Building Successful
Home/School Partnerships
Strategies for Parent Support and Involvement

Over the last two generations, the delineation of "informal" and "formal" education has become a boundary between family and school. As a society, we believe a world of difference exists between teaching a child to hold a spoon and teaching that same child to hold a pencil. With the acceptance of this boundary, we have created two separate, sometimes adversarial, worlds—home and school—and have populated them with separate, sometimes adversarial, adults—parents and teachers. Children must live in both worlds, moving back and forth at the beginning and end of each school day. While both parents and teachers strive toward a goal of well-educated and well-loved children, various problems appear to hinder achievement of this goal.

Many individuals in both the popular press (Dodge, 1991; Foster, 1994; Rubenstein, 1988; Shea, 1993; Singal, 1991; Vogel, 1994) and academic publications (Edelman, 1992; Kozol, 1991; O'Callaghan, 1993) have addressed the conditions in America's public schools and the seeming inability of these institutions to educate many children. Teachers claim that a whole variety of social problems prevent them from teaching. Many children come to school undernourished, in poor physical health and with their basic needs for safety and security unmet. Some children may come to school under the influence of drugs or alcohol and/or may be armed. These conditions undoubtedly make learning in school difficult, if not impossible, for children. Children must feel safe before they will be able to learn (Garbarino, Kostelnisky & Dubrow, 1991). On the other hand, many parents claim that teachers are failing to teach their children critical academic skills and values, and schools have become places where children can easily find drugs, alcohol and weapons. Thus, some parents perceive school to be an introduction to trouble rather than a way to stay out of it.

Data currently indicate that fewer than 70 percent of the young people in the United States will graduate from high school; minority children have even lower graduation rates (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelnisky & Pardo, 1992). Furthermore, according to Kozol (1991), many children who do graduate may not be reading at an 8th-grade level. While the reasons for such outcomes are varied, and, in fact, difficult to pin down, it is certain that parents and teachers, working separately, will not be able to solve the problems.

Teamwork and collaboration are more likely to achieve positive results than when school systems and families work alone. The teacher bears the responsibility for developing and fostering this collaboration (Rotter, Robinson & Fey, 1987). Recognizing the classroom as the accepted site of a child's education and the home as the site of a child's nurturance, support and socialization (Lightfoot, 1978), classroom teachers can use several strategies to enlist parents' collaboration.

Effective schools share a number of basic features: strong leadership, an emphasis on academics, ongoing evaluation, a safe school climate and positive teacher-pupil relationships (Garbarino, Dubrow,
Kostelnky & Pardo, 1992). In addition, a high level of parental involvement appears to have a direct impact on student achievement (Henderson, 1987; Marcon, 1993; Rotter, Robinson & Fey, 1987; Seldin, 1991). Teachers recently named greater parental involvement as their number one priority for improving education (Chira, 1993). Thus, in light of research findings showing the benefits of parental involvement and teacher support for such involvement, an obvious solution to some of the problems becomes apparent. Before a truly effective parental involvement program can be implemented, administrators must understand the nature of change within a system (in this case, a school) and the roles and culture within the school. Then, the interface of the home and school systems and strategies teachers can use when dealing with family and classroom situations can be discussed.

Change
The structure of many organizations makes it difficult to implement change. Long-standing rules must be followed, and resistance to change is inherent to many of the rules. Often, organizations respond to requests for change by only appearing to do something different, while the same basic rules or methods are still used. This is called “first order change” (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). Real, or “second order,” change requires alteration of the rules or methods of doing things (the structure).

Consider the school principal who wishes to increase the number of parents attending school functions and so asks the teachers to send out an invitation and two reminder notes, rather than just an invitation alone. If the turnout remains poor, the principal may conclude that the parents are just apathetic and continue to rely on the same strategy. The reminder notes, while a deviation from previous actions, are merely elements of first order change. If, however, the principal changed the function from the usual weekday evening to a Saturday morning, provided child care and encouraged a buddy system in which each parent brings another parent, attendance might increase. These actions constitute second order change because the structure of the activity has changed. Such second order change required the principal to cease viewing parents as having many faults, and instead to recognize parents’ strengths that can be tapped simply by being flexible with rules and methods.

Roles and Culture Within a School
Schools and families have many structural similarities (Fisher, 1986). Both have different individuals performing complementary behaviors defined by their roles within the system. A degree of flexibility in those roles and behaviors marks well-functioning systems. Flexibility allows individuals to perform tasks according to their strengths rather than simply according to the role they occupy. The roles in school, however, often do not appear to be negotiable. Parents’ roles in school settings are rarely discussed, making their responsibilities unclear and making it likely that they will only be called upon when their child is having a problem.

A school culture built on the idea of collaboration leaves teachers free to discuss parents’ interests and responsibilities for participation and to incorporate them into the classroom without feeling threatened by their presence. This strategy allows parents to define their participation and involves them in determining the boundaries between home and school, rather than being told where that boundary ought to be. Moving toward a system that encourages inclusion, participation and collaboration is the ultimate goal.

Strategies for Improving the Home-School Relationship
Building upon Strengths. Reframing is a strategy that family therapists use to shift from a deficit perspective, in which faults are highlighted, to one that recognizes strengths. In order to reframe something, one must consider what useful purpose a seemingly negative behavior might serve and then shift to that frame of reference. For too long, many professionals have taken a custodial view toward families they perceived to be dysfunctional. As a result of this deficit model perspective, professionals often believed that parents were incapable of being allies and simply needed to be tolerated and avoided. Educators, without ever meeting many parents, would often blame them for their children’s difficulties. Whatever level of

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truth lies in that assessment, it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to develop a positive bond between family and educator. It would be much more helpful to “think of parents as professional child-rearers with considerable on-the-job experience” (Hayes, 1987).

Reframing behaviors that have been negatively labeled in the past can also promote collaboration. When attending a teacher’s conference, I once heard a parent describe their child as being very active and often out of control. The wise teacher looked at the parents and said that the child was “spirited”—giving the parents a new label they found acceptable and helpful. After all, what parent would ever want to break a child’s spirit? While the child’s behaviors did not change dramatically, the parents now looked upon their child in a new way and worked to channel that spirit rather than quell it.

By digging a little deeper beneath the surface, one can view multi-problem families as also being multi-resource (Walker 1991). These families often have support from extended family and almost always are strongly motivated to help their children succeed. Walker suggests that many of these multi-resource families are better able to deal with a crisis since they live in an often chaotic world in which their resources are constantly challenged. When professionals recognize that all these families have been able to conquer, rather than focusing on what they have failed at, they will find it easier to appreciate the families’ strengths.

Making Schools Family-Friendly. Families sometimes bring their own unique concerns into the schools. These concerns can, and should, be acknowledged in a helpful manner, as long as the child’s school issues remain the focus. “The child is the family-school connection. It is he or she who must traverse the worlds of home and school each day and it is he or she who brings the worlds in juxtaposition” (Eno, 1985, p. 161). Any program developed to enhance home-school collaboration must improve students’ classroom achievement. Both home and school affect a child’s academic performance. By focusing on school issues, parents and teachers can discuss just about anything in a non-threatening, collaborative manner (e.g., How does that situation affect your child’s school performance? What can we do to help your child handle this in a better way?). In such a climate, parents are more likely to participate as most parents will do almost anything “for the good of their children.”

Understanding that parental participation is critical, school personnel should assess families’ comfort levels when participating in school activities. Drawing up a needs assessment of all the parents, focusing on their current levels of involvement and seeking suggestions they might have for increased participation are all strategies for moving toward a more collaborative home-school relationship. In the meantime, educators could ask themselves a few simple questions in order to assess the “family-friendliness” of their schools:

- Are all school meetings with parents problem-focused?
- How easy is it for a parent to find out what is going on in a classroom?
- Are parents a source of information? Is parental input valuable and can you name a few specific instances when parental input had an impact on outcome?
- Do parents typically come to the school to discuss positive activities?
- Are meetings only held during the school day?
- Do school personnel usually discuss parents in a negative fashion?
- Are parents informed when their children are doing well?
- What percentage of parents were at the last school function?
- Do teachers and parents describe their relationship in an adversarial fashion?
- Did most of the parents struggle with school themselves?

If the answers to these questions

### Parental Involvement Programs and Strategies

1. Educational support and drop-out prevention programs.
2. Parenting skills training.
3. Workshops where parents can judge their schools’ quality.
4. Adult literacy programs.
5. Parent tutoring programs for their own children.
6. Random meetings with the principal.
7. Potluck meals in the classroom.
8. Field trips with invited parents.
9. Invitations for parents to visit and participate.
10. Invitations for parents to make presentations.
11. Assignment of parents to committees.
12. Recognition of parents at school assemblies.
13. Fathers’ night out.

*Table 1*
**Parent-Teacher Conferences**

**Joining**

1. Speak the language of the family; use their words and definitions.
2. Understand the family’s rules and rituals.
3. Try to keep jargon to a minimum—especially at first.
4. Monitor your own level of discomfort; do you resort to “the facts” when you become uncomfortable?
5. Try to build a collaborative, rather than an adversarial, system.
6. Ask the family to suggest solutions.
7. Recognize signs of a power struggle.

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**Table 2**

Parents can be invited to meet their children’s teachers before the year begins at an orientation, or the teachers could invite parents to a potluck dinner. These activities provide opportunities for teachers to solicit parental input and ask what educational methods the parents have found to be effective in the past. They also provide an opportunity for teachers to build a positive relationship with parents, rather than one based on problems.

In another successful strategy, teachers send home children’s work each week with a letter. The letter can include a review of the week’s activities and suggestions for reinforcing school-learned knowledge at home. Parents can be encouraged to respond with “Monday Messages.” This strategy establishes a two-way dialogue rather than a one-way evaluation directed to parents.

In schools with computerized telephone systems and resources for multiple answering machines, teachers can record messages concerning study units and homework assignments so that parents can call at their convenience to gather information. This allows parents to be involved and to reinforce at home what their child has done during the day (Minner, Prater & Beane, 1989).

- Principals can set the tone by having lunch meetings with parents to discuss their concerns and ask for suggestions.
- Principals can actively seek parents’ input by asking them to sit with teachers on certain committees.

Principals also need to support teachers’ efforts to “join” with families by granting time off or compensating teachers for extra time spent with families. Teachers will feel supported and appreciated.

**The Parent-Teacher Conference As an Opportunity for Connection.** Goals for the parent-teacher conference can include “the exchange of feelings, beliefs and knowledge between parent and teacher about a particular student. This exchange should facilitate cooperation between home and school for the benefit of the student” (Manning, 1985). Since the parent-teacher conference is often the sole contact between parents and teachers, it presents the primary opportunity to facilitate this cooperation. Consequently, what happens during this time is critical. Several counseling techniques, including active listening and developing a trusting relationship with parents, are particularly suited to the conference process. Table 2 lists many of the techniques that can be used to build such relationships. In addition, by scheduling conferences during the first few weeks of school, teachers will allow parental participation early on in the planning of the academic year and thus avoid many potential problems from the outset (Neilson & Finkelstein, 1993).

This first meeting is a good time for teachers to gather information about the family’s rules, roles and learning style (Green, 1992). Teachers should seek answers to the following questions:
SOLUTION-FOCUSED QUESTIONS

1. When do you not experience ________?
2. What is different at those times?
3. What are you doing differently when ________ is not happening?
4. How will you know when the problem is solved?
5. If you woke up tomorrow and your problem was miraculously solved, what would be different?
6. If a person had all of the skills you believe necessary to solve this issue what might he or she do?
7. What is a sequence around the issue?
8. How do you stop things from getting worse? (Emphasize that things could be worse and preventing further deterioration requires some competence.)
9. How have you resolved this problem in the past?
10. Has there ever been a time when this was not happening?

Table 3

- Who has the primary responsibility for child rearing (and, consequently, monitoring school work)?
- What is the child-rearing style in this family? Parents usually exhibit one of three styles (Baumrind 1967, 1968):
  - Authoritarian (behavior is controlled according to absolute standards)
  - Authoritative (behavior is controlled according to developmental needs)
  - Permissive (no control is attempted; instead, a non-punishing, affirming manner is used).
- How is the family defined (who are its members)?
- How does the family describe their style of problem solving?
- Who speaks for the family and is it the same person who has primary child-rearing responsibilities?

This information will allow the teacher to assess the family structure and identify points of entry into the family system. Family structure and family learning styles have an enormous impact on a child’s school adjustment (Green, 1992). Teachers would also benefit from knowing if parents are involved with other professionals (e.g., social workers). Too often, different groups of professionals work with the same family without any coordination.

The Solution-Focused Conference. Teachers should consider using a solution-focused approach during conferences. Borrowing from the work of Kral (1989), O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis (1989) and de Shazer (1985), the solution-focused conference has several features. After joining with the family, the teacher works to clearly define the concern, redefine it as a solvable problem, agree on a specific, clearly defined goal and gather information from parents about whether a similar situation exists at home and what has been done to correct it. If the parents have successfully handled the problem at home, the teacher can enlist their help in forming a strategy for the classroom. A list of questions that may be used in a solution-focused conference can be found in Table 3.

Assigning specific tasks and establishing follow-up plans provides support for the changes discussed dur-

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES
Making Plans: Strategies for Change

1. Write up behavior contracts.
2. Offer advice.
3. Ask solution-focused questions.
4. Gather more information and plan for follow-up.
5. Design tasks for the parents, particularly to observe something.
6. Create a task for family members whereby they look for strengths.
7. Ensure that any assigned task is possible; build on success.
8. Think about direct skill training.
9. Practice during the meeting.
10. Avoid detours or being overwhelmed.
11. Contract for mutually agreed-upon goals.
12. Decide if a referral is necessary.
13. Ask yourself, Am I stuck?

Table 4
Making Referrals

1. Know the agencies in your area.
2. Know competent people with whom you can work at these organizations.
3. Refer to specific people, not just an organization.
4. Get agreement from the family that they will participate.
5. Ask the family to predict what might prevent them from participating and ask for solutions.
6. Check on families’ ideas about solutions and possible referrals.
7. Make sure you provide for a follow-up meeting.

Table 5

Table 5

References


