

The Hard to Reach Parent: Old Challenges, New Insights

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National Community Education Association

Rule #1: Believe in the importance of parent involvement.

"Parents are one available but untapped and undirected resource that teachers can mobilize to help more children master and maintain needed skills for school....This requires teachers' leadership in organizing, evaluating, and continually building their parent involvement practice."

— Epstein 1991

Successful parent involvement models are, first of all, parent-centered. Educators must believe that parents are the primary educators of their children, and that educational programs are incomplete without a parent involvement component. Children spend only 9 percent of their time from birth to age 18 in school, so educators must work with families to try to ensure that the other 91 percent of children's time is used wisely.

Benefits of Strong Home-School Partnerships

Teachers benefit through:

- Training about how to work effectively with families from diverse backgrounds.
- Support from the principal for their efforts to work with families.
- Tapping the knowledge, skills, and resources of colleagues.
- Maximizing limited resources and time through the cooperative development of grade-level homework and home learning activities.
- Better understanding of parent expectations and closer communication with parents.
- Increased rate of return on homework and greater family involvement in home-learning activities.
- Increased parental support and cooperation.

Administrators benefit through:

- Better communication between school and home.
- Fewer parent complaints about inconsistent and inappropriate homework.
- Better use of limited resources to link home and school.
- Improved school climate when children see parents and teachers as working partners.

Parents benefit through:

- Opportunity to become partners with teachers and to shape important decisions that enhance children's chances for success in school.
- Consistent expectations, practices, and messages about homework and home-learning activities.
- Increased opportunities to engage in home-learning activities with children.
- Access to schoolwide resources such as parent learning centers, homework

hotlines, homework centers, parent workshops, and home visits.

Students benefit through:

- More positive attitudes toward school.
- Higher achievement in reading.
- Better and more grade-appropriate homework assignments.
- Completion of more homework assignments because of greater parental interest and support.
- Greater consistency between family and school goals.

— Moles and D'Angelo 1993

Rule #2: Embody an ethic of caring.

"Not all parents are angels. All are individuals—accept the real person in front of you. Be prepared to work where each one is. The way they were treated in the past, and the way the present is bearing down on them makes some parents appear negative. Get past that wall with your acceptance and sincerity."

—Peterson 1982

Education professionals—servants of the community—must make a sincere effort to understand the life situations of parents who are not involved in the school. Lapidés and Lapidés (1981) recommend that educators keep the hierarchy of human needs in mind when working with parents, because all parents have basic needs that must be met before they can be concerned with school involvement. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the Lapidés suggest specific strategies for responding to parental concerns. An obvious way to express caring and concern for another person is to help him or her solve a problem or overcome a difficulty. Educators can help parents overcome the barriers to parent involvement in a variety of ways.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Parent Involvement

♣ Self-Fulfillment Needs (ego fulfillment)

<i>Parent Concerns</i>	<i>Staff Support</i>
Can I really accomplish my goals?	Highlight parents' contributions to the program
What are my potentials as a person, parent, mate, breadwinner, etc?	Assess skills and potential
Will I be able to acquire new skills or enhance present skills?	Develop interest areas
	Plan for upward mobility
	Facilitate goal identification

♣ Esteem Needs ("I am lovable and capable.")

<i>Parent Concerns</i>	<i>Staff Support</i>
Am I doing something worthwhile?	Will I be looked up to?
	Will I learn a new skill or gain new knowledge?

Staff Support
Provide successful experiences

Give positive feedback
Encourage decision making
Encourage volunteering

♣ **Social Needs** (family, friends, groups)

Parent Concerns

Will I be able to make friends?
Will I be accepted by others?
Should I belong to a group?
Do others really need me?

Staff Support

Develop parent/staff
partnerships
Help arrange social events
Support parent/child activities
Identify recreation facilities
Encourage "buddy" system

♣ **Safety Needs** (job, home, security)

Parent Concerns

Will I be able to get a job?
Will I get a "fair break"?
Will I find something to hold
onto?
Will I feel safe and

comfortable?

Staff Support

Identify community resources
Make referrals
Provide counseling
Encourage independence
(clothing, shelter)

♣ **Physiological Needs** (*food,*

Parent Concerns

Will I be able to provide
adequate clothing for the
family?
Will I be able to locate
housing?
Will I be able to provide a
balanced diet?

Staff Support

Provide emergency information
Establish crisis intervention
procedures
Provide information about
resources in the community

Rule #3: Disregard "hard-to-reach" stereotypes.

Educators must face up to their own misperceptions about "hard-to-reach" parents. These flawed perceptions may include:

- Believing that all children from non-middle-class families are troublemakers.
- Believing that it is all right to contact families only when a child is in trouble.
- Regarding poor families as deficient, seeing only their problems and not their strengths.
- Believing that the problems of "hard-to-reach" families are the fault of the families themselves.

— Davies 1988

Reaching out to families is made increasingly complex by the growing number and variety of students' ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds. Teachers who think only in terms of traditional families are likely to have a particularly hard time dealing with today's great variety of family types. The San Diego City Schools (1991) identified educators' assumptions that tend either to limit or to support home-school collaboration.

Educators' Assumptions

...That Hinder Collaboration	...That Facilitate Collaboration
Parents who don't attend school events don't care about their children's success in school.	Not all parents can come to school or feel comfortable about it; that doesn't mean they don't care.
Parents who are illiterate, non-English speaking, or unemployed can't help their children. Parents from different ethnic and racial groups don't understand how to help their children.	All families have strengths and skills they can contribute to their children's school success. Parents from different ethnic and racial groups may have alternative and important ways of supporting their children.
It is up to parents to find out what is going on at school.	Schools have a responsibility to reach out to all parents.
Parent involvement is not worth educators' effort.	Parent involvement pays off in improved student achievement, improved school effectiveness, and increased parent and community support for education.

Rule #4: Develop high expectations for all parents.

"Many poor parents have reservations about the potential value of participating. They may also be somewhat afraid of teachers and school officials and be quite uncertain of the response they expect to receive from those same individuals. In order to develop a successful program one needs to be able to demonstrate to parents that their participation is of value and to help parents develop some confidence in the possibility that their contributions will be respected."

— Krulee and others, 1973

Becher (1984) identified certain perspectives about parents that characterize almost all successful parent involvement programs. She suggests that educators seek optimum rather than maximum involvement. High quality participation should be the goal.

- Parents already make important contributions. Successful programs emphasize the strengths of parents and let them know their strengths are valued.
- Parents can make additional contributions. Successful programs help parents identify new things they are capable of doing.
- Parents can learn new parenting techniques. Parents have both the ability and willingness to expand and improve their parenting strategies and techniques.
- Parents have important perspectives on their children. Successful programs recognize that these perspectives are useful to teachers.
- Parent-child relationships are different from teacher-child relationships. Successful programs recognize and use these differences. Suggested home activities make use of family situations and incorporate consultation with parents.
- Parents' perspectives about involvement are important. In successful programs, the process, efforts, and activities are viewed from the perspective of parents rather than staff.
- Most parents really care about their children. Successful programs hold and express a sincere belief in parental caring.
- Parents have many reasons for their involvement. Successful programs make clear both the purposes of parent participation and the ways parents can best work with their children.

Rule #5: Conceptualize the role of parents.

"In reality, both home and school have the same goal. They both have the interest of the children at heart. Disagreements usually occur in the means of getting something done, not in the way both sides feel about the end result for children. It is helpful for parents to keep in mind that the school's general goals are the same as theirs—better education for the children."

— Peterson 1982

Educators must understand that parents are on their side in regard to educating children. Parents and educators are team members with specific roles and responsibilities. If educators accept parents' roles as essential to the well-being of the child, they will be able to sense ways to foster school-home partnerships that benefit the child both at home and at school. Parents can play any one or all of the following roles in their children's education (Henderson 1986).

Parents as Partners. Parents move from the role of primary educators to a situation in which they share this role with the schools. Much of the parent role at this stage relates to the legal responsibility to enroll the child in school. Parents register their children and ensure that they are properly dressed, get to school on time, and attend each day. They purchase necessary supplies and equipment and obtain required vaccinations and medical exams. Other parent responsibilities focus on various types of home-school communication. In addition, parents have certain rights, including access to school records, due process in discipline, and involvement in decisions about special education placement.

Parents as Collaborators and Problem-Solvers. Parents can encourage and reward satisfactory achievement, show interest in the child's school day, and enforce policies about bedtime, television viewing, and homework. Parents can also provide enrichment activities that reinforce school learning, including reading to children, taking them on trips to the library and museums, and other home and community learning activities. If children are having difficulties at school, negotiation between home and school may be required.

Parents as Audience. Parents provide the audience at the many activities designed to draw them into the school: open houses, back-to-school nights, athletic events, concerts, and plays. A major purpose of such events is to provide parents with direct, personal information about the school; children usually feel good when they see their parents in the audience.

Parents as Supporters. As volunteers, parents can help in their own child's classroom or in other classrooms; work in the library; tutor special-needs children; make attendance calls; or share their expertise in enrichment programs. Parent-teacher organizations provide other opportunities for parents to become involved, as do parent education programs and parent support networks.

Parents as Advisors and Co-Decision Makers. This role is most often accomplished through parent advisory groups that work on solutions to various problems and issues facing the school. Other possibilities, which move toward real power-sharing, include elected school governing boards and councils.

Rule #6: Actualize the role of educator.

"Successful parent involvement programs have clear task expectations, roles, and responsibilities, all of which are communicated to parents."

— Becher 1984

The two critical actors in the organization, development, and implementation of effective family involvement programs are the school principal and the classroom teacher.

The principal should:

- Provide educational leadership for the other key players—other school personnel, students, parents and families, other community members.
- Set a tone for the school that is positive, friendly, and open, dedicated to serving all children equally.
- Overtly recognize and affirm the fundamental premises of parent involvement (that is, all children can learn; parents are a valuable resource; all parents can have a positive impact; etc.)
- Take time to get to know the community served by the school—the history of interactions with the school, values and customs, local heroes, favorite pastimes, child-rearing practices, worries, aspirations.
- Assess school and community perceptions of needs and resources.
- Provide opportunities for staff, parents, and other community members to get to know each other.
- Lead a team of staff, parents, and community members in the design and development of the school's family involvement program.
- Require and encourage staff members to make use of parent involvement as a resource.
- Provide staff training in parent involvement.
- Appoint qualified staff to coordinate the school's involvement efforts.
- Provide parent education on topics of interest to parents and family members.
- Establish and encourage open, two-way communication between the school and the community.
- Give parents a voice in school management decisions.
- Communicate regularly with all key players, soliciting their input formally and informally.
- Monitor and evaluate progress, revising program activities as necessary.
- Acknowledge and reward outstanding efforts by teachers, coordinators, outreach workers, parents, community members, and children.

Classroom teachers should:

- Maintain high expectations for every child.
- Examine their own assumptions about academic ability and interest based on behavior, language, physical appearance, or family background.
- Take time to get to know the community represented by the children—the history of interactions with the school, values and customs, local heroes, favorite pastimes, child-rearing practices, worries, aspirations.
- Treat all children and their families with respect.
- Welcome every family into the classroom and make them feel comfortable.
- Establish and maintain open, two-way communication with parents and other family members.
- Provide a variety of opportunities for parents to collaborate in the teaching of their children, including homework activities, class projects, classroom volunteer work, field trips, fund raising, etc.
- Participate in staff training about parent involvement.
- Participate in school activities designed to help staff and families get to know each other.
- View cultural diversity as a resource and teach children to value it.
- Identify and use ways to validate children's experiences outside the school, incorporating them into instructional activities.
- Collaborate with other professionals and parents to address each child's learning and emotional needs.
- Assess parent involvement activities regularly with input from other key players, revising them as necessary.
- Never give up on any child (Wikelund 1990).

Rule #7: Be willing to address personal concerns.

Just as parents may have had experiences that discourage their involvement, educators may have concerns that impede their implementation of parent involvement activities. These teacher concerns may include:

- Uncertainty about how to involve parents, and at the same time maintain the teacher's role of expert.
- Uncertainty about how to balance concern for the group with concern for the individual child.
- Fear that parents will try to take over teaching responsibilities and not follow the teacher's instructions and school regulations.
- Concern that parents will disrupt the classroom because they don't know how to work with children.
- Fear that parents will not keep commitments and respect confidentiality.
- Worry that parent involvement takes too much planning (Becher 1984).

Rule #8: Understand the framework of parent involvement programs.

Participants in parent involvement programs must have a clear understanding of the purpose and function of a particular program, as well as their place in it. Various parent involvement models have different assumptions and goals that must be communicated to all players. Four basic models are described below (Swap 1991).

Protective Model

The goal is to reduce conflict between parents and educators, primarily through the separation of parents' and educators' functions, and to protect the school from interference by parents.

Assumptions:

- Parents delegate to the school responsibility for educating their children.
- Parents hold school personnel accountable for results.
- Educators accept this delegation of responsibility.

Advantage:

- Generally effective in protecting the school against parental intrusion.

Disadvantages:

- Exacerbates conflicts between home and school because there is no structure for preventive problem solving.
- Ignores the potential of home-school collaboration for improving school achievement.
- Rejects resources for enrichment and support available from families and other members of the community.

School-to-Home Transmission Model

The goal is to enlist parents in supporting the objectives of the school.

Assumptions:

- Children's achievement is improved by continuity of expectations and values between home and school.
- School personnel should identify family and community values and practices that contribute to school success.
- Parents should endorse the importance of school, reinforce school expectations, provide home conditions that nurture development and support school success and ensure that the child meets minimum academic and social expectations.

Advantages:

- Programs based on this model have increased children's school success.
- Parents seek clear direction from the school about the social and academic skills needed for children's success and about the parents' role in supporting the development of those skills.
- Clear transmission of information may be welcomed by parents, particularly those who have not had access to the social mainstream and seek such access for their children.

Disadvantages:

- Programs built on this model often reflect a degree of unwillingness to consider parents as equal partners with important strengths.
- Not all parents will be able to devote sufficient time and energy to parent involvement activities, especially if they are also dealing with housing, health, or employment issues or problems.
- Schools may find it difficult to draw clear boundaries between the roles of school and home.
- There is a risk of demeaning the value and importance of the family's culture in the effort to transmit the values and goals of the school.
- Differences in class or educational background may make teachers and parents feel uncomfortable or threatened; turf concerns may have to be addressed and negotiated.

Curriculum Enrichment Model

The goal is to expand and extend the school's curriculum by incorporating the contributions of families.

Assumptions:

- Continuity of learning between home and school is important in children's learning.
- The values and culture of many families are omitted from the standard school curriculum, leading to a disruption of continuity between home and school, and often to less motivation, status, and achievement in school.
- Omission of family values and culture distorts the curriculum, leading to a less comprehensive understanding of events and achievements, and to the perpetuation of damaging beliefs and attitudes about immigrants and minorities.
- Parents and educators should work together to enrich curriculum objectives and content.
- Relationships between home and school are based on mutual respect, and both parents and teachers are seen as experts and resources in the process of discovery.

Advantages:

- Parent involvement is incorporated into children's learning.
- The specialized knowledge of parents adds to the resources available to the school and provides rich opportunities for adults to learn from each other.
- The contributions of immigrant and other minorities who have not traditionally participated in schools are especially welcomed.

Disadvantages:

- Creating continuity between home and school demands a significant investment of parents' and educators' time, resources, support, and study.
- The number of different cultures represented may make curricular adaptation very complex.
- The question of the school's mission in educating children of diverse backgrounds

- is still unsettled. Is there a majority culture that should be taught to all, or should the curriculum reflect and value the diversity of the children?
- Differences in class or educational background may make teachers and parents feel uncomfortable or threatened; turf concerns must be addressed and negotiated.

Partnership Model

The goal is for parents and educators to work together to accomplish a common mission: success for all children.

Assumptions:

- Accomplishing the common mission requires creating a new vision for the school environment and discovering new policies, practices, structures, roles, relationships, and attitudes in order to realize it.
- Accomplishing the common mission requires collaboration among parents, community representatives, and educators. Because the task is challenging, requiring many resources, none of these groups acting alone can accomplish it.

Advantage:

- A true partnership is a transforming vision of school culture based on collegiality, experimentation, mutual support, and joint problem-solving.

Disadvantages:

- Model is difficult to implement.
- Educators' traditional isolation must be exchanged for a collaborative role and the development of new patterns of scheduling and interaction to support this role.
- Model requires a leader who is both a facilitator and cheerleader, and school and district policies that support the effort.

Rule #9: Be willing to work to improve parent involvement.

"Schools must be willing to experiment with new approaches to home-school interaction...[and] willing to restructure in ways that address families' needs for flexible time frames, childcare, and transportation. Schools may need to adopt an expanded definition of their mission and collaborate with other community service providers in providing educational services to parents whose life circumstances prevent them from being as involved as they may want to be.... If some parents are not going into the school, the school may need to go to where the parents are and provide them with incentives and the support to become involved."

— Freedman and others 1989

The National School Public Relations Association (Davies 1988) suggests that reaching parents who do not come to the school may require getting out of the school building and into the community.

- Hold coffee klatches with groups of parents in their homes or in other non-school settings.
- Have principals, the superintendent, and school board members take two hours one Saturday a month, on a rotating basis, to make themselves available to parents at a local site such as a supermarket.
- Have staff members share good news with parents by phone.
- Visit religious institutions—churches, synagogues, and so forth—to meet parents.
- Locate community leaders and ask them to help you communicate with the parents you want to reach.
- Offer programs that address neighborhood needs; these may not always be school-oriented.
- Provide school representatives who are fluent in the language of ethnic groups; offer English language and parenting classes for adults in locations near their homes.
- Hold parent-teacher conferences in neighborhoods—at churches or youth centers, for example where parents can come together easily.
- School policies and mandates will not guarantee improvement in parent involvement; commitment and dedicated leadership will. Involvement must be a school-wide priority, established as a legitimate and desired activity with full administrative support. Adequate funding, space, and equipment, as well as food, transportation, and child care must be provided, along with leadership, encouragement, and staff time (Wikelund 1990).

[Find more classroom resources about family and community connections.](#) [link f&c_descriptions]