

HONORING FAMILIES

Do more	Do less
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Hello! Welcome to our school. How may I help you?”• Welcome signs with name of the school and principal.• Parent meetings that break into small discussion groups, each picking a leader.• One-to-one and small group meetings.• Thanking parents for contributions large or small.• Meeting and greeting parents before and after school, and going to community events.• Rotating meetings before school, evenings, and weekends.• Involving families in selecting a new reading program.• Surveying families to get their ideas and opinions about activities and programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Who are you? What do you want?”• NO TRESPASSING signs.• Parent meetings dominated by a few “officers.”• Large meetings in the school gym.• Complaining that parents don’t do more.• Hiding in the office and assigning parent involvement to the assistant principal or teacher’s aide.• Meeting only during school hours.• Announcing a new reading program.• Planning events, then publicizing them to parents.

A TEACHER'S STORY:

“We Need to Learn How to Listen!”

Melissa Whipple, coordinator of the parent academic liaison program in San Diego, tells this story:

I was at a staff development training where teachers were discussing an issue in small groups. One teacher was very good at listening. After a colleague offered an opinion, she repeated what she understood that person had said. Then she checked to make sure the group understood the speaker's point of view.

This really let us work efficiently and avoid misunderstandings, because she could listen and rephrase the ideas of others so well. After the meeting, I complimented her on this skill and asked her if she had received it through teacher training.

“Oh no,” she said. “I used to be a bank teller. I received what they call ‘active listening’ training because most people are so sensitive about their money. We were thoroughly prepared on how to discuss money-related issues with customers.”

This really struck me: if people are that sensitive about issues related to money, they must be super-sensitive about issues related to their children. Even when people share a common language and culture, we still have miscommunications. Think what happens when differences in upbringing, language, social class, religion, and personal experience change the relationship dynamic!

Teachers deserve training to increase their confidence and capacity to have sensitive conversations with parents. Parents deserve to be treated with insight, skill, and finesse when discussing their child's education and development. If bank tellers get this training, teacher prep and staff development programs should offer it, too.

BRIGHT IDEA

Ask for suggestions

Engelhard Elementary School in Louisville has a suggestion box, with forms, and pencils next to it, prominently placed in the front entryway. Parents are invited to write down their ideas and are promised a response within twenty-four hours. Even if the suggestion will take more than a day to consider, the parents receive a call of thanks, and a promise to get back to them soon.

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Do	Don't
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Walk right into any classroom that does not already have three visitors.2. Go into the room along the side or back.3. Observe what is happening in the room.4. Talk with staff members only if approached by them.5. Leave when you want. Spend no more than twenty minutes in one room unless otherwise arranged.6. Leave messages or questions for staff in their mailboxes.7. Ask the principal any questions you want.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Go into any room that already has three other visitors.2. Disrupt the students' learning.3. Take pictures without prior permission.4. Ask staff questions while they're engaged in teaching.

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BRIGHT IDEA

VIP security ID cards

Security is always a concern, to parents as well as school staff. Because not all parents have a driver's license or other form of official picture ID, a middle school in St. Louis came up with the idea of a special security badge. They called it a "Very Important Parent (VIP) card." To get one, parents came to the office, got their photo taken with an instant camera, and filled out their name on cardstock labels "VIP" in large, bright letters. Then the card was laminated. Parents wore them proudly.

Steps for Making a Home Visit

In elementary school, a home visit can proceed in this way:

1. Arrange a visit at a time convenient for the family, usually evenings or weekends.
2. Begin by asking parents to talk about their children's skills, talents, and interests.
3. Relate these abilities to skills students are learning at school. Discuss how chores and other family activities can be ways to build those skills.
4. Introduce short, simple learning activities. For example: using cooking recipes to teach reading, sequencing, and measuring; playing counting and spelling games; doing outdoor science projects.
5. Show how to work with the children, and then observe as parents practice with their children. Leave learning materials behind for families to use.

In middle school, children can serve as hosts for home visits. They meet with teachers before the visit and discuss what kinds of assistance they would like. The home visit can include information about tutoring; special programs in math, science, or other subjects at local museums or colleges; and family activities to improve skills. In any home visit, the focus should always be on helping children to succeed in school.

Home Visits to Improve Reading Skills

Even though it's in a low-income area, the O'Hearn school has posted some of the highest reading scores in the city, up from near the bottom. How was this transformation achieved?

First, teachers *and* parents had extensive discussions about how to improve. They tested strategies until they figured out what worked. To their surprise, they found that awarding prizes to students for reading the most books did *not* increase reading for most students. Instead, they found that home visits were far more effective. Parents trained as home visitors went to the homes of every new student and took books for each child in the family. Now, 95 percent of students and their families regularly take part in a home reading program. During their discussions, teachers and parents realized that the parent visitors had become an important resource to promote learning:

1. Families received visitors warmly because they called as friends who share their experience of raising children on a small income.
2. As these relationships continued, parents felt encouraged to visit classrooms and participate in school activities.
3. Parents speaking a second language read to their children in their native language and borrowed easy-to-read books in English from the school library.
4. As a result, home reading increased, trusting adult relationships developed, and children's academic performance steadily increased.

What Is a Family Center?

“Special places in schools where family members can meet, plan, and implement programs, family centers are also places where school staff and community volunteers are invited to collaborate in support of children’s academic and social development. Particularly important to participants in the family center was the *designation* of a special place in schools for families....‘A place of their own’ for parents in schools...represents a significant symbolic and structural change in a school’s relationship with families.”⁹

(Vivian Johnson)

Steps for Starting a Family Center

1. Find out what your community wants in a family center.
 - Welcome the entire school community to take part.
 - Conduct a needs assessment and map the resources in the school community.
 - Distribute the results to everyone in the school community.
2. Based on the results, develop a plan.
 - Invite everyone to meet to plan a Family Center.
 - Determine goals, tasks, and a time line.
 - Report progress regularly and share ideas frequently.
3. Celebrate the opening and keep planning.
 - Be sure everyone is included when the Family Center opens.
 - Consistently invite participation to create and maintain supportive strategies for the Family Center.¹⁰

PRINCIPAL'S STORY:

“What happened in school today?”

Steve Constantino, a former high school principal, describes a typical scenario at his house:

Everyone is home for dinner, for the first time in three months. Dad the educator is trying to engage the kids.

Dad: “What did you do in school today?”

Answer: “Nothing.”

Dad: “Any homework tonight?”

Answer: “No.”

Steve’s comment: “We have to ask better questions of our children. What hope is there if even I as an educator can’t ask better questions than that? We must have a mechanism to equip parents to ask better questions.”

A WORD TO THE WISE

Think before offering parenting classes

When planning programs for families, school staff often suggest workshops on parenting. Many parents are eager for information about how to help their children and keep them safe. But when offered “parenting” classes, families may feel insulted. We often hear parents say: “They think we’re not doing a good job! I don’t want someone telling me how to raise *my* kids.”

“Parenting” tends to be a middle-class term. If parents want a workshop about how to talk to their teenagers, keep their kids from fighting, get them to go to bed on time, or be more responsible, respond to that request. We recommend, however, that you call it something other than ‘parenting,’ unless the parents you want to reach use that term first.

TIPS FOR LINKING TO LEARNING

Do more	Do less
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Displaying student work, along with scoring guides to rate levels of performance• Contacting families regularly about student progress, through Friday folders, notes, and phone calls• Holding math, literacy, and health nights, and family-questions-about-school events• Offering student-led family conferences, where students discuss their work and assess its quality• Holding workshops for families on planning for college and information about college admission standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Featuring teacher-made bulletin boards with themes such as “Autumn Colors”• Calling home only when students misbehave or are in trouble• Offering parenting classes• Focusing on student behavior and shortcomings at parent-teacher conferences• Hanging posters about drug abuse and teen pregnancy