

HOW TO SOLICIT ONGOING SUGGESTIONS FROM PARENTS¹

It's great to get input from parents when they enroll their children, but that's only the beginning. Building positive relationships with parents is an ongoing process. An important part of building such relationships is encouraging parents to give you feedback and ideas throughout the year. Here are a few ideas for soliciting ongoing suggestions from parents:

Informal Daily Conversations with Parents. When parents drop off or pick up their children, don't miss the opportunity to extend a friendly greeting and share something about the child's day. During informal exchanges with parents, ask for their ideas and suggestions whenever possible. Some programs assign one staff person to greet parents towards the end of the day. This staff person can devote full attention to assisting parents, asking them about their day, and listening to any suggestions they might have to offer. If you implement this procedure, be sure to let parents know which staff member has this responsibility (and which staff are expected to stay focused on children and youth). For example, the "Parent Greeter" might wear a "Parent Greeter" badge. In a large program, a different staff member might be the "Parent Greeter" every day, giving parents an opportunity to interact with all staff.

Listen to What Children Say about Their Parents' Interests, Talents, Hobbies, etc. Then, follow-up with phone calls and informal conversations with parents. Invite them to contribute ideas in areas where they have interests and expertise.

Conduct Telephone Surveys. Develop a brief list of open-ended questions and solicit parent suggestions and opinions about various aspects of your program over the phone. Let parents know you will be doing this and ask them to let you know if they prefer not to participate in a telephone survey.

Display a Parent Suggestion Box near the **Parent Bulletin Board** or another spot that is clearly visible and accessible to parents. Invite children to help you decorate the box so that it is eye-catching and attractive. (**Note:** Children might like to have a Suggestion Box, too!) Post a friendly, brief notice inviting parent suggestions near the box. In the notice, let parents know they do not have to sign their suggestions. However, remind parents that it may be easier to follow-up on a suggestion if you can chat with the parent who made it. That way, you can clarify any questions you might have about the suggestion and have the opportunity to work together to implement the suggestion if possible. Remember, if you solicit suggestions, it's essential to let parents know what suggestions you've received and how you plan to respond. You can do this privately or publicly at a meeting, in a memo, etc. – whatever seems most appropriate. Even if you can't act on all suggestions, it's important for parents to know that you've read them and considered them. Without feedback, parents will assume their ideas are disappearing into thin air, and they'll assume it's a waste of time to share them.

¹ Excerpted with permission from Roberta L. Newman, *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs, 2nd Edition, Revised*. New Albany, OH: School-Age NOTES, 2008. (Originally published in conjunction with Work/Family Directions, Boston, MA, AT&T Family Development Fund.) Pages 94 – 95.

Host Parent Forums or Discussion Groups. Parent forums and discussion groups can be especially useful if you are grappling with specific difficult issues in your program (e.g. funding cuts, high staff turnover, or difficulty recruiting substitute teachers). These kinds of issues can have a direct affect on parents and parents can often help you work towards solutions where everyone benefits. In one program experiencing difficulty recruiting and retaining part-time staff, 75 parents who had been complaining about high staff turnover attended a forum to discuss the issue. After a briefing by the director, parents were asked to help brainstorm recruiting ideas. They came up with over 50 ideas for recruitment that the staff had not tried. They also recommended that the program consider raising salaries to help recruit and retain staff!

Sponsor Informal “Get Acquainted” Coffees, Pot Luck Dinners, or Other Social Events for Parents. Informal gatherings of parents provide an excellent opportunity to talk with parents about their suggestions and new ideas for enhancing and enriching the program.

Conduct an Ongoing Feedback Survey. Place copies of a short survey soliciting feedback from parents in a large envelop and post the envelope on or near your **Parent Bulletin Board**. Label the envelope: “*Parent Survey – Please Complete One!*” Post a notice next to the envelope, inviting parents to complete the survey whenever they would like to give you feedback about the program or make suggestions. Post a second envelope labeled “Completed Parent Surveys” nearby. Don’t forget to read the completed surveys and get back to parents with your response! (**Note:** Keep the survey forms simple and short. See **ONGOING PARENT SURVEY FORM** later in **Section Two** for suggested survey format and open-ended questions.) **ALTERNATIVE SURVEY PROCESS:** If your program and program parents have access to the Internet, post your ongoing survey on-line so that parents can complete it at home or on a break at work. Search the Web for “Creating On-Line Surveys” to locate sites such as www.SurveyMoney.com where you can find help in creating your own on-line surveys.

Conduct Periodic Formal Surveys. Once or twice a year, distribute surveys that give parents in your program an opportunity to indicate how they feel about various aspects of your program. (See sample **Parent Satisfaction Survey** later in **Section Two**). If you have families in your program that do not speak English, include translations of the survey form in their primary language if at all possible. **Post Parent Satisfaction Surveys on-line if both parents and the program have access to the Internet.**

Make Ongoing Feedback Forms Available. Encourage parents to give you feedback about various aspects of the program by providing **Feedback Forms** in envelopes on your parent bulletin board or on a table near the place where parents check-in or out each day. **Feedback Forms** provide parents with a convenient vehicle for giving you feedback about **Compliments, Ideas, or Problems**. (See sample *Feedback Forms* later in Section Two of *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs* by Roberta Newman.) **Post Feedback Forms on-line if both parents and the program have access to the Internet.**