

Building Positive Relationships with Parents in School-Age Programs: 4 A's of Parent Involvement¹

by Roberta L. Newman

The following *Four A's of Parent Involvement* revolve around relationship building:

- 1) **Accepting** Parents as the most important people in children's lives (whether they are present or not)
- 2) **Assessing** Parents Wants, Needs, and Concerns
- 3) **Accommodating** Parents Wants, Needs, and Concerns, and
- 4) **Alliance Building** – creating strong, ongoing partnerships with parents (including anyone fulfilling the role of parent in a child's life)

Focusing on building relationships requires us to examine our own attitudes, beliefs, values, perspectives, knowledge, life experiences, communication skills, cultural background, and acceptance of diversity and explore how all these affect how we interact with parents. Relationship building requires us **to think not only about what we want parents to do, but also to consider the role we play in the potential partnership.** It requires us to take an honest look at how our thoughts and actions could be causing us to fall short of the goals of strong parent involvement and engagement.

What follows is a discussion of how these *Four "A's" of Parent Involvement* can provide us with a framework for developing a systematic approach to building relationships with parents and increasing parent involvement.

ACCEPTANCE

Parents, like children, have different ideas, values, concerns, knowledge, pressures, lifestyles, plans, dreams, resources, and constraints. Educators and child and youth professionals who are successful in building positive relationships begin by recognizing and accepting parents as the most important people in children's lives, regardless of differences among them. The attitudes and opinions we have about parents have a strong effect on our ability to interact effectively with them. It is important to identify and acknowledge our feelings and

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opinions about parents of children we serve and to discuss how these feelings can either help or hinder our work with families.

For example, staff who are convinced that parents just want to drop children off and forget about them are not likely to make efforts to get parents involved. They've already decided parents aren't interested. On the other hand, staff who believe parents are a valuable resource for program planning are likely to solicit parents' suggestions, ideas, and concerns as they plan program experiences.

Because we're all human, parents, educators, and child and youth care professionals all have values, beliefs, concerns, and traditions that influence our attitudes and shape the way we look at each other. The first step to building relationships with parents, then, is to acknowledge our own attitudes towards parents and explore ways to work through those attitudes that may be preventing us from accepting parents as valuable partners.

ASSESSMENT

The one unifying theme among today's parents may be that many of them are stressed by the challenges of meeting their obligations in the workplace, while trying to build and maintain healthy relationships with the significant people in their personal lives. The extent to which parents feel that their lives are manageable and under some degree of control has a strong influence on the extent to which they are able and willing to be resourceful partners with their children's school and child care programs.

In order to get parents involved in our programs, we need to assess who they are and what they need. We need to view each family's circumstances objectively. This can be very challenging. Sometimes it is tempting to make judgments about parents based on very brief interactions with them, especially when these interactions are unpleasant or frustrating. When our observations do not provide enough information, we need to step back and ask ourselves what else we need to know in order to connect with parents in a positive way. Here are some useful questions to ask:

- If I were a parent with a child in this program, what would I want to know? What would be the best way for me to learn about the program?
- What individual and group interests and needs are common to many parents in our community?
- What stresses, pressures, problems, or constraints face many parents in our community?

- How much time do most parents in our community have to be involved in their children's out-of-school experiences?
- What special knowledge, talents, and abilities do parents in our community possess? How can we make it easy for them to share/contribute their talents?
- What's the best way for us to learn about the needs, interests, and concerns of parents in our program?

ACCOMMODATION

Assessing parents' needs, interests, and concerns reveals that parents are as diverse as their children. Parent involvement is most successful when programs accommodate that diversity and recognize that all parents do not have to be involved in the same way. Rather, programs can offer a variety of opportunities for parent involvement, including opportunities to:

- Talk with program staff.
- Receive information and learn about the program.
- Help shape program policies.
- Help support program activities.
- Participate in projects and activities at the program.
- Follow up on program projects and activities at home.
- Get to know other parents and children.
- Network with other parents with similar problems and concerns.

Parent involvement can be catching! Parents who become enthusiastically involved in one opportunity frequently expand their involvement to other opportunities.

ALLIANCE BUILDING

Unless we make a conscious, comprehensive effort to let parents know what's going on and shy, parents must depend on their children to fill in the blanks themselves. Some parents imagine everything is wonderful when it really isn't. Other parents are nervous about what they don't know and sometimes imagine the worst. Based on very little information, parents may develop a negative impression about the quality of their children's experiences in the program. Still other parents may feel confused about what's going on and what kind of role they can play in their child's after school program.

When their children are not with them, parents want to know what and how they are doing. Parents like to hear about the little things their children say and do –

anecdotes about daily happenings that give them insights about how their children see the world. They also want to know when children are having problems (even though their initial reaction can be negative or defensive at times).

Ongoing, good communication between parents and child and youth professionals is essential if we hope to make a positive difference in the lives of school-age children. Three steps you can take to ensure that ongoing positive communication can take place between you and the parents you serve are:

1. Share Information

Set up formal ways for parents to learn about daily and weekly happenings in your program. Start out right. Think through what kinds of orientation materials parents need: policy and procedure statements, health and safety guidelines, program philosophy and standards, descriptions of the daily schedule of activities, etc. Once children are attending your program, keep the information coming. Use parent bulletin boards, calendars of events and regular newsletters to keep parents up to date on program happenings.

Remember that sharing information implies a two-way exchange of information. Find out about children's needs and interests and parent needs and expectations through daily chats, conferences, suggestion boxes, and parent surveys. Offer discussion groups where parents can clarify their understanding of the program and explore ways the program can better meet the needs of children and parents.

Communicate regularly about each child's experience in the program. Take time to send home "good news" notes or make a short phone call when a child learns a new skill, solves a hard problem, makes something beautiful, says something funny, or has an especially happy day.

2. Develop a Plan for Building Relationships

Communication experts tell us that the more we talk to one another, the more positive our attitude toward communicating can become. Brief exchanges between child and youth professionals and parents at drop off and pick up times help build open, friendly relationships. Daily warm greetings and good-byes help children and parents feel comfortable and important.

In addition to informal daily chats, plan opportunities for parents to be involved in your program so you can get to know each other. Invite parent participation in family picnics, pot luck dinners, or other social events. Invite parents to attend special program activities like songfests, talent shows, visits from local musicians or other performers. Encourage parents to participate in field trips, if possible. Take photos and make videos of these events to share with parents who cannot attend. Invite parents to help with special projects like repairing equipment at home or helping with a Saturday clean-up and repair day.

3. Share Problems When They Occur

Even if child and youth professionals work at building and sustaining relationships with parents, *sharing problems is never easy*. Yet, it can be one of the most important services we can provide as child and youth professionals. While parents are often understandably apprehensive about discussing problems, they don't want to be kept in the dark. They want to know. How can child and youth professionals meet the challenge of sharing problems or concerns with parents in the most effective way? Here are a few suggestions:

- ***Share problems at the right time and in the right place.*** When you have genuine concerns, never share them casually or in front of other people. Plan thoughtfully and set up a private meeting (or a private phone call if a meeting is not possible). Keep in mind that it's often difficult for parents and child and youth professionals to focus productively on problem sharing and problem solving at the end of a long work day when they may feel emotionally, mentally, and physically drained.
- ***Start a problem sharing conversation by offering some positive comments first.*** Remember what Haim Ginott said in his book *Teacher and Child*, "When a teacher talks to parents about their children, he inevitably intrudes on family dreams." End your meeting with positive comments, too, if at all possible.
- ***When describing a problem, be factual and objective.*** Avoid preaching, blaming, criticizing, or judging (the child or the parent).
- ***Monitor the reactions of parents.*** As you talk with parents about problems, maintain relaxed eye contact and be aware of body language or words that indicate the parent may be feeling tense, hurt, disappointed, or angry.

- **Ask questions, get advice, and invite parents to work with you.** Remember that parents know their children better than anyone else. Find out if they have the same perspective and expectations of their children as you do. Work towards creating strategies for solving the problem that are mutually acceptable to the parent, the child, and you. Stress the importance of consistency between home and the school-age program.

- **Listen.** When you solicit comments and suggestions from parents, be sure to listen to what they have to say. Keep these *listening guidelines* in mind:
 - Be genuinely open to hearing ideas and opinions. Take time to hear parents out. Don't interrupt. Don't rush.

 - Acknowledge and reflect parent's feelings. Be willing to accept feelings even if they're different from your own. Check your perceptions of parents' feelings and opinions by re-stating what you have understood them to say.

 - Trust parents' abilities to find solutions to problems. Let them know you value them value them as a resource.

Always remember that productive two-way communication supports the development and maintenance of positive relationships that are always in the best interests of children. Positive relationships never develop by accident. They take thoughtful planning as well as constant nurturing and attention.