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Family and school represent the primary environments in which young children grow and develop. Today, the link between these institutions is taking on added significance as concern mounts over the challenges that preschools face in building or maintaining

strong parent participation. In order to effectively meet the needs of all families, parent participation programs need to give equal consideration to the needs of all families represented in the class. Teachers can plan parent participation strategies for their own classroom through use of the following guides.

PLAN FOR PARENT PARTICIPATION

1. A good place to begin is to document the barriers to parent involvement created by such factors as family structures (dual career, single parent, teenage parent) and family work schedules (full-time, job sharing, flex-time). This can be accomplished through parent-teacher conferences, telephone calls, or a short questionnaire. Documentation of the barriers to parent participation can be used to develop policies that are likely to work with the parent community. For example, more options may be needed as to when parent-teacher conferences are held (before, during, and after school), how they are held (face-to-face, by telephone, by computer, in small groups), or where they are held (at the school, in the home, at a neighborhood center, or at the parent's place of employment).

2. Recommendations for parent participation should take into account the resources and expertise of parents. Care should be taken to offer parents a range of support, partnership, and leadership roles. Parents can participate by preparing classroom materials, serving on a committee to select classroom equipment and materials, or becoming a member of a search committee to select personnel. Participation can even extend to parents' leading classroom activities in which they have expertise.

3. Teachers can include topics that relate to both classroom and family environments when they develop informational newsletters, public relations material, and parent meetings. Family strengths, parent-child communication, childhood stress, and in-home safety all have the potential to affect children's classroom behavior. Of equal importance is the effect of these topics on family well-being. Schools can meet their objectives and serve the interests and needs of families by offering information and educational programs that give parents practical suggestions on topics like these and others.

4. Plan ahead for parent-teacher conferences. Communicate to parents at the beginning of the year about school policies and services. Inform parents about classroom goals for the year, and give a few examples of what children will be learning. Also let parents know about the frequency and nature of parent-teacher conferences. Once conferences are set, keep a calendar of when, how, and where family contacts are to be made.

5. For some parents, education today is quite different from what they experienced two or three decades ago. Fear of the unknown may be one reason that parents avoid contact with their child's school. For other parents, school may be intimidating because it reminds them of an unpleasant school experience. Empower parents with confidence by supplying them with a list of questions they can ask teachers throughout the school

year.

6. Create a comfortable conference environment in which parents feel free to share information, ask questions, and make recommendations. Allowing parents to begin the conference by asking their own questions and expressing their own concerns is one way to convey respect for their input. Here are some other ways to share responsibility with parents during the conference:

*Schedule an adequate amount of time for the conference so that the parent does not feel rushed.

*If the conference is held at the school, point out to the parent the projects that involved his or her child.

*Begin and end the conference by noting something positive about the child.

*Ask open-ended questions ("How do you help your child with her shyness?") instead of "yes" or "no" questions ("Do you help your child with her shyness?").

*Communicate in a way that matches, yet shows respect for, the parent's background. Be careful not to make assumptions about a parent's level of knowledge or understanding, and avoid talking down to parents.

*Send nonverbal messages of respect and interest. Sit facing the parent and maintain good eye-contact. Put aside paperwork and postpone taking notes until after the conference has ended.

*Instead of offering advice, ask the parent to share feelings and suggestions for addressing an issue. Then offer your own input as a basis for negotiation.

7. Limit the number of educational objectives set during the parent-teacher conference to those that can reasonably be addressed in a specified time. Break each objective down into simple steps. Assign parents and teachers responsibilities for meeting each objective in the class and home. Plan a strategy for evaluating the objectives from both the parents' and teacher's perspective.

8. Follow up the parent-teacher conference with a brief note thanking the parents for their participation. This is also a good opportunity to summarize major points discussed during the conference.

PLAN FOR MULTICULTURAL PARENT PARTICIPATION

1. Seek advice and assistance from parents in introducing young children to various

cultures through the use of stories, holidays, art exhibits, fairs, plays, and other events. Always include in any discussion of cultural differences the ways in which such values as honesty, fairness, loyalty, and industry are shared by all cultures.
2. Avoid making sweeping generalizations about children from different family backgrounds. For example, it has been suggested that a highly structured and verbal-based curriculum is at odds with the nonverbal, people-oriented, and individualistic values found in the cultural background of Black children (Hale-Benson, 1982). Modeling and imitation has been suggested as a big part of the learning process for Hispanic children (Hadley, 1987). In contrast, it has been suggested that a structured curriculum would perhaps be most appropriate for Vietnamese children who are taught to value obedience and dependence (Bowman & Brady, 1982). It is unlikely that the authors of these studies meant for their suggestions to hold for all children from Black, Hispanic, or Vietnamese families. Balance general cultural differences with an assessment of the individual child, and of the child's family and neighborhood environments. Otherwise, sweeping generalizations about children may be based on superficial group characteristics (for example, color of skin or language spoken) rather than on individual strengths and needs.

3. Periodically review social networks among children. Do certain children segregate themselves through their choice of toys, activities, or play? This issue is an important one, because, as Karnes and her colleagues (1983) found, children from low-income families who are placed in middle-class preschool programs can still be segregated from their peers during classroom activities. Teachers can help all children share classroom experiences by encouraging those children with similar interests to play together or work together on a special project. Children's assignments to small group activities can be periodically rotated to ensure that the children have many opportunities to learn about and from all their classroom peers.

CONCLUSION

As American families continue to change, programs for young children will need to adopt parent participation programs that reinforce a consistency of early growth and development experiences between children's family and classroom environments. Strong linkages between the school and the home can be ensured when teachers are routinely allowed the time and resources to discuss the impact on school-home relations of the diversity of family structures, backgrounds, and lifestyles found in their classrooms; and develop a range of strategies by which they can involve all families of the young children they teach.
This digest was adapted from the article, "Planning for the Changing Nature of Family Life in Schools for Young Children," by Mick Coleman, which appeared in YOUNG CHILDREN, Vol. 46, No. 4 (May, 1991): pp. 15-20.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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