents and the ways in which they can contribute; see, <http://nccic.org/ccpartnerships/parents.pdf>.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Program: National Organization of Concerned Black Men

Location: Washington, DC

Program Overview: Concerned Black Men was founded in Philadelphia, PA, in 1975. Since then, chapters have been formed in 29 cities across the United States and in South Africa. The organization's mission is to support the social, emotional, academic, and psychological development of African American children and youth through out-of-school time programs, including mentoring programs, tutoring programs, summer programs, and after-school programs. The organization works to implement "best practices" programs at the national level and to develop special projects with local chapters. More than 8,000 children and teens participate in the group's various projects and activities.

The Importance of Parental Engagement: Concerned Black Men (CBM) views parents as the "first teachers" of their children and recognizes how families affect children and help them make important decisions. The organization takes steps to ensure that families are involved with programs and with their children. When children and youth enroll in programs, parents sign consent forms that require them to be involved in parent workshops. Participating in these workshops underscores to parents the emphasis that the program places on their roles in the organization and in their children's lives. However, if parents do not attend workshops, children and youth are not penalized; they continue to receive services and participate in programs.

Barriers to Parents' Participation: CBM's experience working with parents suggests that they often want to become involved with programs regardless of tangible benefits or incentives; when they are not involved, it cannot be presumed that they are not interested. A number of barriers prevent parents' engagement in these programs, including financial and emergency issues related to housing, child care, and illness. Frequent telephone calls to families help staff become aware of serious problems facing specific families. Moreover, many parents have had negative associations with social service organizations and resent programs that "teach" them to become better parents, although they already view themselves as successful parents. The organization differentiates itself from social services organizations and highlights the contributions that it sees parents can make to programs and to their children's lives.

Strategies for Engaging Parents: Concerned Black Men frequently consults parents to find out what activities interest them. Surveys, direct communication with parents, and attendance at community and cultural events provide families with opportunities to indicate their interests to staff.

- § Immediately after registering their children or themselves for programs, parents receive a call from a staff member thanking them for enrolling and welcoming them into the "CBM Family." Over time, staff members continue to call parents to remind them of events, to check on families, and to share good news about children with their families.
- § Concerned Black Men uses newsletters, the Internet, fliers, invitations, and other methods, as well as phone calls, to make parents aware of events and programs. The organization also publicizes its events through school newsletters.
- § Parents continue to be made aware of the programs, services, and supports that are available to children and their families even after a specific program has ended.
- § Parents have opportunities to become involved in all CBM programs. Specific projects also consciously involve parents. For example, the "One Mind...One Message" Abstinence Leadership Program encourages reaching out to and connecting with parents, developing and improving relationships between parents and youth, and gaining the trust of parents.
- § In addition, Peer Education and Reproductive Counseling for Young Men (PERCY), a pregnancy prevention program, works to build relationships between teenage males and a responsible adult, often a parent, in order to prevent young men from becoming fathers too early.
- § Concerned Black Men also offers programs specifically for parents. For example, through the "Parent Self Improvement Project" (PSIP), parents can gain literacy and life skills. The PSIP offers education, computer training, and job preparation skills to help participants achieve long-term employment.
- § Fathers can improve their parenting skills, co-parenting behaviors, and partner relationships through the "Fatherhood Initiative." In this project, sessions provide needed support and services to strengthen men's roles as fathers, partners, and community members.
- § In addition to offering programs, the organization also sponsors special events for children, youth, and their families. In the past, popular events have often been planned around holidays or special times of the year. Some of these events have included a mother-daughter retreat, a Father's Day jazz brunch, a Mother's Day workshop and luncheon, a dinner theater communication workshop, and a "meet and greet" workshop.

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