Harcourt

Building Partnerships
with Parents

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Introduction

Many teachers are able to communicate effectively with parents using what appears to be very little effort. They have mastered the ability to accept others and show that they are interested in their point of view. They know the art of two-way communication and how to build partnerships with parents. They have developed effective communication strategies.

In order to build an effective partnership with parents, one must understand communication strategies. Basically, there are two types of communication strategies: one-way and two-way (Barbour and Barbour, 2001; Berger, 2000). Newsletters, bulletin boards, school handbooks and progress notes are all examples of one-way communication. One-way strategies keep parents informed about activities and school policies. The second type of communication, two-way, is an integral part of building partnerships with parents. It is essential for educators and parents to engage in an exchange of ideas, including exchanging information on assessment and instruction to build productive partnerships (National PTA, 1999). True partnerships with parents can only be achieved when two-way communication strategies are utilized.

Partnership Strategies

School Climate

Generally, the first opportunity educators have for building partnerships with parents starts when parents enter the school. The staff must create an atmosphere that is inviting and accessible for parents. For instance, greet parents as soon as they walk in the door. Establish a school climate with an open-door policy that allows parents to visit when it is convenient for them, not just during special events, open house or parents' night. Provide parents with guidelines about visiting the classroom so that they do not interfere with the learning process. It is important that all school

employees--office staff, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators and custodians--do their part to create an open-door environment.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Traditionally, parent-teacher conferences have been used as a means to discuss difficult situations or to provide parents with an update on their child's progress. A more proactive approach is to set up parent-teacher conferences early in the school year as a means for laying the foundation for two-way communication. Take this opportunity to get to know the parent and provide information about yourself, your teaching style and positive experiences you have had working with their child.

Conferences can be accomplished through telephone calls, e-mail, or classroom or home visits. The first two methods provide an efficient means for reaching many parents, but are not necessarily the most effective means of communication. Telephone calls and e-mails lack facial expressions and body language and could potentially lead to miscommunication. Instead, consider using telephone calls and e-mails to set up face-to-face interactions with parents. On the surface, this may appear to be creating more work for educators who are overworked already. However, the extra time spent building a positive connection with parents will pay off in the end. Educators will be viewed as partners, not adversaries, when difficult situations arise.

Home Visits

Home visits offer an opportunity to build trust and gain a fuller understanding of the parent-child relationship. Interactions during home visits are less formal and more trusting (Swap, 1993; Barr & Cochran, 1992). This provides educators with a way to become familiar with a family's interests and interactions. Home visits are also a great way to build rapport with the child's family.

Parent Activities

There are a number of programs that school districts can offer to help parents increase their parenting skills, confidence and social networks (Swap, 1993). The Hanen Program is one method that has been utilized when working with parents who have a young child with a disability (Manolson, 1995). This program helps parents recognize and improve their ability to play, interact and communicate with their child with a disability. In another program in New York City, parent activities include English as a Second Language, tutoring sessions for basic reading and mathematics, resume writing and interviewing skills as a means to develop parent support and interaction (Jackson, Davies, Cooper, & Paige, 1988). Schools may find it beneficial to hire an outside facilitator for workshops on more personal topics (such as anger

management) or for programs dealing with techniques for special groups (e.g., Even Start, emotionally disturbed).

Effective Communication Strategies

Be Prepared

Prepare for the parent-teacher conference by assembling the necessary material in advance. For instance, if you will be discussing assessment results, have the child's scores ready. Also, have readily available samples of the child's work that support your point.

Non-verbal Messages

When meeting with parents, what you do not say is just as important as what you do say. Keeping parents waiting for an appointment that you scheduled sends a nonverbal message that you, the educator, are in control and perhaps other things are more important than this meeting. Body language such as head nods and eye contact convey interest and concern to the parent.

Acceptance

People can tell when someone accepts them and is interested in their point of view. Teacher acceptance of the parent is critical to parent/professional participation in the student's program. Good communicators convey their care and concern to the parents and professionals with whom they interact. They always seem to find the time to meet with them.

Listening

Allow parents to tell their story. Individuals are open to listening to another's opinion only when they feel that they are also being heard. Guide the discussion so that you do not rush the parent, but do keep them on track. If the topic of conversation becomes tangential, guide the conversation back to the original issue by rephrasing a parent's comments or asking for clarification about their comment. For example, if a parent begins to discuss how difficult it is to work with her boss, acknowledge that concern--"It does sound like you are in a tough situation at work." Then, redirect the parent--"How can we work together to help Jeffrey improve his math skills?" Reflective listening is another way to convey interest in the parent's comments, "What I hear you saying is…"

Teachers must genuinely listen to parents. Effective listening is more than waiting politely for the parent (or other professional) to finish before you speak. Effective listeners hear the message the other person is sending and frequently ask questions to clarify that they truly understand what others are saying. According to Vaughn, Bos and Schumm (1997) effective listening involves the following elements:

- Listen for the real content in the message (the key information the parent wants to convey).

- Listen for the feelings/emotions in the message.

- Restate the content and reflect feelings.

- Allow the speaker the opportunity to confirm or correct your perception.

Silence

Silence is a powerful tool. It sends the message to parents that their action is needed to make something happen (Luterman, 1991). Using silence as a tool for listening is initially uncomfortable and may even be embarrassing. However, over time, silence becomes an opportunity for reflection, a time-out of sorts that allows participants the opportunity to consider their feelings about the recent discussion.

Choose Your Words Carefully

Educators often speak in shorthand. Acronyms and other educator jargon are often unfamiliar to parents. Take the time to explain unfamiliar terms more than once if necessary. Present the information in an informative fashion, taking care to not be perceived as patronizing.

Types of Responses

Content responses allow educators to establish credibility and provide possible solutions. For example, "I am aware of a number of after school tutoring programs that could help Jeff with his math skills."

Counter-question responses are useful in helping parents reveal their position on issues. "Why do you think Sara is having difficulty in English class?"

Be sensitive to a parent's feelings. The phrase "I know how you feel" should be used with caution. Unless you have actually had the same experience you really do not

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know how the parent feels. A better way to show your empathy is to say, "I can only imagine how difficult this is for you."

Negative Information

Providing negative feedback is difficult for most individuals. Avoid blaming or judging the parent. State the situation clearly and succinctly, and provide concrete examples of the behavior. Realize that the resolution to the problem may not occur until several days or weeks after delivering the news.

Receiving negative feedback is equally difficult. It is best not to internalize the criticism. In order to defuse a potentially volatile situation, acknowledge the parent's feelings, then try to focus the conversation on possible solutions to the problem. Again, a resolution may not occur until a later date.

Questioning

Active listening requires that the "listener" ask questions. Well-stated questions can have multiple purposes. Questions can be used to teach, to establish relationships, to inquire and to investigate. The questions one asks can set a tone of acceptance.

Knowing which types of questions to ask helps you obtain information you need. Open-ended questions allow for a full range of responses.

Focus

Staying focused in your communication and keeping that focus are important skills that contribute to successful collaboration--creating partnerships with the parents. If a parent has a difficult time staying on topic, redirect the focus or remind him or her of the purpose of the meeting. Sometimes parents have so many problems of their own that they want to talk about those rather than the student. Have a referral list for specialized assistance readily available for them.

Conclusion

Individual educators should take responsibility for creating partnerships with parents as part of the educational process. It is essential to engage the parents as active participants in the communication process, rather than permitting them to be passive observers. Active participation draws the parents in as partners, which, in turn, makes the parents feel empowered and invested in their child's educational process. By effectively building partnerships, educators reassure parents and students that we are committed to providing every student with the opportunity to reach high educational standards.

About the Authors

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Extending the Partnerships: Developing Academic Parent-Teacher Teams. Creating and Implementing A Family Partnership Plan For Distance Learning. EL Modification. Parent-Teacher-Home Visits. Home Visit Training Video. A Parent Reflects on Building Relationships with Teachers. Extending the Partnership: Tellin' Stories Approach. Many school leaders recognize that parents have a positive impact on the school and student learning, but they are not sure how to meaningfully partner with their families. Despite best intentions, schools struggle to overcome barriers to family engagement, especially for traditionally marginalized communities. Building partnerships between parents and practitioners. Introduction. Parents are the most important people in their children's early lives. Children learn about the world and their place in it through their conversations, play activities, and routines with parents and families. Parents can also support children's learning in out-of-home settings, such as childminding settings, crèches, playgroups, pre-schools, and primary schools. By working together parents and practitioners can enhance children's learning and development. Building genuine learning partnerships with parents. Published 2018 © Crown copyright ISBN 978-0-478-43868-0. Except for the Education Review Office's logo used throughout this report, this copyright work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 New Zealand licence. What we found in the schools included in this evaluation. The parent partnership approaches and strategies that worked. Moving to genuine relational and learning partnerships with parents, families and whānau. Using and responding to an inquiry to improve learner-centred relationships with parents. Genuine, learning partnership with parents to help both the children and the teachers. Improving educationally powerful connections with parents. Building good relationships. Regular chats with parents are a really important opportunity for sharing information. Parents can often feel they're missing out on their child's day, so a few minutes chatting can be reassuring. It's important to get them involved in their child's learning and development. Top tip: When building a relationship with parents you should consider the sensitive feelings of the parent and thinking carefully about how you communicate, particularly when you have difficult things to say. "Tactful responses are also needed, for example if a child learns to walk whilst in your setting. A child's first steps are very important to parents, so I think about this and approach the subject with sensitivity." Karen Steer, Childminder. Extend children's learning. 2. Partnerships with parents – Partnerships between parents, students and schools promote student learning, wellbeing and high expectations for student success. 3. Community collaboration – Relationships between the school and wider community strengthen the ability of schools and families to support student learning, wellbeing and developmental outcomes. ` Identifying and building community partnerships with local businesses and community organisations (including allied health, family support, counselling and rehabilitation services) to improve opportunities and outcomes for students. ` Planning community collaboration and developing commitment. ` Developing clarity around partner roles and responsibilities.