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# Involving At-Risk Families in Their Children's Education. ERIC Digest Series Number EA 58.

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"I never see the parents I need to see," more than one teacher has complained. These are the parents of children at risk--at risk of failing, of dropping out, of having what in today's world accounts to no future at all.

The benefits to children whose parents are involved in the educational process are well-known: substantial research links family involvement to both academic and social success of children at school. Of all youth, at-risk children, whose numbers are increasing, have the most to gain from parent involvement. Consequently, schools need to find ways to reach at-risk families.

# WHO IS AT RISK?

Most children are "at risk" at some time or another. James Comer states that "given increasing divorce rates, the growing numbers of single parent families and families in which both parents work, and the general complexity of modern life, even children of well-educated, middle-class parents can come to school unprepared because of the stress their families are undergoing." (quoted by Lynn Olson 1990)
Certain children, however, are in critical need of social intervention. These are generally the children who have traditionally been termed "at-risk." They are usually poor minorities often from other cultural backgrounds.

# WHY IS PARENT INVOLVEMENT SO IMPORTANT FOR AT-RISK

CHILDREN?The main reason parental involvement with the schools is so important for at-risk children is that their home and school worlds are so different. "The predictable consequence in such situations is that children usually embrace the familiar home culture and reject the unfamiliar school culture, including its academic components and goals," says Muriel Hamilton-Lee (1988).

Suzanne Ziegler (1987) suggests it may be particularly important for teachers to develop communication with parents of at-risk children so that both understand the others' settings and expectations which may alter both settings. That is, school can become more home-like and home can have a school component. Or, as Joyce Epstein (1987) points out, family-like schools make students feel part of a "school family," where they receive individual attention which improves motivation.

# WHY HAVEN'T SCHOOLS BEEN REACHING AT-RISK PARENTS?

Traditional methods of parental involvement do not work with at-risk parents. In addition,

the history of relationships between poor and minority parents and schools has been very different than those of the middle class. Barriers and misperceptions that exist for both parents and schools include:
Parents. At-risk parents may have feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, as well as negative experience with schools. Other cultures, as well as many low-income parents in general, see schools as institutionalized authority and, therefore, leave it to the teachers to educate their children. Additionally, there are economic, emotional, and time constraints (some families are struggling just to survive) and logistical problems such as lack of child care, transportation, and scheduling conflicts. In cultural minority families, involving parents can be further complicated by language barriers.

Teachers and Schools. Teacher attitudes play a large part in the academic success of at-risk children. Teachers who have low expectations for at-risk children, or who believe that at-risk parents don't care about their children and don't want to be involved in their education may contribute to children's failure. Teachers also may feel uncertain about how to maintain their role as experts while still involving parents.

According to Diana T. Slaughter and Valerie Shahariw Kuehne (1988), schools tend to see the parental role as traditional and perhaps passive and home-based, whereas many parents are interested in more active roles. Schools are often guilty of not taking the initiative to ask parents for help, and of not welcoming their participation. Finally, schools often organize events for their own convenience and pay little attention to the needs of at-risk parents.

# WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THESE OBSTACLES?

Schools should consider adopting new beliefs and premises, based largely on the work of Rhoda Becher (Ziegler), Don Davies (1989), and Jean Krasnow (1990):
1. Successful at-risk programs begin with the premise that it's not any single person's or group's fault that a child or group of children is not learning; nor is it the school's fault. We are all responsible and dependent on each other.

2. All families have strengths. Successful programs emphasize them and let parents know these strengths are valued. This also means it isn't helpful to view at-risk families as deficients or as failures.

3. Most parents really care about their children. Successful programs acknowledge and express this. Studies of poor and minority parents in Maryland, New England, and the Southwest, for instance, have found that parents care deeply about their children's education but may not know how to help. (M. Sandra Reeves 1988)

4. Parents can learn new techniques. Successful programs help parents identify what they're capable of doing and how to overcome obstacles. One way to do this is by teaching them new skills and behaviors, such as helping their children through home learning.

5. Cultural differences are both valid and valuable. Successful programs learn about other cultures and respect their beliefs. They find ways of building on the loyalty and obedience, for example, that Hispanic parents instill in their children.

6. Many family forms exist and are legitimate. Successful programs involve stepparents or even grandparents, and provide family support where resources are limited.

7. All individuals and families need to feel empowered, especially at-risk families who often feel powerless and out of control. Successful programs ask parents what they'd be interested in doing and work with their agendas first. Some also train at-risk parents to be part of their school's decision-making groups.

8. Partnership with at-risk families is impossible without collaboration with other community agencies. Schools cannot provide all the services that at-risk families need, such as parenting education, counseling, health care, and housing. The school staff also needs to function in a collaborative way with each other for real change to occur.

# HOW DO I BEGIN A PROGRAM FOR WORKING WITH AT-RISK FAMILIES?

The Hispanic Policy Development Project's publication (Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos 1990) offers guidelines, based on successful projects, that are useful for most at-risk groups:
*Be sure you're totally committed; half-hearted attempts do not accomplish much. There must be active support by the principal and staff. All the Hispanic projects that lacked the support of teachers and principals failed to increase parent involvement.

*Assign a project coordinator-someone who understands the culture and background of the parents and is sincerely dedicated. Give the coordinator time to do the job. Nicolau and Ramos found that leadership was the single most important element in launching a successful program with Hispanic parents.

*Be prepared to be innovative and flexible. The Hispanic projects that failed were those where new techniques were not tried, or where things were done "the way we have always done it."

*Use strong, personal outreach. "The personal approach," say Nicolau and Ramos, "which means talking face to face with the parents, in their primary language, at their homes, or at the school...was the strategy deemed most effective by 98 percent of the

project coordinators." Home visits are a must.

*Make your first event fun. Start with something social as an icebreaker. Not every event can be a party, and Nicolau and Ramos offer suggestions for how to sustain involvement once you've gotten it started.

*Do not hold your first activity at school. Events may be more successful on neutral turf such as neighborhood homes or community places.

*Pay attention to environment and format. Informal settings are less intimidating to low-income parents. Make them as participatory as possible. A warm, nonjudgmental atmosphere is mandatory.

*Prepare staff with in-service workshops so that everyone understands the community being served. Include everyone; you don't want a less than welcoming secretary to spoil all the work you've done.

*Do not view child care, transportation, interpreters, and meals as frills. Providing them will make a big difference for at-risk parents.

*Choose different times to schedule events. Do it with consideration for the parents' availability.

*Do not give up if the initial response isn't overwhelming. Under the best circumstances, it takes time.

"Keep up the effort," Nicolau and Ramos conclude, "and one day you will find that you can't keep the parents away."

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