

Partnering with Families Equals Success

By Bev Schumacher

For most educators, the August-September calendar marks the beginning of a new school year. Even those who follow year-round calendars may find this season brings a time of reflection, new purpose and commitment. With a new term and new students come---NEW parents and families.

Although it is easy for teachers to say “my students”/“my children,” obviously parents are only sharing these children with you for a portion of the day. You will do your best to challenge these youngsters - to teach them and to help them become successful learners - so that some day they will become positive contributors to society. But you will be most successful if you partner with parents to support the student’s growth and developing skills. Effective educators work with BOTH the child and their family!

When planning for the coming year, consider some of these suggestions on how to work and communicate with families.

Communication

Successful communication helps build relationships with parents and families, and consequently will enrich the child’s home learning environment. You can use a wide variety of strategies throughout the year to welcome parent input and to communicate classroom events and accomplishments. Begin the year with a concentrated effort to get to know each family member.

- When teaching a child whose family is acquiring a second language, it is essential to honor the family’s native culture and language. If you are not proficient in the family’s language, try to learn basic phrases, such as greetings. When you demonstrate a sincere effort to communicate, generally people will, in turn, work to connect with you.
- Pictures are worth a thousand words---especially when there are language issues. Decorate entrance areas with pictures and photos showing fun and exciting classroom events. This will ensure that families are aware of positive interactions happening in the classroom.
- Use a specific color of paper in all communications you send home (e.g., newsletters, parent booklets, permission slips, etc.). When parents see that color of paper, they will know this is information for the family.

- Apply the “3 rule review” approach for printed communications. After creating your message, have two other staff review it. These colleagues should ensure that the “who, what, when, where, and how” questions have been answered. Typos and other errors can be extremely confusing for second language learners. Reading your message backwards word-by-word can catch any errors your computer’s spellchecker might have missed.
- Learn family members’ names, and welcome them with a smile and by name. Remember that sometimes second language learners are working to improve their speaking skills, but may have stronger comprehension skills.

Supporting Learning at Home

Encouraging families to continue the learning process at home will strongly impact the child’s total development.

- Include strategies in your lesson plans for involving parents in the classroom and for sharing with them what children are learning. Every lesson needs to have those connectors for bridging concepts between home and classroom. Educators serving young children or those developing language skills have to be especially careful to communicate regularly. Often youngsters don’t talk about what they are doing in school, so parents and families need to hear from you about what is happening in the classroom.
- Every daily parting connection should include a daily highlight, a suggestion of an enrichment, and forecast of what experiences the next contact might offer. Your doorway parent connection might sound like this: “Antonio, show your mom the art project we did today for the color red. Show her the red on your shirt, too. On the way home find red stop signs like we saw in the book we read. When Antonio comes back to class tomorrow, we are going to taste red foods.”
- Invite parents into your classroom. Their visits, no matter how brief, allow them to experience firsthand what their children are learning. Let their children show them a project, a classroom pet, something on the computer, a puzzle the child can assemble... This type of sharing helps parents understand the child’s accomplishments and also builds the child’s confidence.

- Use a report form to summarize and share the day's accomplishments. First, talk with the children about their day, record their comments on a post-it-note, and then simply attach it to the form. Include as many comments as you wish. Make each note brief and legible! When possible, have each child write their own comment or draw a picture and sign it. If you utilize this sort of form, be sure to use it for as many children as possible. Children who for some reason cannot participate one day should certainly be featured the next time you use this strategy.
- Provide families with resources for them to use at home. These can be as simple as a word sheet for a favorite classroom song, a puzzle, or a book to be shared. Books can come from a classroom library or from your community library. Bilingual books can be sent home for children from non-English speaking homes to read with their families. Be sure to consider what is developmentally appropriate for the child. Pencil and paper sheets should not be the standard offering, as hands-on enrichment is much more valuable! In my research, I have found that when families are provided with resources, they are more likely to complete the engagement activity. Furthermore, they spend more time on the activity, repeat it more often, and include more family members in the activity.
- Families want to hear what their child has been doing in the classroom, but also need to know what future activities are planned in case they want to contribute resources and or support skills. Keep a balance between communicating past and future learning information.

Inviting parents to participate takes effort and leadership from you and your educational program. When parents are involved, children do better in schools and programs are enhanced. Make parent engagement YOUR goal.

Bev Schumacher has been an educator for over 25 years. She has served as a Parent Involvement Coordinator at a nationally recognized center, taught in the classroom, and trained childcare professionals. She is President of Learning Props, LLC, and coauthor of "Menu for Successful Parent and Family Involvement," published by the Southern Early Childhood Association.