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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that early childhood teachers need to consider the families with whom they work in order to select the most effective ways to involve them in their child's education. The paper presents strategies mentioned most often in interviews with teachers and families working in effective family involvement programs. Each strategy is described, followed by a family perspective and a teacher perspective on the practice. The strategies discussed are: (1) written communication, including letters about classroom activities, articles from magazines and journals, suggested activities to extend classroom experiences, informal two-way communication, and displays of children's work; and (2) family involvement activities, including conferences, monthly family meetings, and special events evenings. The paper concludes by asserting that starting family involvement programs with two or three components and then adding a new component every few months makes implementing an effective family involvement program feasible. (KB)

**REVISITING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT:
PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS AND FAMILIES**

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**REVISITING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT:
PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS AND FAMILIES**

While recognizing that parental involvement is a key component in successful classrooms, teachers often wonder about the most effective ways to involve parents. Should they send home more written information? Should they make more telephone calls? Should they have more meetings at night so more families can attend? The simple answer to all these questions is – probably! Each family will respond differently to different components of a family involvement program. Reaching out to families in multiple ways is important, but teachers need to consider the families with whom they work and decide which methods might prove most effective for each group of families. This article describes strategies mentioned most often in interviews conducted with teachers and families involved in effective family involvement programs. Teachers and family members share their feelings about each strategy.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Teachers have lots of information to share, and written communication is probably the most time-efficient way of transmitting that information to families. Few families truly understand how classrooms work and how supportive interactions with adults help children extend their thinking. Teachers are obligated to share their specialized knowledge of children and the ways that they learn so families can better understand and be more supportive of the learning process.

Letters about Classroom Activities

Although most teachers routinely send home notes about picture day or upcoming field trips, those educators who truly want to involve families send

frequent letters to describe learning goals and classroom activities. These letters may share teacher's knowledge of children or advice on how to support children as they reach developmental milestones. When parents are informed of events in the classroom, they can extend their child's knowledge of a particular topic or ask questions about a specific activity. Weekly letters answer the "What did you do today"– "Nothing" syndrome that many families of children experience at the end of the school day. In these letters, teachers typically give a summary of the week's events. They also itemize the titles of books that were read aloud, list directions for games the children played, and remind families about upcoming topics of study or special events. Throughout the year, these letters can continue to explain the "whys" of the educational program. If weekly letters are not practical, monthly or bimonthly newsletters can be created and sent home to families.

Family Perspective: I looked forward to those letters about the past week's classroom activities. I felt like I always had a good idea about what was happening. Now those letters are a documented history of my daughter's K-1 years, filed away with drawings and writing.

Teacher Perspective: I think that it is important to share the things that you are teaching. It prevents a lot of the future "did you?" questions. It also provides parents with the opportunity to see how they might be able to help in the classroom or do something at home to supplement the classroom activities. Any activity that helps the teacher reflect on what has been done and what needs to be planned is a good thing for the teacher professionally. These weekly letters do both things - inform families and help the teacher reflect.

Articles from Magazines and Journals

Most families live hectic lives. Finding time to search through magazines

for articles related to their children is a task few families manage on a regular basis. However, when a teacher selects relevant articles and sends them home as recommended reading, many parents will read them. Articles of interest to families might describe classroom practice, explain child development issues, or provide practical parenting ideas. Of course, not all families will invest time and effort in reading articles sent home by the teacher. Still, if only a few take advantage of the information, the investment of teacher time is worthwhile.

Family Perspective: I appreciated the professional articles. This was my third child, but I learned quite a lot from the articles in the Friday Folders. I knew very little about project-based learning or authentic assessment, so I really appreciated those articles.

Teacher Perspective: When I sent home a professional article for the first time, I was a little surprised at myself. When I thought about it, I wasn't just trying to inform the families of my students. I wanted to know what they thought about the ideas in the article.

Suggested Activities to Extend Classroom Experiences

By investigating only two or three hours a month, teachers can generate dozens of activities that children and families work on together at home. Families generally want what is best for their children but are not sure of how to best support their children's learning. Sending home age-appropriate activities related to classroom learning experiences provides guidance for families as well as extending children's learning at home.

Many different types of activities are appropriate for children and their families: reading books and doing literature responses, writing dialogue journals, playing word games, playing math games, following recipes, conducting simple science experiences.

Family Perspective: Including simple "homework" where parents work with their

child extended classroom experiences into our home. I always read to my daughter, but the homework menu we got from our teacher gave me ideas I never would have thought of on my own.

Teacher Perspective: My weekly letter always contains ideas for parents to do with their child and sometimes I mention things that are coming up (television shows, library storytelling, special events in the community, etc.) which the parents could use to extend the classroom learning.

Informal Two-Way Communication

Two-way communication between school and the home is also important. Teachers send home information and parents send notes to teachers, but these are not necessarily two-way communication. Two-way communication involves the sharing of and response to information that is of interest and concern to both parties. Something as simple as a few pages of notebook paper stapled together and placed in a pocket folder encourages individual communication between a teacher and a family. The paper provided by the teacher, along with a note that explains its use, serves as an invitation for families to write. Adults who are hesitant to interrupt the teacher during schools hours to raise a concern can use this paper to jot down their questions. The teacher can then respond at some point during the day and send the folder home with the child that afternoon. If folders are exchanged between school and home regularly, parent questions can be answered promptly. The teacher can also use this simple procedure to share something interesting a child has done or said during the day. A short personal note about their child reassures families that the teacher is concerned about and cares for the child. Using the folder in this way facilitates two-way communication between the home and the school for the benefit of the child.

Family Perspective: I took the notebook paper in my child's folder as an invitation

from the teacher to write to her. I doubt she intended for me to write every night, but I did. I did some serious venting and soul-searching on those pages. Kindergarten was new to me. Writing, and getting responses from the teacher, helped me a lot. Sometimes the teacher only wrote, "Thanks for sharing your thoughts." Still, I knew she was reading what I wrote and that was such a comfort to me.

Teacher Perspective: Not all families use this way of communicating with me, but several do. I can't know what parents are thinking unless they let me know. This gives parents a way to write quick questions or to let me know about something that is going on at home that might affect how the child acts and reacts, things like their dog ran away or a grandparent is sick. I need to know those things. And about their questions, I can jot down a quick answer to a parent concern and it doesn't build into something bigger. This method of communicating works for me with a lot of parents.

Displays of Children's Work

Not all written communication has to be sent home. Many teachers display children's work samples outside the classroom. With a little extra effort, these displays can become another way of communicating with families about events in the classroom. When photographs and written descriptions of the activity are included, along with a statement of what the children learned, these extended displays offer families another glimpse into the life of the classroom.

Family Perspective: When my daughter was in kindergarten and first grade, there was always some kind of display of children's work outside the classroom. Sometimes there were drawings and children's dictation about them; sometimes transcribed answers to teacher questions; sometimes photographs of the children at work and the work samples they produced that day. I enjoyed being able to look at the work from all the children. It was just one more way to learn about what the children were doing in the classroom.

Teacher Perspective: Sometimes I don't want to spend the time putting up displays of the children's work, but I do it anyway. The children feel such a sense of pride when their work is exhibited outside the classroom. Other teachers comment on it, and they beam. Some parents come to the school just to see the new displays and those children are so pleased.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Written communication gives families a body of shared knowledge. Through reading the same letters and articles and by experiencing some of the same at-home learning activities, families begin to develop similar understandings about education. However, the heart of building a community among families is relationships: between teacher and families, and among the families themselves. Shared knowledge can be a foundation for these relationships, but to truly develop a sense of community, there must be shared time among the adults.

Conferences

Each family needs opportunities to talk with the teacher about their individual child. Educators provide this time through regularly scheduled conferences. Meetings between teacher and parents should be a relaxed time of sharing, so that means that conferences should be scheduled for a period of time long enough to ensure that the teacher can share information about the child and the family can ask questions, express concerns, and share ideas. Before the conference, the teacher organizes representative samples of the child's work. Then at the conference, he describes that work to the family and offers interpretation and explanation of the progress indicated by the work. He also shares stories about the child and discusses his observations of the child in

various settings. He encourages the family to ask any questions they might have at any point during the conference, to share information, and to give their perspective on the child's development and learning. Families should do at least 50% of the talking during a conference with their child's teacher.

Conferences can be disconcerting for both the family and the teacher. Teachers often feel apprehensive before a conference because they worry that parents will challenge their classroom practices or ask questions they cannot answer. Parents often feel anxious because they are afraid that the teacher will share with them a negative report about their child. The teacher can help alleviate anxiety by describing in a letter to families what they can expect in a family/teacher conference, by scheduling time periods long enough for unhurried conversation, and by opening and closing the conference with positive comments about the child. Conferences are often the basis of the relationship between teachers and families.

Family Perspective: I always look forward to conferences. It gives both the parent and teacher helpful information about each other and the student.

Teacher Perspective: When I'm preparing for conferences, I try to anticipate the questions and feelings that the parents might have in response to the information I give them. I recall how intimidating it was to me sometimes when my children were small, because they are so precious to me and I wanted everything to be perfect for and about them. I wanted to know that the person who was sharing really cared about them and was a capable teacher who would know what to do to bring out the best in my child and was a capable teacher who would know what to do to bring out the best in my child. I try to remember those feelings when I talk to parents.

Monthly Family Meetings

Perhaps the most effective method of building relationships among families is through regularly scheduled family meetings. Most teachers plan these meetings for the evening hours when more adults are available. The conversations between the classroom teacher and family members take several different forms during family meetings. For a portion of the meeting, the teacher follows a preannounced agenda. She might explain the learning that occurs as children play in the block center or talk about the reasons she uses a variety of math manipulatives. She shows student work and asks the adults to try out some of the classroom activities on their own. As the adults build with blocks, the teacher describes what they are doing, much the same way she does with the children she teaches. She challenges them to expand their block building, and then discusses the learning children would have experienced if they engaged in the same construction activity. As the adults use linking cubes or two-colored counters to solve problems, they understand that mathematics is more than computation and begin to appreciate that manipulatives and the conversation among the families supports the relationship forming between the adults connected to the classroom.

Not all the talk is teacher-to-family. As the meeting continues, families take a more active role. Some parents like to share anecdotes of what their child has done or said at home that gave them insight into classroom activities. Others like to share problematic moments they have had with their child and ask advice about parenting issues. At times, family members ask advice about bedtime reading routines or how they can support their child's literacy or math development. At others times, parents like to get involved in planning activities for the class. The more the group meets together, the more the family meetings

take on the characteristics of a group of friends getting together informally to talk about educational issues and their own children.

Family Perspective: Monthly family meetings were TERRIFIC! What an enjoyable way to spend an evening, listening to teacher stories about our children. Of course, we benefited too from your discussion of the next month's activities in advance. I always felt like I was in the know.

Teacher Perspective: Regularly scheduled family meetings offer an opportunity for parents to mix and find friends. I enjoy this time because it is not just me telling parents about things. After a meeting or two, it really begins feeling a bit like a family reunion.

Special Events Evenings

Another way teachers share educational information and arrange time for families to spend time together is by organizing special events evenings. With two or three weeks advance notice, most families can plan to come together to celebrate their children's accomplishments and to learn more about the way the class works. Special events nights might be reciting poetry, playing math games, sharing books the children have published, viewing a class-produced video tape, perusing the latest artwork hung in the children's class museum, or any other student creation that they want to share with their families. When the teacher begins the event with a few words of introduction, she can explain what the children did to prepare for the evening and what learning was embedded in their work.

Family Perspective: It meant a lot to be as a mother to celebrate my child's accomplishment with other parents. But it was more than just celebrating what my child did. These events were almost like a family reunion, a group of people who cared about all these children coming together to celebrate what the whole class had accomplished. The

children seemed so proud of themselves and so willing to share what they had learned.

Teacher Perspective: Not every family comes to the special things my class plans during the day or at night, but for those children whose families do attend, something special happens. When families come to an art exhibit created by the children or a poetry reading night, the children feel so much pride in their work. It is like they have a real audience for their work. They don't just memorize poems for the teacher. Other people are going to come to these events. The reactions of family and friends confirm for the children that they are doing important work.

SUMMARY

The family involvement activities discussed in this article may sound ambitious at first. It would be difficult to begin a family involvement program and include every one of these components. However, starting small with two or three components, then adding a component every few months makes implementing an effective family involvement program feasible.

Teacher Perspective: I can say from experience that these activities are achievable. These are components from my own plan to develop relationships with and among families. Teachers who have not had extensive experience with family involvement programs may be concerned about the investment of additional time and work required by these activities. I can say honestly that, except for the months when I held hour-long conferences with individual families, I only invested about ten hours a month to these family-involvement components.

Obviously from the family components above, families feel very positive about the opportunity to get involved in the life of their child's class. Each comment was

made by a parent with whom I worked during my last year of teaching public school. Undoubtedly, the children of this class benefited from the close relationships between their teacher and their families. The teacher statements above, gathered from teacher colleagues, confirm that teachers also benefit from these close relationships.

The families of my students were supportive of my classroom practices, worked with their children at home on a regular basis, volunteered in the class, and helped make my teaching life easier. They brought in books and artifacts to support topics we were studying, sent boxes of markers or envelopes when they noticed the lack of supplies in our learning centers, or bought animal bedding or a case of audio tapes when I wrote about classroom needs. I felt supported and appreciated by the families of my students.

Now that I teach college classes, I share my plan for working with families with preservice teachers. While I discuss its benefits from a teacher's perspective, I also ask a parent of a former student to speak to my classes about the benefits from their family's perspective. The advantages mentioned above for students, families, and teachers are just the beginning of the positive outcomes that occur when a teacher works to build a community of families in the classroom.

-- Deborah Diffily

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