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**Supporting Families: Children Are The Winners**

By Ann Barbour, Ph.D.

In recent years, numerous efforts to improve children's school readiness and achievement have focused on building partnerships with families. The recognition that parents are key elements in children's learning is reflected in the U.S. Department of Education's Goals 2000 Education America (1993). One of the eight goals states, "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children." Most education intervention programs, including Head Start, require parent participation and consider it an essential component. Various legislative acts providing services to children also mandate parent participation (e.g., Title 1 of PL 100-297, PL 94-142). In addition, numerous professional organizations, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children and Association for Childhood Education International, recognize that parent involvement is an important measure of program quality.

There are many views of parent involvement. For instance, some teachers regard parent involvement as a source of classroom help or attendance at school events (Gestwicki, 1992). However, the word "partnership" implies shared interests and mutual support. While teachers need various types of assistance from parents in meeting the needs of children in their care, teachers' support of families in the difficult task of parenting is likely to have the longest-lasting impact on children's success. Children's healthy development is the concern of parents and teachers alike. Collaborative efforts – teachers' support of families as well as the reverse – contribute to children's success in school and in life.

Early childhood professionals can play a critical role in the attitudes parents develop about their child's schooling. Teachers of the very young often establish the first connections parents have to school situations and thus influence parents' attitudes toward involvement. These first connections may be respectful and supportive or distant and antagonistic. Ideally, the initial experiences in the school environment for both children and their families should be caring and nurturing (Swick, 1994). Just as the early years are crucial for children's learning, they are also critical in establishing parents' patterns of involvement. If parents are not involved in their children's early school experiences, it is unlikely that they will become involved as their children grow older (Berger, 1995).

**Challenges Facing Today's Parents**

Parents, today as in the past, want their children to succeed in school and in life. However, social and economic changes make it increasingly difficult for parents to provide the support that children need. "The loss of community, the increased fragmentation of family life, the competing, often conflicting pressures" in parents' daily lives (Boyer, 1991, p. 4) confront families as they raise their children. Parents often lack traditional support networks (e.g., spouse, extended family, neighborhood, church/synagogue) and experience feelings of isolation in carrying out the responsibilities of parenthood. In the face of such social change, schools and child care programs become increasingly important as sources of support for the family as well as for the child.

Usually, parents are the one continuous force in their children's learning. But few parents feel fully equipped to guide their children's learning. Relationships with other adults who care for and about their child can influence parents' attitudes and child rearing techniques. Teachers are a powerful and positive influence in this regard.

Although parents are their children's first and most essential educators (Boyer, 1991), the school, and the circumstances in which children live, also impact their growth and development. Ideally, these influences should provide a stable environment in which children can experience the kind of continuity that promotes healthy development.

Lombardi (1992) cites three components which help to ensure continuity in children's development: developmentally appropriate curricula, parent and school collaboration, and community support and services provided by social service agencies. Teachers who build supportive relationships with parents can influence these three components. They can help parents understand and sanction developmentally appropriate curricula, adopt appropriate guidance strategies in the home, develop long-term patterns of collaboration with schools, establish supportive networks with other parents, and utilize community social services.

### **Benefits of Family Involvement**

Family involvement in children's learning benefits children, parents, teachers, and program quality in many interrelated ways. These include child competence, parent effectiveness, and program enrichment.

### **Child Competence**

The single most important determinant of a child's success in school is not socio-economic status or parents' level of education, but rather parental interest and support (Watson, et. al, 1983). Many parents demonstrate interest through involvement with children at home and within early childhood program. Other parents need encouragement and help in becoming involved. A direct relationship exists between the support a parent receives and the support a parent gives the child. Even though there are increasing numbers of community resource programs offering services to families, the positive impact of personal support given by individual early childhood professionals should not be underestimated. "Parents who have a support system to rely on are likely to translate their positive human relationships into a productive home learning setting for children" (Watson, et. al., 1983). Supporting parents in their efforts to nurture children, in turn, can lead to increased child competence.

### **Parent Effectiveness**

Parent participation can also be "a means of fostering the growth and development of parents as people" (Powell, 1989, p. 6). Parental involvement contributes to parents' feelings of self-worth and competence, especially among low-income and minority populations. Parents who participate tend to feel both vested in what happens at school and more effective in their roles as parents. One rationale for including parents in Head Start programs is that the experiences and training parents receive make it more likely that they will become more involved in other human service institutions and thus act as mechanisms for social change.

In addition, parents have opportunities to learn appropriate methods to nurture development through participation. Concern about their children's early acquisition of basic skills prompts many parents to contribute to the problems of early academics (Stipek, et. al., 1994). Without the benefit of evidence to the contrary, many parents believe that young children learn best through teacher-directed "instruction," worksheets, and grades. However, by watching and listening to teachers in high-quality programs, parents observe that young children learn best through active engagement in selfinitiated activities (Bredekamp, 1987). Parents have opportunities to understand that appropriate environments are rich and challenging while being success-oriented, that appropriate experiences are those which are personally meaningful to children and which progressively build upon concepts and skills children already possess, and that appropriate curricula and teaching methods are tailored to individual children's natural methods of learning. Through involvement with teachers, parents also can learn positive guidance techniques and appropriate strategies to promote learning at home.

### **Program Enrichment**

Parent involvement enriches early childhood programs in many ways. Parents can supplement the resources of teachers by providing one-on-one attention to individual children and by working on long-term projects. They can share their expertise on themes and topics and donate supplies and materials. Parents can organize fundraisers, supply extra help to make field trips possible, and serve as part of a decision-making team.

In addition to augmenting the program, involved parents often become advocates for teachers. These parents are the most likely to urge communities to establish conditions and policies that improve teachers' abilities to provide the best learning experiences for children (Gestwicki, 1992).

## **How to Support Families and Encourage Involvement**

When early childhood professionals encourage parents to nurture their children, the likelihood that the children will experience success and grow up to be healthy individuals increases. Supporting families in child rearing begins by forming partnerships based upon mutual respect, shared understanding, and cooperative decision making.

### **Get to Know the Parents**

Many steps can be taken to build supportive partnerships. However, the first step is to understand parents'

feelings and concerns (Berger, 1995). Early personal contact helps to alleviate parents' and children's apprehension as they begin a new experience. It also conveys the message that children and their families are valued (Gestwicki, 1992). Parent questionnaires can supplement personal contact and highlight parents' questions, concerns, needs, and interests.

Just as knowing individual children makes it possible to create personalized learning experiences, understanding individual families makes it easier to respond appropriately to their needs. Regardless of family configuration, background, or challenges, every family has strengths. Knowing families will enable teachers to capitalize on family strengths. Parents who feel a teacher genuinely cares for their child, and wants their child to succeed as much as they do, are likely to view working together favorably and to share information willingly. Exchange of observations, insights, and ideas helps everyone to respond appropriately to the child.

### **Communicate With Parents**

*Communication takes two forms.*

One-way communication conveys information to parents through means such as handbooks, newsletters, or notes sent home. One-way communication is vital to keep parents informed but provides little in the way of family support. Two-way communication, on the other hand, allows sharing of information, concerns, and feelings. Frequent two-way communication is essential to establishing rapport, and building understanding, trust, and a sense of collaboration, all of which contribute to a teacher's ability to support parents. Two-way communication can take place during home visits, phone calls, classroom visits, conferences, or brief conversations during drop-off or pick-up times.

Be as positive as possible when talking with parents. Share children's accomplishments with them regularly. Even when there are concerns or problems to discuss, begin and end discussions on a positive note. This is known as the "sandwich" approach (Manning, 1985) and insures against alienating parents. Emphasize working with parents for the benefit of the child. Focus on what can be done together to help a child who may be having difficulty.

### **Consider Parents' Practical Needs**

Flexibility in scheduling conferences, school events, and various opportunities for participation increases the likelihood that parents will become involved. This may require special efforts to keep in touch with parents, such as an evening phone call, home visits, parent-teacher dialogue journals, arrangement of transportation and child care, or events scheduled on Saturdays.

### **Encourage Involvement and Provide Options**

An atmosphere which is welcoming and inviting promotes family involvement. The center environment can convey messages that parents are a vital part of the school community: a friendly, helpful staff; an open-door policy; parent information bulletin boards; photographs of children and their families on display; and a designated area for parents to meet with each other or work together on school-related projects.

Provide multiple opportunities for parental involvement. Because not all parents are alike, different involvement opportunities should be available. Epstein (1995) developed a framework of six major types of parent involvement with their children's learning. Her framework includes parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Not all parents feel comfortable or able to assist in classroom projects. Some may prefer to help at home, for example by making classroom materials, or by reading books and doing activities sent home with their own children. While some parents respond to general announcements or requests for volunteers, others may need personal invitations. Repeated efforts of various kinds to involve reticent parents are often necessary.

Make it worth each parent's time to volunteer. Many parents desire to see that whatever they are asked to do directly benefits their own child. Whatever their contributions are, make sure parents know they are important and essential to

program effectiveness. Parents who feel valued are likely to stay involved.

### **Be Aware of Community Resources**

Children and their families often need support and services beyond those which early childhood professionals can provide. Teachers can help families learn about and use resources and services available within the community. Pamphlets and referral information can be collected for reference by program staff and made available to families. Teachers can also share information with community resource personnel working with families to ensure high levels of continuity.

### **Conclusion**

Families face many challenges. These require that early childhood professionals expand their role as caregivers and educators of young children to include support for those children's families. Support given to parents goes a long way in mediating the stresses many families experience and in facilitating their abilities to nurture their children. Partnerships between teachers and parents produce mutual benefits, but greatest of all are benefits to the children for whom they care.

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**Ann Barbour, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

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