



## TIPS FOR DEVELOPING POSITIVE FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

By Pamela Kramer Ertel

*Parents can work positively or negatively to impact your career and your relationships with students. Early in my days as an elementary school teacher, I learned a lesson on parent power.*

**A**s a new teacher, I abandoned a long-time tradition to begin a new one that I thought would be more beneficial for the students. Little did I know what an uproar my decision would cause in the school community! I quickly learned the importance of informing parents about new ideas, while still respecting traditions. Eventually I won them over to new approaches, but it was a tough sell until the parents got to know and trust me.

Evidence supports that parental involvement significantly impacts student achievement (Knopf and Swick 2007). I believe that you must *strategically* plan to develop positive family-school-community partnerships that enhance family involvement and student achievement. You can't assume that strong partnerships just "happen."

These 12 tips can help you build strong partnerships:

**1. Show that you truly care.** Take time to know each student academically and personally. When communicating with families, use language and actions that indicate you know and care about their child. Share specific observations about the student's interests, abilities, and personality. Ask questions so that families can share what they know about their child. Remember, they know the student best, and their

information may be extremely valuable to you as a teacher.

**2. Seek to build trust.** Gaining families' trust is essential. Swick (2003) suggested that the best relationships are established when family-school interactions are frequent and positive. Families need to see you consistently follow through on actions you have said you will take to help their child. You also must respect confidential information shared by the family. Once trust is violated, it is extremely difficult to retrieve. Families also need to know that you will treat them respectfully rather than critically. Some parents and caregivers are fearful of school personnel, thinking that they will be judged or ridiculed for their parenting skills.

**3. Communicate clearly and consistently.** "Communication is indeed the major way that we empower each other" (Swick 2003, 275). Plan a variety of ways to communicate with families: personal meetings, e-mail, newsletters, online, and through phone calls. They have a right—and need—to know what is happening in their child's classroom. Keep families informed about exciting activities, special events, and student projects.

**4. Be an active listener.** When families share a concern, they want someone to take the

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time to listen to them and validate their concerns. It is important that the listener be open-minded and non-judgmental (Swick 2003). Help families feel welcome, valued, and respected by giving them your full attention. Truly listen; determine what they really are trying to tell you. Repeat back to them what they shared to ensure that you have interpreted their message correctly.

- 5. Respect differences.** Not every family parents their children the same, especially where cultural differences exist. Learn about and respect cultural differences and customs. Not all family structures are the same, so be sure to know the correct names for family members, particularly for blended families.
- 6. Assume Nothing.** I once assumed that a parent of one of my students did not care about his son because he never came to parent-teacher conferences. Learning later that he was facing many challenges as a single dad with financial difficulties gave me a new perspective on his love for his children. He was doing all he could to support the family financially and emotionally.
- 7. Create win-win situations to resolve conflict.** Be a creative collaborator in problem solving. Families are more receptive to partnerships that give them voice, and that value and respect their ideas and needs. Partner to solve problems through compromise or a solution that works for everyone. You need not bow to a family's every whim and desire; however, both sides need to gain something positive in the resolution process.
- 8. Encourage family participation with boundaries.** Plan activities and events that allow families to contribute to student learning. Engage family volunteers in meaningful tasks and make use of special talents. Let them give input on how they might help, but set boundaries for what happens and who has final say. Don't be

bullied by a parent who wants to control you or your classroom. Train parents for whatever task they have volunteered. Make their responsibilities clear to them.

- 9. Meet sooner rather than later.** Provide multiple opportunities for families to meet you early in the school year—before problems occur. Developing a positive relationship is difficult if the first meeting is embroiled in conflict. First impressions are lasting impressions.
- 10. Environmental ethics.** When meeting with families, the physical environment should be conducive to communication and respect. Can you make eye contact? Are you sitting in the teacher's chair while the parent is in a child-sized chair? Consider how the classroom arrangement illustrates your level of respect toward the family.
- 11. Ask for help.** When you don't know the answer to a question or you lack the expertise to address a situation, seek help from other professionals. You aren't expected to know everything or be able to solve every problem!
- 12. Positive parting.** End each communication with a family in a positive manner and with a sense of hope for their child. Help them clearly understand any problems that exist, but develop a strategy to address the problem and be specific about what will be done. Document action plans and share them with the family.

Positive teacher-family partnerships nurture interest and involvement in the classroom, which cultivates student achievement. Working with families as partners is in everyone's best interest. 🍎

#### References

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- Swick, K. J. 2003. Communication concepts for strengthening family-school-community partnerships. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 30(4): 275–80.