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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Strategies for Managing Parents

by Carol LaLiberte

Three decades of research have shown that parental participation improves students' learning. This is true whether the child is in preschool or the upper grades, whether the family is rich or poor, whether the parents finished high school.

—U.S. Department of Education. (1994). *Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning*.

When I was a new preschool teacher in a walk-in, neighborhood-based center serving a diverse population, I wanted parents to have a voice in my program. I handed fliers to incoming parents, inviting them to a parent meeting at the beginning of a new school year. I wanted their opinions on the curriculum and to inform them of our upcoming field trips and classroom needs. It was important to me to make sure that they knew they were always welcome in our school. Even though parents nodded enthusiastically as I handed them the parent meeting announcement, that evening, only two of the 20 parents showed up. That happened the following month as well; the same two, very involved parents attended the parent meeting. Rather than bringing parents together, both parents in attendance were growing impatient with those who did not attend, saying things like, "They just don't care about their children's preschool." I could have joined the blame game, but chose instead to try to under-

stand why parents were not coming out to their children's school on the first Tuesday night of every month.

The morning after the second failed meeting attempt, I greeted parents and children at the door as I always did, but this time, after the children went off to play, I told the parents that I missed them and asked why they were not at the meeting, reiterating how valuable I felt their input was to our program and their children's education. What they told me reminded me of how complicated these families' lives were. Parents said, "It is too late for me to go out because my neighborhood is unsafe." "I don't have a car." "I have to get four kids fed, bathed and into bed with no help." "I can't afford a babysitter."

My third attempt at a parent meeting was very different. I asked parents which night was best. I drove our center van and picked them up, since most lived in the same housing complex. I ordered large pizzas, hired a babysitter and told parents they could bring all of their children for dinner and play. I even suggested the kids come in their pajamas, so parents could return home with one less thing to do that night. The meeting was attended by all but four families. It was noisy and I accomplished less with many interruptions, but parents felt validated. How could I have possibly thought they could have informed me about curriculum when they were scared, hungry and struggling? By providing families with what they needed, I demonstrated to them that I cared enough to listen and find ways to help them overcome obstacles of effective participation.

Family engagement is many things. It is meeting families where they are: referring them to food pantries or diaper shelves if that is what they need. It is considering families in everything that you do—their diversity should be reflected on your walls, in your newsletters (in their primary languages) and in your approaches. Do your approaches send the mes-



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sage, “I am in charge of your child here. You do not have any say or power or influence?”

Families are more diverse today than ever before. Knowing who your families are—their challenges and needs—is a key first step and one that can be easily achieved through the use of a survey. The Family-School Relationships Survey, developed by Panorama Education and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, measures 10 areas of family engagement, among them family support, school fit, school climate and barriers to engagement. It is a free tool that can be downloaded and used by your center or school to get a clear view before you start planning how you will form relationships with parents. While designed for parents with children in school aged programs, it could be adapted for use in other programs as well.

Programs that care for children may have LGBTQ parents, step parents, extended family, single parents, foster families, deployed parents and many other combinations. It is an important first step to ask parents in admission forms or early conversations, “Who do you consider to be part of Marissa’s family?” That is a different question than, “Who should be allowed to pick her up from school?” but it is no less important that we get this right. Another important question to ask is, “What does your child call these people?” Children tell us all sorts of things throughout a day and it is good to understand who they are describing in their stories. Often asking preschool and school age children to draw a picture of their family gives a clue as to who they think is included.

A survey of 18,000 parents identified some of the biggest barriers to family engagement: time, lack of information and lack of childcare (Getting Smart.com). That was certainly my experience as a preschool teacher, and it is clear parents are perhaps even busier today with the internet extending many peoples’ workday long after 5 p.m. While the digital age makes demands more challenging, it can also make communicating with families easier. Over half of all parents surveyed said they wanted to learn what was going on in their children’s centers and schools via text messaging. Just five years prior, only 5 percent wanted to hear updates using this format. Other similar surveys indicate that while parents want to be informed online of school news, they do not want to be overwhelmed by an avalanche of communications.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has developed a set of resources called Parents for Healthy Schools, which helps schools create strategies to communicate and involve parents. These are encompassed in three words: connect, engage and sustain. Schools and programs that focus on

these three aspects of engagement design opportunities for families across a variety of tiers. Rather than using the same approaches over and over, it is best to create an engagement plan that targets groups of parents using the following strategies:

- **Identify engagement barriers.** Conduct a survey of your families each year to help identify what barriers may exist that prevent them from communicating with you or becoming involved in your programs. Devise a plan of engagement that tells families you have learned about their barriers and are working hard to address them and to build communication plans that are informed of these challenges. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, just as every class you teach will be different from the one before and every family is different from every other. Getting to know families and understanding their needs, and then tailoring your approach to them, will go a long way toward making them feel heard, appreciated and engaged in your program.
- **Identify levels of involvement.** Not everyone will attend meetings or go on field trips. Find ways that all families can be part of your community from the simplest interaction to greater involvement. All efforts can help support your program and help your families feel that they are an integral part of their child’s school life.
- **Use strategies that others have found to be successful.** These should include creating a welcoming environment for families from the front entrance and onward. Is there a welcome sign in every language represented in your program or school? Does staff greet each family no matter what they are in the building for? Do they offer to help them to find the office or to engage a reluctant toddler? This strategy can take seconds, but it sends a clear message: You are always welcome here.
- **Use multiple methods to communicate with families.** Families are not one-size-fits-all, so why would any single engagement strategy work for all? Instead of hoping to involve and communicate with the tip of the iceberg, why not set your sights on the entire glacier; in other words, strive to connect with families who you often see and those you rarely do. Use social media to inform and engage, but also try more traditional methods such as notices and newsletters in backpacks. Don’t overload families who are busy, but instead plan effective elevator speech interactions for parents who drop off and pick up their children. Share something positive about the day or something they may not otherwise know. “Jesse tried green beans today and liked them!” “Ming spent a long

time working on her easel art." A heartfelt hello and goodbye help too. This is also a good reminder time: "There's a family potluck tomorrow night. Come if you can! Childcare provided." Or "Newsletters went out online and in backpacks. I think you will like some of the fall events we have coming up."

- **Avoid the blame game.** If you are serious about understanding families and creating engagement opportunities that are planned to address their needs and interests, then stop blaming them when they do not engage, and instead, figure out how to increase their comfort level with you and your program or school. Teachers often tell me that they are annoyed by parents who come into a center to pick up their infant or toddler with the phone to their ear. They take their child, ignore any attempts to chat about the day, do not greet their child, and hurry out, kid in arms. Teachers often want to share how the day went, feeding and diapering schedules, things that went well or did not, and this prevents that from happening. Many centers have a no cell phone sign hanging but this does little to address the problem. So, should staff ignore the parent on the phone? What if they asked them individually to leave their phones in their car unless there is an emergency? A sign saying no phones does not explain why it is important that children are greeted responsively at the end of the day or left off with a goodbye ritual that works for child, parent and center. This is a good topic to objectively discuss in an early newsletter, at admission time and at a first family gathering. Helping parents find ways to disconnect without making them feel bad is also vital.

- **Provide tips that parents need.** Simple things that help at home can be useful, so long as center staff do not appear to be the only experts in a child's life. Parents often complain that their children do not tell them anything when they ask, "How was your day?" Center and school staff know that for young children, a more targeted inquiry can help. Advise parents to try: "Tell me something funny that happened during lunch?" or "What storybooks did you read today?"

- **Engagement is a two-way process.** Can you use a journal that parents fill out with information about home and you fill out with information about school? These sorts of two-way communications give parents the message that we are a team instead of only school-to-home communication, which makes teachers the experts in the partnership. Some schools have a special friend, such as a stuffed animal, who goes home with each child for a few days. The families can document in a journal whatever adventures the special friend had with that family. This is a wonderful, non-threatening way to understand the lives of the families in your program—their practices, lifestyles and culture.

Early childhood programs, be they infant rooms or first grade classrooms, are communities within which children and families grow along with teachers and staff. Sharing goals, communicating, laughing, telling stories and doing purposeful work enrich all involved. There is no all-encompassing approach to family engagement; rather, it should be a rich, ongoing dialogue with all families in the manner that works best for them.

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Whether we are out in front, leading others along or holding others up, or leading from below, learning to tune into the thoughts and actions of ourselves and others in a non-reactive way gives us the stable footing to make a tangible impact.

Kirsten Haugen and Pam Boulton • Exchange Issue 245

