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Parenting Beliefs & Behaviors: What Matters Most

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Educators know well what research continues to show: school success is significantly improved when parents are full partners in children's learning. How can schools help families support learning? Educators need to recognize the many ways families contribute to children's learning, and offer a range of supports. No single parent or family factor has been found to predict school readiness and achievement. Rather, a *pattern* of parent beliefs and behaviors shapes family learning environments. Three dimensions are particularly important to early school success.

Family verbal environment: Children's everyday experience with language is a powerful predictor of academic success. It is especially valuable for children to have conversations at home that:

- involve increasingly diverse words and sentence structures;
- support the child's expression of ideas and enable the child to help guide the interaction;
- provide the child with choices.

Family mealtimes and shared book reading are great opportunities for meaningful conversation. Studies show it is helpful for children to retell activities, and to extend discussion of a book to their lives and interests. Adults can help by asking open questions. Children learn more by answering a question with many possible responses ("What happened at school today?") rather than a "yes/no" question ("Did you have a good day at school?").

Routines and materials: Supports for learning are deeply embedded in family routines. Parents can foster routines that actively bolster education, such as keeping well-established times and places for homework; reading books, and talking about past and future activities and interests; making age-appropriate reading and writing materials available. Parents' own reading habits and use of literacy to get information, are models for children. Children of parents who view reading as a source of information and pleasure generally have a more positive view of reading.

Expectations of learning and development: What parents think about how children develop, and how they as parents contribute, are important influences on school outcomes. School success is associated with parents who:

- See the child as an active contributor; rather than a passive recipient of learning;
- Have high expectations for school achievement;
- Believe they can and should exert a positive influence on their child's education.

Connecting With Parents also requires a broad view of how families contribute to children's learning. A single method is unlikely to be widely successful.

Foster relationships: Supportive connections require on-going relationships, rather than one-shot events. To be supportive, schools must learn how parents view their roles, and understand their goals for their children, then tailor information to their interests. Educators must approach parents as individuals rather than as a group, and find ways to connect with parents who cannot come to the school.

Provide different learning opportunities: Some parents respond best to a parenting workshop or group discussion. Others learn most effectively through one-on-one exchanges with their child's teacher, and still others prefer written resources. One size does not fit all!

Incorporate families into the classroom: Our cultural diversity requires schools to embrace the range of family traditions and interests represented in its classrooms. Literacy activities like family-made books provide simple yet affirming ways to acknowledge the enriching value of family life to learning.

Successful Partnership Action Teams Talk about Partnerships

Since 1995, the Connecticut School-Family-Community Partnerships Project has trained almost 100 school action teams in developing partnerships to support student success. Last year, we conducted an evaluation of the Project and its impact. Research included phone surveys, site visits and focus groups. Thank you very much to the school teams that participated. Here is some of what we learned.

Reasons for Success

Successful teams have **strong leadership** and connect activities to **school improvement** efforts.

- **Decision-Making Authority:** Successful teams make or influence important decisions. Most report family and community involvement are integral parts of their school or district improvement plan.
- **Ability to Act:** Teams must be able to "get things done." Resources, staff, volunteers, and authority to move from ideas to action are all critical. A full-time staff person devoted to partnership work often provides leadership, ensures follow-up, and maintains momentum.
- **Team Cohesion:** teams say trust among members, commitment, and flexibility in the division of labor are important success factors.

Stumbling Blocks

Turnover, especially among principals, is the greatest threat. Teams must plan for turnover, ensuring that no one member serves as a keystone. It is important to create buy-in, and recognize the efforts of all contributors. Expanding buy-in to the district level can lead to use of "support for partnership" as a criterion for new leaders.

Disappointment and **loss of motivation** cause many teams to lose momentum. To avoid this:

- Set realistic goals to manage expectations and avoid feeling overwhelmed or disappointed about progress.
- Remember, reaching all parents is an ongoing challenge. Never give up.
- Focus on and celebrate early successes, no matter how small.

Advice to Teams

Teamwork is essential. **Communication** is key.

- Survey family needs and skills. Focus on strengths as well as needs.
- Start with a small, dedicated group; build over time; make it fun.
- Provide off-site opportunities for team members and others to contribute.
- Achieve ongoing, personalized, two-way communication with families. Using fellow parents as messengers, home visits, phone calls, bilingual staff, and community presentations work for other teams.
- Send clear, consistent messages to parents that they are important, and that the school needs them in order to be successful. Connecting with parents is everyone's job.

Raising Teens: Messages for Parents

Teenagers face enormous risks ranging from violence and substance abuse to teen pregnancy and school failure. Yet seldom do professionals seek to enlist the group that can best, and most wants to help: **parents**. Below is an excerpt from a recent research synthesis that suggests ways parents can support positive adolescent development.

The 5 basics of Parenting Adolescents

- 1. Love & Connect.** Teens need relationships with parents that offer support and acceptance while accommodating and affirming the teen's increasing maturity. *Most things about their world are changing. Don't let your love feel like one of them.*
- 2. Monitor & Observe.** Teens need parents to be aware of—and let teens know they are aware of—their activities and relationships, through a process that uses less direct supervision and more communication, observation, and networking with other adults. *Monitor your teen's activities. You still can, and it still counts.*
- 3. Guide & Limit.** Teens need a clear but evolving set of boundaries, maintaining important family rules and values, but encouraging increased competence and maturity. *Loosen up, but don't let go.*
- 4. Model & Consult.** Teens need ongoing family support around decision making, values, and goals in order to interpret and navigate the larger world. Teach by example and through ongoing dialogue. *Parents still matter and teens still care.*
- 5. Provide & Advocate.** Teens need parents to provide not only adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, and health care, but also a supportive home environment and a network of caring adults. *You can't control their world, but you can add to and subtract from it.*

Taken from Simpson, A. Rae (2001). *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action*. Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health. For more information or to download a free copy: www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/parenting or 617-432-1038.

Parenting Information Woven Into School Fabric

If you ask parent educator, Jene Flores how she gets good parenting information to families, she laughs and takes a deep breath. Then she talks fast, because at **Vincent Mauro School in New Haven**, they don't rely solely on workshops and a new family resource center to get parenting information to families; they integrate it into everything.

The school holds a Parent Chat every other week. At drop off, parents are welcome to stay for coffee and a healthy snack with Jene, administrators and other available staff, and are encouraged to ask anything on their minds. These sessions include a mini-workshop after parent concerns are answered. Topics, selected from responses to a parent interests survey, have ranged from how to help with homework at different ages to behavior. Sometimes the social worker or a guest from the community joins the group and initiates role-play. Handouts and other resources are always available.

They organize monthly Saturday activities such as the recent Pajama Day where families and kids in their pajamas filled the gym with blankets, ate breakfast and read fun books families were given to take home. Yale students joined the fun, reading to families and being read to, demonstrating reading strategies and giving families a chance to practice them in an informal atmosphere. Even monthly PTO meetings include an event tied to curriculum such as a math night or science night, with fun activities for the whole family and plenty of information available about how to support learning at home.

But Jene stresses that the real key to reaching families with parenting information is one-to-one communication. She is ever present at the school, especially at drop-off and pick-up times, when she reinforces with families the messages that the school really wants them to take to heart – that being involved in their children's education and helping them enjoy learning at home really does make a difference.

For more information: Jene Flores, 203-946-5970 or jene.flores@new-haven.k12.ct.us.

Kindergarteners take "Vantastic Voyages" at Charter Oak Academy

Once a month a group of five-year-olds, parents, a teacher and the FRC Parent Educator bundle up and climb aboard the Family Resource Center van. This group of intrepid travelers leaves school on a "Vantastic Voyage", a short journey into the West Hartford community to explore the ways adults use language and literacy skills on the job.

The voyagers have visited the Department of Public Works where they watched as street signs were created. They visited the library where they helped stamp and catalog books. They toured a local ice cream parlor, created their own sundaes and practiced reading menus and writing checks. At the ice skating rink they read the schedule and each child sat on the Zamboni. At the Park Road Playhouse the children looked at scripts, tried on costumes and went behind the scenes to learn about stage lighting.

Back at school they write a book about the hour-long trip. Illustrated with drawings and photos, the books are written in English, translated into Spanish, and reproduced so each child can take one home. Copies are added to the three kindergarten classroom libraries and the school media center. Charter Oak kindergarten teacher, Carol Small, says "Vantastic Voyages provides children with new experiences. The program builds background knowledge, develops oral and written language skills and connects children and parents to real life experiences with literature."

For more information: Deborah Zipkin, The Family Resource Center at Charter Oak Academy, 860-233-4701, deborah@bridgefamilycenter.org.



CT School-Family-Community Partnerships, a project of the State Department of Education, helps educators, parents and community members develop partnerships by providing training and resources that promote effective local policies and practices, and increase public awareness of the positive impact of school-family-community partnerships on student learning.

Staff: Judy Carson, Harriet Feldlaufer & Wendy Harwin, CT State Department of Education

Project Partners: CREC, SERC & CT Parents Plus, United Way of CT

Resource Materials on S-F-C Partnerships Available For Loan

Teaching Parenting the Positive Discipline Way: A step-by-step approach to starting and leading parenting classes.

Lott, L. & Nelson, J. (1998). Presents a step-by-step approach to starting and leading parenting classes using experiential activities rather than lectures and intellectual discussions. A generic model, it can be used with or without a parenting book. Outlines are included for 10 major parenting books.

Parenting Toward Solutions: How parents can use skills they already have to raise responsible, loving kids. Metcalf, L. (1997). Suggests new ways of rearing responsible, self-confident children and adolescents. The parenting ideas focus on times when a specific problem does not occur instead of why it happens. The approach is to discover abilities parents already possess that can make changes in the relationship with their children and adolescents.

Parenting People: Strategies for effective parenting. Mulroy, M.T. & Malley, C.Z. (1995). Includes a training manual and four part video series on how to be an effective parent. The videos are **Parenting Style** (5 minutes), **Understanding Children** (20 minutes), **Talking to Your Child** (30 minutes), and **Teaching Children to Behave** (5 minutes). Includes an overview and guide, along with handouts, surveys, and evaluations for parents.

A New Wave of Evidence: The impact of school, family, & community connections on student achievement.



Henderson, A. & Mapp, K. (2002). This research synthesis of more than 50 recent studies examines the impact of family and community connections on student achievement. The conclusion—for parent involvement to affect achievement, schools must link parent activities to student learning goals and be respectful of differences among families. Schools that succeed focus on building trusting relationships; recognize, respect, and address family needs, as well as differences; embrace true partnership where power and responsibility are shared.

To download a free copy or order a printed copy: www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/fam33.html or call 800-476-6861.

Be sure to visit the SERC Library to explore the extensive collection of resources related to family involvement, available for loan free of charge. Located in Middletown, the library is open to the public Monday through Saturday. Call (860) 632-1485 for directions or hours. You may also request annotated bibliographies on a variety of topics including school-family-community partnerships. The collection of books, journals, videos and other materials covers a broad spectrum of issues helpful for administrators, teachers and family members alike.

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