

## Parent Involvement - Health Education For Children

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Parents are partners with schools in the effort to educate healthy children who have the skills they need to become competent and productive adults. There is no area of the curriculum where this is more true than in health education. Children acquire their basic health attitudes and behaviors within the family home. Involving parents in their children's education takes time and effort. The energy you put into involving parents will have a big reward, however, both in your classroom this year and in your students' lives now and in the years to come.

Parents are partners with schools in the effort to educate healthy children who have the skills they need to become competent and productive adults. There is no area of the curriculum where this is more true than in health education. Children acquire their basic health attitudes and behaviors within the family home. Parents purchase and prepare nutritious (or otherwise) food for children, regulate their sleeping patterns, enforce rules for how family members treat each other, and model positive or negative behaviors with regard to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Even as children approach adolescence and their peers become a more significant influence on their lives, parents continue to be important role models for good health. If health education is to be effective in promoting healthy behaviors, it must actively enlist parents as partners in the process.

The research is clear on the value of parent involvement. Children who grow up in families who are involved in their education in positive ways achieve higher grades and test scores, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, display more positive attitudes and behaviors, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to go on to higher education (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Some of the positive ways that parents can be involved in their children's education include monitoring homework, encouraging participation in healthy extracurricular activities, limiting television viewing and video games, establishing a daily family routine, talking to their children and their children's teachers, participating in parent-teacher associations, and demonstrating that they value learning and good character (Ballen and Moles, 1994).

This research is so compelling that a new National Education Goal encourages every school to promote partnerships and increase parent involvement in their children's growth and learning (Moles, 1996).

Parents, teachers, and students themselves value parent involvement. Forty percent of American parents believe they are not devoting enough time to their children's education (Finney, 1993). Teachers rank strengthening parents' role in education as the highest priority issue in public education policy (Louis Harris and Associates, 1993). Almost three-quarters of students aged 10 to 13 say they would like to talk more to their parents about schoolwork (National Commission on Children, 1991).

Still, there are many barriers that stand in the way of greater parent involvement. In many families today, both parents are working. Two-thirds of employed parents report that they do not have enough time to spend with their children. School-related meetings are often scheduled at times that are not convenient to working parents. Even when they have the time, many parents don't know what to do to help their children and would like guidance from their children's teachers about specific activities they could do.

Another important barrier to greater parent involvement is cultural and linguistic differences. Many educators assume that some parents, particularly those from other cultures, don't care about their children's education. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, there are cultural and institutional barriers that need to be overcome before some parents can feel comfortable communicating with the school about their children. For example, if messages from the school to the family are only presented in English, non-English-speaking parents may not understand them. Parents who are illiterate may not be able to read notes sent home by the teacher. Parents may not be able to attend meetings at the school if no child care or transportation assistance is provided. Parents from other cultures may feel that teachers are authority figures whom they have no right to question. Other parents had negative experiences at school themselves and feel uncomfortable in the school environment. Finally, particularly in some urban areas, parents may be so young and so ill-prepared for the job of parenting that extra support to help them learn how to parent may be needed.

In addition to these barriers to greater parent involvement, some families live in neighborhoods which are so poor that opportunities for children at home and after school are limited. High rates of crime compel many parents to keep their children indoors after school. Easy access to libraries, cultural institutions, recreation and health services may not exist.

What can you do to increase parent involvement in your students' education? First, learn as much as you can about your students' backgrounds and neighborhoods before school starts and throughout the school year. Is English spoken at home? Are their neighborhoods safe and clean? Then, plan on ways to make families comfortable in your classroom from the very first day of school. Consider strategies such as these:

- Welcome Letter Send a letter home at the beginning of the school year or when a new student enrolls. You might want to include some general information about what students will be learning, a list of materials the child will need for class, a

telephone number and time where you can be reached, and an invitation to parents to share their concerns with you. Use simple language and avoid educational jargon. Address your letter to "Dear Parent" or "Dear Family," rather than "Dear Parents" (since some children will live in single parent households). You may wish to have your letter translated into other languages for parents who do not speak English.

- Open House If your school holds a "Back to School" night, plan carefully to make parents feel comfortable in your classroom. Have your students create invitations for their parents. Call parents personally—or ask a parent that you know to call others—to remind them of the event. At the open house, explain your plans for the year and allow enough time for parents to ask questions. Describe the kind of help you would like to have from parents throughout the year, both in the classroom and at home.

- Home Visits Visiting families at home can show parents that you are sincerely committed to their children's education and are willing to go more than halfway to involve them. Visits should be short (no more than 15-30 minutes) and should be scheduled at a time which is convenient for parents. Send a letter home first that explains your purpose is just to introduce yourself and that no special preparations are necessary. Give parents the opportunity to decline, if they so desire. If you do not speak the language in the child's home, you will need to invite someone who does to help translate.

- Positive Phone Calls Call each child's parents two or three times a year to let them know how well their child is doing or ask if they need any additional information. The tone of your call should be positive and may include just introducing yourself, describing what the child is learning in school, telling the parent about special strengths that the child has, and/or inviting the parent to an open house or conference. Establishing positive contact with the parents will make it easier to communicate if and when a problem with the child arises later.

- Teacher Letters Send a letter home to parents on a regular basis, such as monthly or each time you start a new unit. In your letter, inform parents of what their children are learning and what the parent can do to reinforce that learning at home. Again, you may need to translate the letter into another language(s) if parents are not English-speaking.

- Homework Communicate to parents your expectations about the homework you assign, e.g., how much homework can be expected and that all homework should be completed promptly. In addition, give students some homework assignments that involve their parents. By giving parents specific guidance on what they can do, you can help them become involved in their children's education.

- Parent Volunteers Encourage parents to volunteer in your classroom. They can work individually with children or help you set up special work areas within the classroom. As parents spend time in the classroom, they will feel more comfortable with you and share their experiences with other parents.

- Informal Contact with Parents Invite each student and his or her parents to have breakfast with you before school once a year, just to get to know each other. Working parents often find breakfast meetings easier to make than those scheduled after-school or in the evening. Or work with a community organization or church to hold a neighborhood coffee where you could meet in a location familiar to the parents.

Involving parents in their children's education takes time and effort. The energy you put into involving parents will have a big reward, however, both in your classroom this year and in your students' lives now and in the years to come.

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