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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement begins with teachers and principals. They initiate the contact with the parents. How parents respond depends on how they are regarded--whether they feel respected and needed. The teacher has to model openness, so that the parent develops trust and becomes more willing to disclose and resolve. If teachers concern themselves with the "untrained parent" who might unwittingly interfere with their educational turf, teachers will not be able to sincerely produce the communication behavior that reflects openness. Furthermore, teachers must not view parent involvement as a burden and need to be better educated in strategies for involving parents. Two solutions to these problems are: (1) require at least one college course on interpersonal skills for new teachers; and (2) provide staff development on parent involvement for experienced teachers. The goals are to raise teachers' consciousness about the value of involving parents and to train them in the skills they will need to communicate with parents. A several-session course which begins with reinforcing teachers' successes and which includes activities for practicing learned skills can help to accomplish these goals. (PRA)

TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Judith M. Martin

I've been on both sides of the desk. I've taught for many years: first, in high school; then, in college; then, as a trainer in business. And I've been the parent who has met with my children's teachers, kindergarten through high school.

In my role as a parent, on many occasions, the exchanges were pleasant, positive and uplifting. On several other occasions, I was talked down to and patronized. When I initiated some meetings, I sensed defensiveness in the teacher even before my purpose was fully disclosed.

My children were excellent students and had no behavior problems. So I often wondered how parents who had children with learning or behavior problems handled those situations. Could those parents successfully resolve problems if they were less educated or less "thick skinned" or if they had less understanding of the teacher's position than I? Did they feel OK when the conversation ended? And did the problem get resolved to the satisfaction of teacher, parent, and student?

I had believed that a teacher's attitude and behavior heavily influenced relationships with parents. My own evidence proved it. I never again confronted the crying teacher after I was asked to leave by the principal who

stayed behind to comfort her. And I never volunteered again after the teacher didn't respond to my offer to talk with my daughter's high school English class about business letters.

How could a teacher demonstrating more distress than the person who owned the problem produce positive solutions? How could no response encourage an enthusiastic parent to volunteer again? Somebody would lose, and in the end, it would be the student.

Now the research on my concern for the lack of parent involvement in children's education confirmed my own experience -- that the teacher's attitude and communication skills greatly influence parent involvement. But more than that, I hadn't realized just how important parent involvement was in a child's education. I had understood the great loss for the child when teachers' initial contacts with parents failed. But I also learned about the important effect on the entire school and the community when the scope of parent involvement programs was expanded.

The evidence supporting the value of parent involvement comes from study after study. It included the following findings:

> *. . . parent involvement in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains*

in student achievement. (The Evidence Grows, National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1981). (3)

. . . programs designed with a strong component of parent involvement produce students who perform better than those who have taken part in otherwise identical programs with less parent involvement. (The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parent Involvement Improves Student Achievement, NCCTE, 1987). (3)

The effect of parent involvement is long term. Studies of students from preschool through high school showed "higher grades and test scores, better long-term academic achievement, positive attitudes and behavior. . ." And the effect went beyond the student to "more successful programs and more effective schools." (3)

THE CONCERN

Parent involvement begins with teachers and principals. They initiate the contact with the parents. How parents respond depends on how they're regarded -- whether they feel respected, needed, truly involved.

Where did the teachers fit into the successful programs? What skills and abilities did they use to create rapport with parents, to resolve problems, to reinforce appropriate behavior, to select and use appropriate communication media?

My research revealed that among the variables that led to successful programs, "teachers who believe that they are effective will be more likely to bring parents into the classroom." (1)

Researchers said that parents wanted respect and a "personal touch" from teachers. (5) One writer pleaded to both parents and teachers "to be aware of the hidden agenda that can lurk below the surface of our relationships. . . " and to "become conscious and candid" with each other.(4)

The teacher has to model the openness. Then the parent develops trust and becomes more willing to disclose and resolve. But if teachers concern themselves with "the untrained parent (who) might unwittingly interfere with"(3) their educational turf, teachers will not be able to sincerely produce the communication behavior that reflects openness.

Further, some teachers believe that "involving parents is a time-consuming 'luxury ' . . . a burden on already overworked (and underpaid) teachers and principals."(3) So, "involving parents in the educational process tends to break down at the point of implementation."(3)

Sadly, another problem with teachers competently leading this important component of a child's education is that very few teacher education programs are available to prepare teachers. In a 1988 survey of 4000 teacher educators, teachers, parents, administrators and school board members, the following was discovered:

- *only 4% of the teacher educators taught a complete course on parent involvement;*
- *15% reported teaching part of a course on the topic;*
- *only 3% devoted one class period to parent involvement; but*
- *73.4% of the teachers, 83.1% of the principals and 82.8% of the teacher educators agreed that a course in parent involvement should be required.(2)*

Even more alarming, 24 states that require certification tests including the National Teacher Exam measure a category called "extra classroom influences" including parent involvement. But " only 1.94% of the 826 competencies, skills, or objectives included in the exams dealt with the 'extra classroom influences' category."(2)

So this leaves us with a potentially powerful means of supporting our children's education with a great number of teachers unaware, unprepared and unskilled in leading the way.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The solution? I have two ideas.

First, for future teachers, require at least one college course on interpersonal skills.

Second, for experienced teachers, provide staff development. The goals would be to raise teachers' consciousness about

the value of involving parents, to realize the benefits to them as overworked and underpaid teachers, and to train them in the skills they need to communicate with parents. No one of these goals is more important than the others. They must all be accomplished if teachers are to be effective leaders of parent involvement.

Solution #1: The college course for future teachers.

This solution assumes that courses offered by education divisions of colleges and universities include study of the phenomenon of "extra classroom influences." The study would include not only the positive influences, like parent involvement, but others that challenge students and their parents, like drugs, teenage pregnancies, AIDS.

Then in communication courses specified for education majors, the preparing teachers would learn the skills they can apply to all of their professional relationships -- students, parents and colleagues. They would learn the skills assumed to be intuitive -- basic socializing that includes creating rapport and establishing relationships. They would learn higher level skills: listening, expressing opinions and feelings appropriately, asking for help. And they would learn the highest level skills: problem solving, decision making and conflict resolution.

In an intense hands-on course, the preparing teachers would practice until they integrated the skills into their communication behavior. The assertive, confident teachers could handle difficult situations, and not allow the threat of them to diminish their effectiveness. They would achieve "teacher efficacy," the belief that they are effective.(1) For these teachers, their belief in themselves as effective teachers catapults their value as contributors to relationships in all important relationships in the education process -- parents included.

Solution #2: Staff development for experienced teachers.

The staff development will have two focuses. First, it has to raise teachers' consciousness about the value and benefit of parent involvement. Second, it has to teach the needed skills to make the efforts successful.

These goals won't necessarily be reached in this order nor will they be reached easily. We'll be working with teachers who have mixed beliefs about the best way to deal with parents. They have drawn their own lines between the education turf and the parenting turf. Like all adult learning situations, some teachers will hold stubbornly to their beliefs because their experience has proven them well. Some will be more willing to change once they realize the

benefits. We'll have to remember the overall purpose -- to enhance the child's education -- to moti ate our efforts. Staff development has to start early. If a formal program in parent involvement is planned for this year, preparing teachers had to begin last year.

The training must be based on teachers' experiences. Teachers have had successful experiences communicating successfully or they wouldn't be teaching. So the training starts with the successes. The course might look like this:

Session 1 -- Ice breaking activities used to create rapport among the teacher trainees.

Expectations set for the course.

Trainees allowed to voice concerns and objections.

Assurance from school or district leaders that the concerns will be addressed.

Trainees' strengths reinforced and related to the expected results and application.

Session 2 -- Communication skill introduced, for example, creating rapport with parents.

Activities presented that allow trainees to see demonstrations, to practice the skill and receive feedback, to discuss the skill's application and their concerns about applying.

Activities assigned to be completed outside the session before the next session.

Session closed with an encouraging message reinforcing the trainees' strengths.

Session 3 -- *Reports of successful application of assigned skill, allowing time for people to brag about their successes.*

Difficulties discussed and practiced.

New skill introduced, following the format as in Session 2 for practice, feedback, discussion of concerns, assignment for outside practice.

Session 4 -- And beyond. Following the format of skill demonstration, skill practice, feedback, discussion of concerns, continue the training until trainees comfortably demonstrate competence in the needed skills and agreement to the proposed program.

Experienced teachers can develop new skills. They can gradually accept new ideas. They can take on non-traditional programs that require competence in higher level communication skills. If the training is systematic and responsive to the trainees' concerns, it will work. And when the training is scheduled over a long term, teachers have time to reflect on the advantages of a new idea and will talk themselves into accepting it. Training sessions over a long term can also become support sessions -- another valuable component of any program.

My solution for effecting teachers' competence in communicating with parents to promote their involvement and overcoming teachers' real objections doesn't include the cost of such an effort. And it doesn't include suggestions for scheduling it into a busy teachers' workloads. Those issues may become obstacles if not addressed. But if parent involvement is seen as an important step in reaching the goal of enhancing the education our children, the issues of cost and scheduling will have to be resolved.

What I want to see is parents and teachers working together for the children they both care about. That can't happen until the walls of threat to turf and threat to respect are torn down. Teachers' competence in communicating will help do that.

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