DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 534 EC 303 166

AUTHOR	Karp, Naomi
TITLE	Collaborating with Families.
PUB DATE	Mar 93
NOTE	38p.; Chapter 4 in: Billingsley, Bonnie S.; And Others. Program Leadership for Serving Students with Disabilities; see EC 303 164.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Check Lists; Cultural Differences; *Disabilities; Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Involvement; Individual Differences; Interpersonal Communication; *Parent Participation; Parent Responsibility; Parent Rights; *Parent School Relationship; Parent Teacher Conferences; Program Design; Program Implementation; Social Values; *Values

ABSTRACT

This chapter on collaborating with families is taken from a guide to designing, implementing, and evaluating instruction and services for students with disabilities. The chapter provides information abut values-based, family-centered programs that will involve all families and improve education programs and student outcomes. The tone is meant to be supportive of both school and home. The chapter discusses what collaboration with families involves, what the families' rights and responsibilities are in the educational process, and why new ideas and models are needed for collaborating with increasingly diverse families. It presents strategies, ideas, and guidelines for developing value-based, family-centered education and encourages respect for others' values, rights, and beliefs. It analyzes reasons why family members are not involved in the schools, offers strategies for improving meeting and conference outcomes, and describes the role of parent resource centers. Checklists address components of collaboration for professionals and families, improving school-family interactions, bridges and barriers to school-home communication, and strategies for involving families. (Contains 34 references.) (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
● Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

ED 372 534

Chapter 4

Collaborating with Families

Naomi Karp

INTRODUCTION

The 1980s produced a series of changes that will upgrade the quality of public education in the United States in the 1990s. Two key factors that have shaped these changes are

1. Awareness that public education must be restructured, with enduring systemic changes, yielding higher quality programs and improved student outcomes (Lezotte, 1989).
2. Increased recognition that family involvement is necessary if student outcomes are to improve (Cone, Delawyer, & Wolfe, 1985; Henderson, 1988; Lipsky, 1989).

In addition, the 1980s gave rise to a new way of thinking about family involvement. The concept of family-centered services (Shelton, Jeppson, & Johnson, 1987) emerged from the field of health care for children and youth with disabilities and chronic illnesses. These new attitudes are grounded in the belief that the family and child with special needs are at the center of the delivery system; the services revolve around and support them (Turnbull, Turnbull, Summers, Brotherson, & Benson, 1986). It is now time to move family-centered approaches beyond the health care world and to incorporate them into educational policies and practices.

This chapter gives administrators information about values-based, family-centered programs that will involve *all* families and improve education programs and student outcomes. The main areas of discussion include:

1. **What is collaboration with families?**
2. **What are families' rights and responsibilities in the educational process?**
3. **Why are new ideas and models needed for collaborating with families?**
4. **What are best practices and strategies for collaborating with families?**

EC 303166

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

1. WHAT IS COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES?

Increased recognition of the importance of family involvement in schools has been a key ingredient in current education reform initiatives. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) *requires* family involvement during the special education process. In addition to IDEA's mandate that families be genuine partners and collaborators in their children's education process, state and local education agencies also mandate that families be involved in advisory capacities in the development of policies and state and federal plans (Anderson, Chitwood, & Hayden, 1990b). It is the family's right and responsibility to participate with the schools in order to help their children develop to the fullest extent possible (Ordover & Boundy, 1991; Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, 1991b).

Therefore, a good working partnership between family and school is necessary to ensure that (a) students have positive, successful outcomes; (b) the spirit and intent of the law are met; and (c) families' rights are guaranteed. In order to reach these three goals, it is necessary to examine collaboration, families, and values-based principles more closely.

Understanding Collaboration

Over the past 15 years, the words involvement, partners, and collaboration seem to have taken on lives of their own as education and other fields try to find effective ways to work with families. The literature is replete with definitions of the three words, with each definition reflecting a slightly different perspective. For example, Portland State University researchers have identified the following elements of collaboration (Staff, 1988):

- Mutual respect for knowledge and skills.
- Honest and clear communication.
- Understanding and empathy.
- Mutually agreed upon goals.
- Shared planning and decision making.
- Open and two-way sharing of information.
- Accessibility and responsiveness.
- Joint evaluation of progress.
- Absence of labeling and blaming.

Based on these elements, a checklist developed by the staff at the Research and Training Center for Family Support and Children's Mental Health at Portland (OR) State University is used by mental health professionals and families to see whether they are truly collaborators (Staff, 1988). Figure 1 shows how the checklist has been adapted for use by educators and administrators.

Figure 1

Collaboration Checklist for Professionals and Families

FOR PROFESSIONALS	FOR FAMILIES*
• Do I believe that a family is my equal and, in fact, is an expert on the student?	• Do I believe I am an equal partner with professionals and accept my share of the responsibility for solving problems and making plans on behalf of my child?
• Do I show the same respect for the value of families' time as I do for my own time by educating myself about an individual student before a conference about that student?	• Do I clearly express the needs of my child and family to professionals in an assertive way?
• Do I speak plainly and avoid jargon?	• Do I treat each professional as an individual and avoid letting past negative attitudes and experiences get in the way of a good working relationship?
• Do I actively involve the family in the development of the student's IEP?	• Do I communicate quickly with the school when significant changes or notable events occur?
• Do I make appointments and schedule conferences that are convenient for families?	• When I make a commitment to the school for a plan of action, do I follow through and complete that commitment?
• Do I share necessary information with other professionals to ensure that services are not duplicated and that families do not spend valuable energy searching for providers and services?	• Do I maintain realistic expectations for professionals, my child, and myself?

* _Note._ Revised by Naomi Karp with permission from _Focal Point_ (Winter, 1992, pp. 1-3).

The questions in Figure 1 contain values that reflect respect, empathy, and consideration for others. The questions for professionals have a family-centered flavor that indicates a supportive concern for the family and the child with disabilities. Administrators and educators might want to share these checklists with families at the start of the school year or throughout the school year to establish and reinforce a spirit of collaboration and partnership.

Another definition of partnership and collaboration focuses on the recognition that both parties have special skills and knowledge to contribute to improving programs and services that will benefit the child. This means that their roles complement each other. There is also a feeling of mutual respect, a shared purpose, joint decision-making, and flexibility in working with each other (Lipsky, 1989). Again, these ideas are supportive of families and reflect a family-centered philosophy.

A third definition of collaboration relates successful schools to the presence of families as equal partners on those schools' collaborative teams (Thousand & Villa, 1989). Moreover, families are considered active members who contribute to their child's educational planning. When schools do not see families as equal partners, there is limited access to the valuable resources that families offer in terms of identifying their child's strengths and needs, planning effective programs, and evaluating outcomes (Thousand & Villa, 1989).

In summary, collaborating with or involving families in their child's educational program tends to result in positive outcomes for the child, improved emotional well-being of the families, increased parenting skills, and strengthening of the educational program itself (Cone et al., 1985; Lipsky, 1989; Turnbull, 1983). A Vermont parent of a student with disabilities perhaps best summarized why family-professional collaboration based on family-centered principles is vital: "Parents should be thought of as scholars of experience. We are in it for the distance. We see and feel the continuum. We have our doctorate in perseverance. We and the system must be in concert or the vision shrinks" (D. Sylvester in Thousand & Villa, 1989, p. 100).

Understanding the Family

The composition of the family is no longer the stereotypical mom, dad, two kids, and a dog. Rather, it may be a single parent who relies on a maternal grandmother for child-rearing help; a teenage couple who speak little English; or any configuration of people living under the same roof. Therefore, it is essential that administrators and educators think about so-called "parent" collaboration in new ways.

One of the first steps toward a new way of thinking is to use new language. The term *parents* should be replaced with *family*, since so many children do not live with both parents, or, in many cases, with either parent. A broad, inclusive definition of family should be used when schools are trying to involve adults who are responsible for a child's well-being. In 1991, 38 family leaders at the Second Family Leadership Conference recommended a new, inclusive definition of family (Family and Integration Resources, 1991):

> A family is a group of people who are important to each other and offer each other love and support, especially in times of crises. In order to be sensitive to the wide range of life styles, living arrangements, and cultural variations that exist today, family in OSERS' programs no longer can be limited to just parent/child relationships. Therefore, family involvement in OSERS must reach out to include: mothers, fathers, grandparents, sisters, brothers, neighbors, and other persons who have important roles in the lives of people with disabilities (p. 37).

The inclusiveness of this definition gives administrators and educators an opportunity to reach out to those persons living with the child who may be of help and support to the child's progress and success in school. Confidentiality issues arise, but the legal guardian or parent can give written permission to allow the school to involve other persons as part of the child's circle of support. The more inclusive and supportive the adults are, the greater the chances for improving outcomes for children, particularly children who are vulnerable and at-risk.

Furthermore, amendments to the original legislation have set a precedent for the use of the term family. The Part H and Section 619 portions of IDEA do not refer to "parents"; they refer to "families." This type of latitude allows the people with whom a child is living to choose important family and support system members to participate in educational decision making.

The Need for a Values Base in Education

In its 1989 Report to the President, the National Council on Disability found that "parent-professional relationships too often are strained and difficult, and families and professionals frequently view one another as adversaries rather than partners" (West, 1989, p. 15). When families and schools have antagonistic working relationships, chances for improving student outcomes are diminished. When values-based, family-centered strategies are developed, the quality of student outcomes and family-school relationships will improve. Leaders in the community integration movement also have found that, in addition to legislation, if a program is to be successful, the professionals involved must have values and commitment (Racino, 1990; Taylor, Racino, Knoll, & Lutfiyya, 1987).

Meeting the Need

All school systems have a value base. Too frequently, however, these values are not clearly defined and well articulated (Pearpoint, 1989). Therefore, if the quality of educational programs, student outcomes, and collaboration with families is to improve, administrators and their staffs should jointly develop a vision and a set of values pertaining to students and their families.

When adopting a set of value statements about students and families, administrators should ask themselves the following important questions:

- Would I want my son or daughter to be in this school or program?
- If I were this child, how would I want to be treated?
- If this were my family at the IEP meeting, how would I want to be treated?

Ideally, the answers should guide administrators' actions.

Values and Family-Centered Principles

It is important that educational planning teams believe in a common set of values. Some basic values that educators may want to jointly articulate about students and families include the following:

- All children and youth are to be valued as people.
- All children and youth have strengths, can learn, and can make positive contributions to their families, friends, and society.
- It is up to educators to identify and build upon each child's strengths so that the child's learning can be maximized.
- All families have a variety of strengths and coping skills that should also be identified and enhanced.
- Diversity and individual differences among people are to be valued and respected.
- Families are sources of wisdom and knowledge about their children and should be recognized as experts.
- The values, choices, and preferences of families should be respected.
- Families are a constant in children's lives and must be equal partners in *all* decisions affecting the child's educational program. Professionals are to support, not supplant, the family.

After the professional staff develops a set of values regarding students and families, administrators may want to have the values posted in a visible place in the school or administrative building. They will be examples of family-centered principles that, when operationalized by district and/or building staff, will demonstrate to all families that they and their children are respected and valued. This will help lay the foundation for a positive, collaborative partnership between families and educators.

2. WHAT ARE FAMILIES' RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS?

Prior to the passage and implementation of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), families had few legally prescribed rights in their children's educational programs (Anderson, Chitwood, & Hayden 1990a, 1990b). Schools had the final say regarding the enrollment of students with disabilities as well as the types of programs they were receiving. Today, however, educators and administrators need to be familiar with the rights guaranteed to families under EAHCA and succeeding amendments as well as how families can be equals in educational decision-making processes (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1978, 1985). These significant pieces of legislation and their contributions to families' rights are discussed in chronological order in the following section. Educators and administrators should be familiar with the rights guaranteed to families under EAHCA and succeeding amendments. The writings of Turnbull and Turnbull (1978, 1985) clearly lay out families' rights as well as how families can be equals in educational decision-making processes.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act

After the enactment of EAHCA in 1975, students with disabilities were guaranteed a free and appropriate public education. In addition, families and professional educators were to be partners in the development of Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities. Furthermore, the legislation guaranteed families the rights to due process, prior notice and consent, access to records, and participation in decision making (Anderson et al., 1990b; ARC Georgia, 1988).

Congress included strong support in EAHCA for family involvement for two reasons (Anderson et al., 1990b):

1. To give families potential control to prevent erroneous decisions that might be made during the course of the special education process. This is a regulatory purpose to ensure that school officials carry out their duties under the law correctly.

2. To ensure that families are more than rubber stamps in the IEP process. This is an affirmative purpose. Congressional intent was to make sure that the IEP process included more than "in consultation with families."

Handicapped Children's Protection Act

After establishing basic rights for families through EAHCA, Congress added additional rights with the 1986 Handicapped Children's Protection Act. This act affirms that special education laws do not limit any protections and rights guaranteed by the Constitution or any federal statutes. It also allows parents who prevail in a due process hearing or court suit against a school division to collect attorney's fees. Additionally, this law allows payment of fees for work attorneys did prior to a due process hearing.

Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers

The EAHCA was reauthorized and amended in 1986 as Public Law 99-457, Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers, and important provisions for children from birth through 5 years of age and their families were added (Anderson et al., 1990a; ARC Georgia, 1988). Part H of the law addresses the needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities or who are at risk of developmental delays. Children from birth to 3 years of age may be served by states that apply for funds to plan, develop, and implement statewide, comprehensive, multidisciplinary early intervention programs. The following additional rights for families are mandated:

- Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs), which focus on the family unit, must be developed by a multidisciplinary team, with the family members as active participants. The family's concerns, priorities, and resources are to be identified, goals and timelines included, and the services to be used listed. The family must have a designated case manager, with dates shown for when services will begin and end. There must be yearly evaluations of the child, a review of the IFSP every 6 months, and a plan for moving into an appropriate preschool program by the child's third birthday.

- Procedural safeguards for families are continued.

Part B, Section 619, mandates that states serve *all* children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 5 and permits *noncategorical services*, meaning that a child does not have to have a label in order to receive services. Parent training is an allowable expenditure. Children may be served according to their families' needs, allowing a local education agency to contract with other agencies and programs to provide a flexible, wide range of services.

The Early Intervention Amendment to EAHCA has been extremely important in fostering collaboration based on values and family-centered approaches. It speaks about the "family," not just the mother-father or "parent" unit, and allows for flexibility in funding and service provision while addressing the strengths of the child and family. Families' choices are to be considered in all decisions. These legislative changes to the original Act set the tone for truly collaborative partnerships between school and home.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

In 1990, Congress further amended EAHCA under Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The same procedural safeguards and rights afforded to young children, students, and families under the original statute were protected. The overall result of these legislative actions has been increased participation in the community by children and adults with disabilities and their families. The general public has come to see people with disabilities in a new light. People with a variety of special needs now take part in regular community activities. The idea that people with disabilities have rights and capabilities and can contribute to their communities is beginning to take hold (Comegys, 1989). In addition, as a result of litigation and legislation, citizens with disabilities and their families have become skilled advocates, securing and reinforcing their rights in their communities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Scheerenberger, 1987).

Meeting the Spirit of the Law

Parent rights, as guaranteed under the _letter_ of the law, have been clarified and strengthened by decisions handed down by the courts and by statutory amendments (Anderson et al., 1990b; Martin, 1991; Ordover & Boundy, 1991). The _spirit_ of the law is met when school administrators and educators develop positive, collaborative relationships with the families of students with disabilities (Anderson et al., 1990b; West, 1989). These relationships are often difficult to achieve and maintain because the portions of the law that guarantee specific rights and safeguards are also areas that tend to cause friction between families and school personnel. These areas include notification, consent, and participation during the referral, evaluation, eligibility, IEP, annual review, and triennial evaluation phases of the special education process (Anderson et al., 1990b; Lipsky, 1989).

Too frequently, families believe that they must acquiesce to the professionals' advice or decisions about their children's educational programs. Most of the reasons for this passivity are rooted in the fact that families are unaware of their rights and procedural safeguards under the law (West, 1989). On the other hand, many administrators and educators perceive that family participation ranges from families wanting to be in complete control to a total lack of interest in the process and the issues (Anderson et al., 1990b). Administrators of high-quality educational programs are constantly seeking ways to meet the spirit of IDEA by searching for ways to collaborate meaningfully with families in order to improve outcomes for students and the quality of educational programs.

3. WHY ARE NEW IDEAS AND MODELS NEEDED FOR COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES?

Administrators today face challenges that are entirely different from those faced by their colleagues 15 to 20 years ago. Over the past two decades, many significant changes have taken place in society in general and in the field of education specifically. Some of the specific societal changes deal with accepting, honoring, and respecting diversity and differences, honoring others' choices and preferences, and improving student outcomes. These changes have been influenced by the emergence of the new American family, the increasing heterogeneity of the United States, and increased accountability for student performance and outcomes.

These changing times require new ideas, new language, and new models for improving the quality of education, reaching out to and collaborating with families, and improving students' outcomes. Today's administrators have to be able to listen to families with special needs and honor and respect the families' goals and visions for their children's futures. The following section examines some of the societal and educational changes and discusses how a values-based, family-centered education program can address them.

The New American Family

Recent data indicate that the American family of today does not look anything like the American family of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1979, 16% of children in the United States lived below the poverty level, with an increase to 20% by 1988 (Hewlett, in Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991). By 1991, 27% of all births were to unwed mothers (Raspberry, 1992). The rate of nonmarital births to adolescent mothers has more than doubled to 64% over the past 25 years (Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1991). Adolescent mothers also have higher poverty rates, and, of major concern for educators, they have low motivation and expectations and inadequate schooling (Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1991). Almost 44% of grandmothers across all ethnic groups in the United States provide care for at least one grandchild.

These disturbing data mean that administrators must be prepared to collaborate with a new population of parents who tend to be poorer, frequently of school age themselves, and possibly lacking hope for their future. In many cases, administrators may not even be communicating with the student's natural parent, but with a grandparent, other relative, and/or close family friend. Economic issues and urgencies may override a family member's ability to take time from a job to attend a school conference or other event. The need for administrators to be flexible, creative, and sensitive to families is stronger now than ever before.

The Heterogeneity of the United States

Isaacs and Benjamin (1991) believe that the 1990s will be known as the years of "the cultural imperative" in the United States because issues relative to culture, ethnicity, and race are present in almost every segment of public policy. National agendas and discussions are calling for a restructuring of our country's institutions, particularly education, to make them more culturally sensitive and culturally competent (Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991).

Although the 1990 Census indicates that the United States remains a majority white country, minority populations are growing at a much faster rate than ever before. For example, in 1990, 9% of the total population was Hispanic and the number of African-American citizens increased 13.2% between 1980 and 1990. The Asian/Pacific Islander population in the United States also increased 107.8% over the decade (Vobejda, 1991). Minorities now make up about one fourth of the U.S. population (Vobejda, 1991). This increase in multicultural diversity is expected to continue. The Children's Defense Fund (1989) has predicted that, by the year 2000, the total number of children from minority groups will increase by 25% and will comprise one third of all children in the United States while non-Hispanic white children will increase by only .2%. By 2020, nearly half of the nation's students will represent minority populations (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). The challenges of adjusting to these changing demographics become even more complex when considering the multiple cultures and languages represented by these population shifts. During the 1990s, more than 5 million children of immigrants are expected to enter U.S. public schools.

Serving a Diverse Student Population

Educators are finding that traditional, mainstream-culture-dominated approaches are not appropriate for reaching out to students from minority groups and their families. This is most evident in areas where a majority of children being served in school-aged programs are from minority backgrounds. The concept of tailoring an educational program to meet the needs of students with minority group backgrounds is, in many ways, similar to developing an IEP for a student in special education. Many of those same skills can be applied by educators in learning how to relate successfully to families from different cultures.

By exploring the cultures represented by their students, teachers and administrators may be able to better identify strengths, needs, strategies, and solutions. For example, one teacher asked for an evaluation for a 3-year-old Pakistani girl because she never said a word in class and avoided eye contact. The teacher was concerned that the girl's behavior suggested that she was selectively mute. During a home visit, the evaluator observed a vibrant and talkative child. When the mother was asked about the girl's different behaviors at home and school, she explained that "good girls are always quiet and do what they are told when they are in school."

However, there are some subtle differences between individualizing an educational program to meet a student's strengths and needs and tailoring services in a manner that is respectful of a family's culture. With specific minority groups, it is important to learn from family members which aspects of their culture are important to them and how their cultural beliefs and practices will affect the design and delivery of educational services. This approach recognizes the importance of families in the well-being and development of a student. Conversely, it acknowledges that without family involvement and support an educational program is likely to fail, either through passive or active resistance. Passive resistance might be expressed as nonattendance or lack of follow-through with a home program. Active resistance could include refusing services that might ameliorate a disabling condition or prevent secondary disabling conditions from arising.

Some families from other cultures may have a different view of what causes a disability and how it should be treated. Other families may have a mistrust of government services based on their previous experiences in a repressive country and may be wary of approaching educators. If a school division is not respectful of a family's culture or if it is unable to provide services because of a language barrier, the family may be reluctant to obtain appropriate educational services for their child. Lynch and Hanson (1992) identified several things that professionals can do to make services more culturally competent and family centered, especially when developing programs for very young children:

- Learn about the families in the community: (a) Where are they from and when did they arrive? (b) What are the cultural beliefs and practices surrounding child rearing, health and healing, and disability and causation?

- Work with cultural mediators or guides from the families' cultures to learn more about the extent of cultural identification within the community at large, the situational aspects of this identification, and regional variations.

- Learn and use words and forms of greeting in the families' languages if families have limited ability, or are nonproficient in English.

- Allow additional time to work with interpreters to discern families' concerns and priorities and to determine the next steps in the process. Building rapport may take considerable time, but it is a critical element in building effective collaborative partnerships.

- Recognize that some families may be surprised by the extent of family-professional collaboration that is expected in the United States.

  (1) Do not expect every family to be comfortable with a high degree of involvement.

(2) Never assume that a family does not want to be involved. It takes time to build a relationship.

(3) Conversely, do not assume that a family will become involved on its own or will feel comfortable doing so. Try to build a relationship.

- Use as few written forms as possible for families who have limited English skills.

(1) If forms are used, be sure that they are available in the family's primary language.

(2) Rely on the interpreter, your observation, and your own instincts and experience to know when to proceed and when to wait for the family to signal readiness to move to the next step.

In summary, the diverse populations that now call the United States home bring with them languages, beliefs, and values that must be respected and honored by administrators and teachers. In many communities, public schools now serve more children who do not have English as their primary language than children who do. It requires time and sensitivity on the part of school administrators and teachers to meaningfully involve and work with families from different cultures. A value-based, family-centered educational program that respects differences and honors choices will be effective for this population of families, and the quality of educational programs and student outcomes will improve.

4. WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES?

This section of the chapter presents strategies, ideas, and guidelines for developing value-based, family-centered education and involving families in their children's education programs.

Reasons Why Families Are Not Involved

There are many reasons why families may not be involved in their children's school programs. The Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC) in Alexandria, Virginia, identified several reasons why families are not involved in their children's schools. These reasons are listed in Figure 2. Some of them may not seem like good reasons, but nonetheless, they do keep people away from their children's schools. Additional ideas to help bring families into the school can be found in Appendix A.

Figure 2

Reasons Why A Family Member Is Not Involved in the School

- Sees no reason to be involved.
- Is sick.
- Works and cannot leave job.
- Is a single parent.
- Is older parent who has "been there."
- Is burned out or under stress.
- Has little education.
- Is apathetic.
- Is poor.
- Has a child in residential placement.
- Feels inadequate.
- Thinks school people are smarter.
- Has no transportation.
- Does not think school is important.
- Does not understand the child's disability.
- Comes from a different culture.
- Lives in rural area.
- Lives in the inner city.
- Is from a middle class family.
- Is from a upper class family.
- Is depressed.
- Is from a very young family.
- Is too busy.
- Does not speak English.
- Fears the school.
- Is not assertive.
- Feels isolated.
- Does not trust teachers.
- Cannot read or write.
- Thinks the school's job is to educate.
- Has bad memories of his or her own school.

Source: *Adapted from Partnership Series 1: Teachers' Strategies for Involving Hard-to-Reach Families (1991a). Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center.*

General Principles to Encourage Collaboration

The following suggestions can be used to engage and involve families who may be headed by a single parent, have two parents working full time, be non English-speaking, or be a member of a minority population (Staff, 1992):

- Give families opportunities to visit the school, to use the library, or talk to teachers and administrators when it is convenient for them to do so.
- Increase teachers' awareness of and sensitivity to families' time constraints by announcing meetings far enough in advance to give families time to arrange to attend.
- Arrange and facilitate peer support groups for teenage, single, working, and/or custodial mothers and fathers.
- Provide before-school child care so that working families can see teachers before going to work.
- Conduct evening meetings, with child care, so that working families can attend.
- Establish bilingual hotlines for families who do not speak English.
- Print informational signs in the school in the languages spoken by the families.
- Send messages to families in their primary languages, announcing meetings and suggesting things they can do at home to help with their children's education. Some families may need oral communication because they do not read.
- Establish or support family learning centers in schools, churches, and/or storefronts and offer help to families who want to help their children learn.

Specific Strategies

Specific strategies that can be used by administrators to involve families in different types of school activities are given in Appendix B. There is not one given set of strategies to use with Family A and one set to use with Family B. These ideas may or may not work with all families. The ideas should be tailored to the unique needs of families. The main thing to keep in mind is that each family is different. Flexibility and creativity to meet each student's unique needs are critical elements of successful collaboration.

Additional strategies for involving families in children's education programs used successfully by educators and administrators in Virginia and other rural areas include the following (Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, 1991a):

- One teacher in Accomack County, Virginia, sends registered letters to tell families of meetings if phone calls tend not to be sufficient. She has found that families pay more attention to registered mail; regular letters are often thrown away unread.
- In some rural areas with rugged terrain, citizens band (CB) radios are used to send messages to families.
- In rural Colorado, before IEP meetings, a school social worker visits families who live long distances from the school. She explains the IEP process and answers questions. She also tells them that she will be at the IEP meeting, and if they have any problems or questions and want her to intervene for them, she will.
- In Pendelton, West Virginia, a teacher-parent team visits individual families before their child is evaluated. They inform the families about the special education cycle and assist them throughout the process.
- In some Head Start programs, transportation and child care are provided for all families attending workshops or meetings.
- One school has established a Principal's Hotline 1 hour each week. Families may call the principal about any issue. Calls are limited to 5 minutes each.
- One school district locates and calls the family-to-family networks in the community to seek assistance in involving more families.
- Some schools feature a day for the men in the lives of young children. Special class activities are planned to honor the fathers, grandfathers, and others.

These are just a sampling of ideas to use to involve families who traditionally may be reluctant to enter the school. Administrators are encouraged to seek out and share successful collaboration ideas with colleagues.

Strategies for Improving Meeting and Conference Outcomes

This section contains ideas for setting a collaborative, cooperative atmosphere when administrators and teachers schedule and conduct conferences with families. There are also some ideas that administrators and teachers can share with families before, during, and/or after conferences. Appendix C is a useful handout for administrators to share with families regarding their role in effective collaboration.

Setting the Tone for Meetings and Conferences

Meetings between schools and families are opportunities to build long-lasting, collaborative partnerships, if certain elements such as those laid out in Appendix C are present. First, the environment for a meeting should be welcoming. Second, the opening of the meeting should focus on the strengths and positive aspects of the child. Third, there should be time for the family to outline its concerns. Fourth, the discussion should be organized, with a purpose and outcomes.

Some specific steps that can be taken to help make meetings and conferences as positive as possible include the following:

1. Arrange the space and time.
    - Use adult-size chairs that are comfortable.
    - Make sure there are no barriers blocking the line of vision between the school staff and the family.
    - Meet in an area that is clutter-free, with few distractions.
    - Arrange to have no interruptions during the scheduled meeting time. If there is an emergency interruption, tell the family members they can have more time or reschedule them for another time.
2. Open the meeting with a positive topic to "break the ice."
    - Compliment the student's strengths and capabilities.
    - Tell an amusing story about something the student might have said or done recently.
    - Discuss the weather, current events, or something else totally unrelated to school.
3. Be prepared to let the family members start the conference discussion if they seem eager to discuss their agenda.
    - Listen carefully to what is and is not being said.
    - Ask clarification questions.

- Reinforce the family's comments when appropriate.
- Let the family members finish, without interrupting them when there is disagreement with what is said; address the point when it is your turn to speak.

4. Outline, briefly and concisely, the points the school wants to cover.
    - Have necessary papers and documents at hand.
    - Have copies of the current IEP.
    - Include any of the family's concerns identified in Step 3.
5. Develop an action plan, setting specific goals with the family.
    - Lay out action steps.
    - List responsibilities and who is to do what.
    - Establish a timeline.
    - Set the time of the next meeting, phone call, or information exchange. (Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, 1991b. Revised with permission.)

Collaborating by Telephone

For a variety of reasons, it is often necessary to communicate with families by telephone rather than in face-to-face meetings. Rarely should the phone be relied upon as the sole means of collaborating and communicating. There are few substitutes for face-to-face meetings for building sound relationships. However, when necessary, phone collaboration can be a productive way of reaching out to families if basic collaboration techniques are kept in mind (Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, 1991b). See Appendix D for additional strategies for communicating with families.

Collaborating in Writing

Teachers and administrators may like to use informal written messages to families as a way of reporting a child's progress, informing them of homework, and/or providing positive reinforcements (Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, 1991b). Some of the information that can be conveyed to families in this way includes the following:

- Skills mastered.
- Skills now being learned.
- Ideas for home activities to reinforce skills.
- Form for the family to return to school indicating
  (1) What the child does at home.
  (2) Suggestions for activities.
  (3) Pertinent information.

If this form of communication and collaboration is used, remember to

- Involve families in making the decision to use this type of communication and in designing the format for it.
- Keep a record of what is sent home.
- Plan for regular phone or in-person meetings for feedback.
- Make sure the messages sent
  (1) Are clear and concise.
  (2) Have a simple format.
  (3) Are friendly and collaborative in nature.
  (4) Are easily recognizable (by using colored paper, one child's drawings, or a colored folder).

Parent Resource Centers

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has established a Parent Resource Center Project to give local school systems support in establishing their own parent resource centers. This project evolved from the need to train both parents and educators in the skills they need for creating and implementing effective, collaborative working relationships. It is the goal of the VDOE to make the services of Parent Resource Centers available to *all* of Virginia's families of children with disabilities. Each local center is staffed by a parent of a child with a disability and an educator. The center's functions and responsibilities include the following:

- Providing a basic training workshop, _Understanding Special Education_, to help families understand special education and their role in cooperative planning.

- Providing up-to-date information and resources for families and professionals.

- Helping families resolve concerns and make decisions regarding their children's education.

- Offering workshops and training on topics requested by families.

- Offering inservice training workshops, _The Partnership Series_, to educators.

- Facilitating interagency collaboration with major agency and advocacy organizations serving exceptional children and their families.

Although all centers provide the services just listed, each center is different and designed to meet the unique needs of the local community. Examples of other types of activities and services that may be provided are

- Surrogate parent training.

- Family support groups.

- Lending library for families and educators.

- Preschool screening/child find.

- Interagency councils and committees.

- Liaison to the Special Education Advisory Committee.

A complete list of parent resource centers in Virginia can be obtained by contacting

Judy Hudgins, Educator
Anita Swan, Parent
Virginia Department of Education
P.O. Box 2120
Richmond, VA 23216-2120
1-800/422-2083

SUMMARY

This chapter has provided information about values-based, family-centered strategies that will involve all families and improve educational programs and student outcomes. The tone is meant to be supportive of both school and home. Both sides have rights; both sides have responsibilities. Neither side is right all the time; neither side is wrong all the time (Martin, 1991).

The ideas and strategies presented here are designed to encourage respect for others' values, rights, and beliefs. In addition, they are intended to encourage creative thinking about how schools address the strengths and needs of, as well as the differences among, all populations of students. The strategies and suggestions are intended to develop positive, collaborative relationships between families and schools and to prevent conflicts. If conflicts do arise, resources such as Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, by Roger Fisher and William Ury, may be helpful.

Families whose children are in special education programs have carefully defined rights under IDEA. Schools must accept students and involve their families. Providing students with disabilities with a high quality educational program that is collaboratively designed by home and school meets the spirit of the law. When the spirit of IDEA is carried out in every local school building, there will be values-based, family-centered state-of-the-art programs in place. Improvement in educational programs and student outcomes will follow.

Special acknowledgment and thanks go to Cherie Takemoto and Deidre Hayden of the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), Alexandria, Virginia. Cherie was an invaluable resource and drafted the section in Question Three, The Heterogeneity of the United States. Dee offered PEATC's library, Cherie's time, and her own time to review the draft. They are collaborative partners in the best sense of the term.

REFERENCES

Anderson, W., Chitwood, S., & Hayden, D. (1990a). Negotiating the special education maze: A guide for parents and teachers. Rockville, MD: Woodbine House.

Anderson, W., Chitwood, S., & Hayden, D. (1990b). Implementing the spirit of P.L. 94-142. Unpublished paper.

ARC Georgia. (1988). Parents educating parents on Public Law 94-142. College Park, GA: ARC of Georgia.

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (1991). Children having children: Effects on the family system. Pediatric Annals, 20(9), 467-481.

Comegys, A. (1989). Integration strategies for parents. In R. G. Ross (Ed.), Integration strategies for students with handicaps (pp. 339-350). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Cone, J. D., Delawyer, D. D., & Wolfe, V. V. (1985). Assessing parent participation: The parent/family involvement index. Exceptional Children, 51, 417-424.

Family and Integration Resources. (1991). Second Family Leadership Conference. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Harry, B. (1992). Cultural diversity, families, and the special education system: Communication and empowerment. New York: Teachers College Press.

Henderson, A. (1988). The evidence continues to grow: Parent involvement improves student achievement. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Isaacs, M. R., & Benjamin, M. P. (1991). Towards a culturally competent system of care: Volume II. Washington, DC: CASSP Technical Assistance Center, Center for Child Health and Mental Health Policy, Georgetown University Child Development Center.

Lezotte, L. W. (1989). School improvement based on effective schools research. In D. K. Lipsky & A. Gartner (Eds.), Beyond separate education: Quality education for all (pp. 25-37). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Lipsky, D. K. (1989). The roles of parents. In D. K. Lipsky & A. Gartner (Eds.), Beyond separate education: Quality education for all (pp.159-175). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (1989). Building the future. In D. K. Lipsky & A. Gartner (Eds.), Beyond separate education: Building the future (pp. 255-290). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Lynch, E. W., & Hanson, M. J. (1992). Developing cross-cultural competence: A guide for working with young children and their families. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Martin, R. (1991). Extraordinary children - Ordinary lives. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Ordover, E. L., & Boundy, K. B. (1991). Educational rights of children with disabilities: A primer for advocates. Cambridge, MA: The Center for Law and Education.

Pallas, A. M., Natriello, G., & McDill, E. L. (1989). The changing nature of the disadvantaged population: Current dimensions and future trends. Educational Research, 18(2), 2.

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center PEATC. (1991a). Partnership series 1: Teachers' strategies for involving hard-to-reach families. Alexandria, VA.

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center PEATC. (1991b). Partnership series 10: Families. Alexandria, VA.

Pearpoint, J. (1989). Reflections on a quality education for all students. In S. Stainback, W. Stainback, & M. Forest (Eds.), Educating all students in the mainstream of regular education (pp. 249-254). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Racino, J. A. (1990). Community support services. In A. P. Kaiser & C. M. McWhorter (Eds.), Preparing personnel to work with persons with severe disabilities (pp. 203-226). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Raspberry, W. (1992, May 15). The welfare-work dilemma. The Washington Post, p. A25.

Scheerenberger, R. C. (1987). A history of mental retardation: A quarter century of promise. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Shelton, T. L., Jeppson, E. S., & Johnson, B. H. (1987). Family-centered care for children with special health care needs. Washington, DC: Association for the Care of Children's Health.

Staff. (1992, Winter). Involving parents. SPECIAL EDition, 9.

ERIC
Full Text Provided by ERIC

Staff. (1988, Winter). Portland hosts parent/professional collaborative training session. Focal Point, 1-3.

Taylor, S. J., Racino, J. A., Knoll, J. A., & Lutfiyya, Z. (1987). The non-restrictive environment: On community integration for persons with the most severe disabilities. Syracuse University: Human Policy Press.

Thousand, J. S., & Villa, R. A. (1989). Enhancing success in heterogeneous schools. In S. Stainback, W. Stainback, & M. Forest (Eds.), Educating all students in the mainstream of regular education (pp. 89-101). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Turnbull, A. P. (1983). Parent-professional interactions. in M. E. Snell (Ed.), Systematic instruction of the moderately and severely handicapped. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull, H. R. (1978). Parents speak out: Views from the other side of the mirror. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Turnbull, A. P., Turnbull, H. R., Summers, J. A., Brotherson, M. J. & Benson, H. A. Family, professionals, and exceptionality: A special partnership, Columbus: Merrill, 1986.

Turnbull, H. R., & Turnbull, A. P. (1985). Parents speak out: Then and now. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Vobejda, B. (1991). Asian, Hispanic numbers in U.S. soared in 1980's, Census reveals: Groups accelerate ethnic diversification in every region. The Washington Post, pp. D1-7.

West, J. (1989). The education of students with disabilities: Where do we stand? Washington, DC: The National Council on Disability.

APPENDIX A

Improving School-Family Interactions: What Schools Can Do

IMPROVING SCHOOL-FAMILY INTERACTIONS: WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Send early notification of meetings, giving choices for dates/times/places. •Flexible hours and places. •At least two weeks notice.	Set realistic time limits; plan an agenda and allot time to each item.
Make notices friendly and nonthreatening.	Establish priorities; extend time or increase the number of meetings if time runs short.
Notify the family as soon as a student has a problem; do not wait to announce it at a conference.	Improve your communication skills in: •listening. •giving feedback. •resolving conflicts.
Get to know the families through open houses, back-to-school night, PTA events, sports, etc; communicate in informal ways.	Learn from families; Acknowledge the family's expertise about the child's interests, behaviors, history, preferences; gain this information before a meeting by calling the family if necessary.
Plan a comfortable physical environment; ask whether the family would like you to come to their home to put them at ease; have snacks available.	Accept families as advocates; do not take a family's intense desire to make things better for its child as single-mindedness or belligerence.
Have documents, etc. ready before the meeting occurs; give copies to the family prior to meeting, if possible, so they are prepared.	Avoid using jargon; use clear language.
Build the family's confidence in you by finding something special about the student.	Establish rapport and a collaborative spirit through a good conference.

Source: Adapted from Partnership Series 1: Teachers' Strategies for Involving Hard-to-Reach Families. Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center. (1991a).

Appendix B

Strategies for Involving Families

Strategies for Involving Families

Reason Not Involved	Possible Approaches	Activities/Resources
Works long hours; is busy; has too much stress.	Let the person know that you know she or he is working, very busy, or under stress.	Arrange for regular contacts: phone calls and/or written messages.
	Emphasize the importance of her or his input and observations in the school.	Start to schedule in September a variety of ways in which families can help in the classroom for a half day: •field trips. •art projects. •cooking projects. •lunch at school. Let the family select the activity and schedule it at their convenience, within reason.
	Discuss the value of close school-home follow-through, encouragement, and reinforcement (not homework supervision!).	
	Point out that short, but ongoing, contacts between home and school mean better student outcomes.	
	Ask what the family needs the school to do to make involvement easier.	

ERIC
Full Text Provided by ERIC

Reason Not Involved	Possible Approaches	Activities/Resources
Overwhelmed by life's events and family crises.	Set the goal of getting your foot in the door; visit the home with someone who is already reaching out to the family.	Link the family with another one that is positive and upbeat.
	Build the family's self-esteem by acknowledging the student's positive qualities and accomplishments.	Schedule a preliminary meeting with the family before any formal conferences to make sure they are ready and understand the purpose of the conference/ meeting.
	Make the family aware of how much they know about their child and the valuable resource they can be to school.	Send home photos and scrapbooks of school events.
	Let the family know that you like their child.	Extend a special invitation to visit the school for a pleasurable activity.
	Identify hobbies and skills that might be shared with other students.	Provide linkage with other social services.
	Structure a series of small successes the family can achieve.	

Reason Not Involved	Possible Approaches	Activities/Resources
Cultural differences.	Learn about family life and traditions from school staff and people from other agencies who are familiar with the culture.	Have special days for learning about the culture's history, foods, and customs, and ask the family to assist with them.
	Identify a key person from the culture to facilitate communication between the school and home: •older sibling. •relative. •church member. •community agency staff. •neighbor.	Make home visits if culturally appropriate.
	Select one aspect of home-school relations to work on at a time.	Have a key person from the PTA or another family routinely call and explain special activities, when they will be, and whether a ride is needed.
	Reinforce, often and in a variety of ways, the importance of the family's role in the student's education.	Translate school notices and information.
	Accept diverse approaches to family involvement.	Refer the family to parent resource center.
	Ask for help in structuring the child's school program to match his or her homelife, such as learning key words and phrases used at home and understood by the child.	

Reason Not Involved	Possible Approaches	Activities/Resources
Fear and distrust of the school system.	Talk with other school personnel to see what approaches have been tried.	Have first contacts be of a nonschool, nonproblematic nature; focus on building a positive relationship.
	Identify someone in the community whom the family trusts and ask to make a home visit with that person.	Plan a social meeting with food and children's activities.
	Make sure communication with the home is clear, friendly, honest, and short; do not use educational jargon.	Ask another family to call and provide transportation.
	Expect to be rebuffed but continue friendly persuasion.	Provide baby sitting for the meeting.
	Send positive notes about the child, and make frequent phone calls as well.	Talk with the parent resource center regarding ways to reach the family.
	Avoid becoming defensive if the family expresses angry or hostile feelings.	
	Help the family focus on the future and positive aspects and goals of the child's education.	
	Let the family know how much the child is enjoyed; stress how the family can help the school meet goals for the child.	

Reason Not Involved	Possible Approaches	Activities/Resources
Burned out; discouraged.	Schedule a one-on-one meeting early in the year; ask questions to find reasons for burnout; explore past school experiences; emphasize the student's strengths and positive aspects of the program.	Send home positive notes on a regular basis.
	Emphasize the student's accomplishments and how much progress she or he has made; ask if the person would help another family who is not involved.	Provide information about support groups, respite care, and family-to-family groups, and/or refer the person to the parent resource center.
	Promote a new strategy or approach to the involvement, depending and building on past experiences.	Organize a "buddy" system, pairing families who will complement each other for school activities.
	Ask for specific involvement, clearly outlining the steps, what is needed, and why it is needed in order to avoid overwhelming the person.	Ask the person to share a hobby or special skill with students in one or several classes.

Source: *Adapted from:* *Partnership Series 1:* *Teachers' Strategies for Involving Hard-to-Reach Families* *(1991a). Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center.*

APPENDIX C

Ways Families Can Improve Communication with the School

Ways Families Can Improve Communication with the School

1. Get involved in school activities such as PTA, sports, back-to-school night, and other informal events. Get to know the people there so that you are comfortable when you come for a conference.

2. Nip a problem or concern in the bud. Problems are easier to solve when taken care of early.

3. Be prepared for meetings and conferences. Bring records and documents. Make a list of questions and concerns. Get to the meeting place early so that you are not rushed and under undue stress.

4. Approach school staff with a clear definition of the problem or issue. Have an open mind. Avoid dwelling on one fixed solution. Be willing to engage in problem solving.

5. Make a list of what you want to talk about, starting with the most important thing first. Ask for additional time if you are running too long. Do not agree to a course of action for the sake of saving time.

6. Avoid assigning blame. Do not blame yourself for your child's problems at school. Do not blame the teacher. Do not blame the child. Blaming is not productive.

7. Acknowledge role differences. You are there just to advocate for *your* child. The school staff is there for *all* the children.

8. Treat school staff as allies. Do not view them as your enemy before knowing them. This makes it difficult to make important decisions with a clear mind. Assume that school staff can be effective, collaborative allies, working with you to improve outcomes for your child.

Source: *Adapted from Partnership Series 1: Teachers' Strategies for Involving Hard-to-Reach Families (1991a). Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center.*

APPENDIX D

Bridges and Barriers to School-Home Communication

BRIDGES AND BARRIERS
TO SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATION

BRIDGES	BARRIERS
Be interested, not impressive; promote the family's confidence in their own authority.	Appear to be the authority.
Listen so that you are completely clear about the family's concern(s); not getting their message will "come back to haunt you."	Avoid the issue or patronize and pay lip service to the family's concern(s).
Get enough information; find out what has been tried before; ask advice of others.	Make snap recommendations based on emotions.
Wait and form your own opinions; observe behaviors.	Form opinions based on stereotypes, rumors, etc.
Focus discussion on factors you can control.	Make excuses and blame factors you cannot control.
Keep in mind that the family is usually concerned or upset about an issue that has nothing to do with you personally.	Assume the family's concern is directed at you or your job performance.
Give the family at least two thirds of the time allotted to the meeting.	Talk too much and control the discussion.
Respond with statements and questions.	Ask questions that intimidate the family.
Be sensitive to the language levels, vocabularies, and background of the family; adjust your language, but be yourself.	Use educational jargon; be patronizing and condescending.

Source: Adapted from Partnership Series 10: Trading Places: Improving Understanding Between Parents and Teachers (1991b). Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center.

BRIDGES	BARRIERS
Be open to new approaches, then clarify your position, based on past experiences and observations.	Be dogmatic; use simplistic statements.
Ask the family in what area they want suggestions: •Keep suggestions limited. •Give just a few to see whether they are followed. •Ask questions that lead the family to develop their own problem-solving skills.	Give too many suggestions.
Let the family know good times to contact you.	Limit accessibility to families.
Schedule discussion times, allowing ample time to reach a resolution.	Take on a tough problem, with too little time for discussion.
Pinpoint and follow through on all things promised by the school.	Fail to follow through on promises.
Admit openly when you are wrong; accept your share of the problem.	Avoid admitting you made a mistake.
Encourage the family to take up a problem with another staff member or person directly, not with you; focus on working together to improve outcomes for the student.	Talk about problems with another staff member when the person is not there.
Wait until the family asks for help or until a good relationship is established before suggesting a counselor or support service.	Suggest counseling before establishing a relationship built on trust.
Be natural and relaxed and use good listening and communication skills.	Act like a psychologist; overuse reflective listening.

Source: Adapted from Partnership Series 10: Trading Places: Improving Understanding Between Parents and Teachers (1991b). Parent Educational Advocacy and Training Center.