The family partnership by Molly Greenman

Moving from family participation to partnerships: Not always easy; always worth the effort by Anne Stonehouse

The importance of fathers in the lives of their children by Christophe Beard

Taking your time with families by Kayren Woolum

Room at the table: Parent engagement in Head Start by Shanna Grefrud

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The family partnership

by Molly Greenman

So glad you asked

As one woman after another described small victories as parents — “I took my son to the playground”, “My daughter won the class spelling bee” — Cheryl seemed to disappear into her chair. The group got more and more animated with successive rounds, but Cheryl ‘passed’ every time. Finally, the other moms insisted there must be something Cheryl did with her kids that she felt good about. “Well, I made a promise to myself I would read to my kids every night, just like my mom did, and I have kept that promise to this day.” After a moment of stunned silence, the room exploded: “Every single night?” “Where do you get the books?” “How do you know what books to read?” Cheryl, like many of the other moms present that night, was living in a transitional housing apartment and had been homeless many times over the years. And, like the other moms, she was used to being told what she needed to do to take care of her kids, but not used to being asked what she knew how to do that might benefit others.

In 2000, The Family Partnership was asked by a large local family foundation to come up with a fresh approach to teaching parenting to low-income parents. The result was The Family Project. Its innovation within the field of parent engagement has been to offer alternatives to parenting classes and institutionally driven parent engagement activities, rethinking parent involvement in terms of community-building and parent connectedness. It has been particularly successful with low-income families, families of color, and new immigrants, helping to reduce the information and connection gap between parents and the institutions that families interface with — especially schools. Since 2001, more than 15,000 parents and children have been engaged through this work; 84% identified as people of color and 59% as new immigrants. The Family Project has grown into a nationally recognized program, receiving the Annie E. Casey “Family Strengthening Award” from the United Neighborhood Centers of America.

The Family Project model is founded on several assumptions:

- We see parents as the bearers of assets; our job is to help bring those assets to light.
- Change takes place in the context of relationships, and positive change requires mutual trust and respect.
- As people experience being seen, heard, and valued, they begin to believe they have something to offer.

The typical parent we seek to engage is living on a marginal income, uses public transportation, and has limited English language proficiency. Native-born parents usually have their own history of negative school experiences, while immigrants often have very different expectations of their role in their children’s education. Finally, isolation is a common thread. These are families who are disconnected from the school community and often their neighborhoods, as well. Particularly, when children are being bused to elementary and pre-schools, the parents are unlikely to know each other.

Most of these parents have heard from the school (and many other professionals in their lives) plenty about what they are not doing, but should do for their children. This is not surprising; we are a nation of problem-solvers, which of course means we have to have problems to solve. And we love experts (think Dear Abby, Judge Judy, Ask This Old House). As educators and social workers, people expect us to have answers, and besides, we put a lot of time, energy, and money into developing our expertise.

We often encounter school personnel, and parent volunteers, who have given up trying to engage the other parents. One principal told me, “I think those parents just don’t care!” Class sizes, classroom expectations, and diversity are increasing, while resources, support services, and public confidence are on the wane. It must be really challenging for teachers and school staff to maintain a spirit of equanimity, much less enthusiasm toward parents who don’t meet our expectations for involvement.

So, if schools and programs want parents to help their kids to succeed and parents want their children to succeed
in school, why do we keep missing the mark? What we have found in The Family Project is that school staff and parents have a hard time listening to each other. School staff experience enormous pressure to share information with parents because of the urgency of educating parents about school choice, meeting No Child Left Behind goals, etc. School staff often think they are listening, when in fact they are doing most of the talking, information sharing, and problem-solving. Parents, for their part, are pretty tired of being talked at, frequently have had negative experiences of their own with school (as both a student AND a parent), and are tired of coming to school-parent meetings where the entire agenda has been set in advance by the schools.

That’s why The Family Project begins by asking questions. When we help parents and schools come together in Family Gatherings, we ask both parties some fundamental questions — usually ones that they have never been asked before. Our first Family Gathering icebreaker question goes quite deep: “What beliefs and values guide you as a parent, or as someone who cares about kids.” This question creates an atmosphere of both intimacy AND equality. Practically every time we do this, both parents and school staff say: “We have never been asked this question before.”

This conversation sets the stage for other questions:

“What do you think is going on with your child? What do you need to help your kids succeed in school? How can we help?” Sadly again, most of these parents tell us, no one has ever asked them what they thought.

For example, Alejandro’s teacher and the school social worker had worked for months to get help for him after he was screened for ADHD. They could not understand why a parent would not follow through on treatment that they had bent over backward to make accessible. They asked our Spanish-speaking school-family liaison to help. She visited the mother and, by asking questions, found out the mom had completely misinterpreted the school’s communication. The mom thought ADHD meant she was deficient in paying attention to her son. She was so ashamed, she avoided contact with school officials as much as possible.

We have also learned in our work with parent engagement in schools that immigrant parents are often coming with completely different expectations of schools and themselves. In México, for example, the schools are the authority on a child’s education and have the responsibility for the child while in school. Parents are neither expected nor encouraged to get involved and may be seen as meddling if they do.

At the beginning of my comments, I shared Cheryl’s story. She persuaded low-income, homeless parents that it is possible to read to their children every night. She answered their questions, which helped them see how they could do this, too. Now if our staff said the same things, those same parents probably would have said: “Get out of here! Stop talking down to us. You have no idea what being homeless is like or how unrealistic you are being about our lives. You’re not helping.” Even worse, they may not have said but only thought the words, and disengaged from further involvement. But Cheryl showed that everyone can help. Parents can teach each other. Parents have many — perhaps even most — of the answers that other parents need. We just need to create spaces in which they can share what they value, believe, and know with each other. To do that, we have to ask them.

I’m not going to tell you we have all the answers about how to do this. I will offer some questions that you can ask parents, your co-workers, and yourself to begin the conversation:

- Share a time you felt successful as a parent.
- What do you think would help your child (get to/behave better in/do better in) school/child care?
- What’s getting in the way of you helping your child succeed?
- What was your experience with school/pre-school like? How would you like your child’s experience to be the same? Different?
- What beliefs or values help guide you as a parent? How can we support those in our center?
- What are some of your family’s cultural traditions?
- What has been your experience with your child’s school/center/program?
- What are your dreams for your child? What are your hopes for your child in this class/program/center?
- What’s the best way for you to get information about what’s going on in this school/class/program?
- What does your child like best about you?
- What support could you use to make sure your child has a good experience in our school/program?
- And last, but not least, how can we help your child, your family, and you succeed?!

You may be surprised that staff and parents frequently come up with different answers to the same key questions. For example, when asked what parent engagement means, school staff and child care providers often say:
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Attending conferences
Going to PTO meetings
Doing what is asked by staff (e.g., filling out forms)

Parents, on the other hand, may say engagement means:

“I get my child to the bus every day.”
“I let the teacher do their job.”
School staff will greet me when I come into the building, believe what I say about my child, and see my child and me as a source of solutions, rather than problems.

To get you started, it may help to think about what a positive, engaged parent interaction looks like to you:

Think of a time when you made a strong, positive connection with a parent.
What about that interaction was different than others?

What are your strengths as a relationship builder? What might others in your center bring to a parent engagement process?
How do you know whether parents think you (and your center) are listening to them and being responsive?

Today, there is a general consensus that early childhood development and learning is essential for children’s success in school and life. Most experts agree that parent involvement is key to children’s success in school. Early childhood educators can not only jump start young children’s learning, you can jump start parent involvement, too.

One more question: What are you waiting for?

Moving from family participation to partnerships: Not always easy; always worth the effort

by Anne Stonehouse

The early childhood profession has a strong tradition of involving families — that is, finding ways to help families connect with services. Involvement, sometimes called participation, is valuable, but current thinking suggests going beyond involvement to partnerships. It’s important to have many ways for families to be involved and participate in the life of the service if they want to; however, family involvement is now seen not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end: partnerships with families.

As is true of personal and business partnerships, child care partnerships with families take many forms. The partnership with each family will be unique, but they all have some common characteristics:

mutual respect
trust
sensitivity to the perspective of the other
ongoing, open, ‘both-ways’ communication
common goals that are clear and agreed on: the child’s well-being
clarity about roles and responsibilities
teamwork; absence of rivalry or competition
recognition and valuing of the unique contribution and strengths of the partner
shared decision making.

Respect for families and children is the foundation for healthy partnerships. Children, no matter how young, are

Most of these parents have heard from the school (and many other professionals in their lives) plenty about what they are not doing, but should do for their children.

Anne Stonehouse works privately as an early childhood consultant. She has written a number of resources for parents and early childhood practitioners including How does it feel? Child Care from Families’ Perspectives (Exchange Press, 2008).
active participants in the relationship, and their views are taken into account.

Working in partnership doesn’t mean that professionals assume the roles and responsibilities of families — that is, that they take their place. They can’t, as families are the most important people in children’s lives. Believing that in some ways child care substitutes for family experience and relationships can interfere in a major way with partnerships.

Most child care philosophy and policy statements place importance on good relationships and communication with families. Putting these words and ideas into daily practice is much more challenging than coming up with the words. Many child care professionals would agree that establishing and maintaining partnerships with families is the most complex part of working in child care.

What’s the difference between family involvement and partnerships?

The difference between involvement and partnerships has to do primarily with power and authority. Typically, family involvement consists of families taking up some opportunities offered by professionals to contribute to the operation of the service. These may include such activities as:

- fundraising
- attending working bees
- being on committees
- contributing materials
- organising and/or attending social events, meetings, or talks
- helping out with the program.

Most family involvement activities allow the professional to maintain control and power. Genuine partnerships, on the other hand, require professionals to share power. True partnerships mean that families and professionals, along with the child, negotiate the child’s experience in child care.

Partnerships require a confident professional who is open to families’ priorities and requests and who is clear about areas where compromise or negotiation is not possible. This may be because of regulations, when families’ requests do not fit with the service philosophy or policies or are not in the child’s best interests. When there are partnerships, families are encouraged to express their concerns, question practices and policies, and ask for what they want. When their requests cannot be agreed to, professionals owe them an explanation, given without any implication that it was inappropriate to ask. Child care professionals need to know what families want for their child in child care and what their concerns are (Greenman, Stonehouse, & Schweikert, 2008). While family participation often focuses on the operation of the service, social events, or parent education, partnership focuses on negotiating the child’s experience.

Having a variety of ways for families to become involved is important, and can contribute to a partnership. However, it is possible for families to be very involved and not have a partnership — that is, not have much of a say in their child’s experience. Similarly, it is quite possible for families to have robust partnerships with the professionals who care for their child and not be involved in the service.

If partnerships are complex and challenging, why bother?

Increasingly, child care services are viewed as not only places for children, but also family support services. This doesn’t mean adding program components. It means giving priority to partnerships with families in every area of service operation, but particularly in daily interactions and communication. Working in partnership isn’t an extra thing to do, but rather a way of going about everything that you do. It’s as much about how you go about your work and the ways you communicate as it is about what you do and say.

Partnerships with families lead to many benefits for families, children, and professionals.
**Benefits for professionals:**
- Getting information about the child from an expert on the child
- Working with a more complete picture of the child, leading to the satisfaction of providing a better experience
- Greater appreciation by families of professionals’ work
- The satisfaction of knowing that they may be making a lasting positive difference in the life of a child.

**Benefits for families:**
- Greater confidence about their child’s experience
- Increased confidence in their parenting
- Belonging to a community of people who care about their child
- Opportunities to contribute significantly to their child’s experience even when they are absent
- Greater appreciation of their child’s uniqueness
- Additional information about and a different perspective on their child
- Ongoing reassurance that they are the most special person in their child’s life.

**Most importantly, benefits for the child:**
- The experience of the special people in his or her life working together and with the child, which promotes feelings of security and belonging
- Consistent, sensitive, individualised experiences
- Greater continuity between family life and the child care experience
- Families who feel confident about their childrearing
- Relationships in child care that are built on deep knowledge of the child.

As a profession, we now understand much better than we did in the past that in order to support children’s learning we need to know them in the context of their family, culture, and community. Ultimately, the reason to strive for mutually respectful partnerships with families is that one of the most important things professionals can do for children is to promote a strong sense of connection and belonging with their family.

**What gets in the way of partnerships?**

Partnerships aren’t easy. Obstacles, in addition to confusion with involvement include:

- Lack of time and staff resources along with competing responsibilities
- Inclination to ‘blame’ the other when something goes wrong
- Narrow view of the role of the child care professional: ‘my work is about children, not families’
- Lack of confidence and skills to work with families
- Families’ expectations — they may not be expecting a partnership
- Families’ lack of confidence — what do I know?

**What are some practices that promote partnerships?**

**The physical environment.** Create a welcoming physical environment that makes a strong statement to families that they belong in child care. Seeing something of their communities, cultures, and lives connects them to the child care and conveys respect.

**Informal communication.** Prioritise ongoing informal communication. Use a variety of ways, but keep in mind that text messages, emails, phone calls, displayed documentation, and exchanged journals are good supplements to brief chats, but they are not a good substitute for them.

‘**Good news**’. Share all the ‘good news’ you honestly can about their child with families — not just the big events or milestones, but little things as well. This demonstrates to families that you both know and value their child.

‘**Not so good news**’. Think carefully about when and how to share concerns with families. When you do, combine honesty with optimism and professionalism.

**Parents as people.** Acknowledge in your interactions that parents have many other roles and responsibilities — as workers, partners, or spouses, parents of children other than the one you care for, people with siblings, and parents themselves. In other words, parents are people with complex lives — not just parents!

**Empathy.** Think about what situations mean from the family’s perspective, especially when there are differences or conflicts.
Orientation. Exchange information with families before and at the beginning of a child’s participation. Ask them about their child — interests, personal style, routine — and about what they want for their child in the child care setting. Ask them what is important for them about their child’s experience. This sets the stage for partnership. Follow up and continue these conversations throughout the child’s participation.

Focus. Accept that families will focus more on their own child than the whole group and that families’ love for their child means that they cannot be objective about the child. It’s your job to be objective.

Encouragement. Encourage families to ask questions, make requests, and engage in constructive criticism. Follow up on these.

Expectations. Just as we do with children, recognize that each family is unique and that families are dynamic. All families have strengths. Some families need considerable ongoing support, and all families need support at times. Individualise expectations for families and avoid stereotyping and making unfounded assumptions.

Fun and joy. Whenever possible, support families in their childrearing and help them to find pleasure in their child. Childrearing can feel like a burden for families — such high expectations, so much professional advice, and so many competing obligations. There are many good ways to rear children and to be a family.

Shared decision making. Involve families whenever you can in making decisions about their child’s experience.

Strong connections. Build relationships with other family support services in your community so that you can help families make use of them when they need assistance or information that you cannot provide.

Conflict resolution. Have in place procedures for resolving conflicts and let families know about these. It is inevitable that conflicts will arise around something as important as children’s early learning.

In summary

Partnerships are relationships. Relationships are a matter of heart and mind, a perspective or way of working and not a set of activities or strategies. The focus of the relationship is children’s well-being. The main purpose of the relationship is to support children by:

- finding out as much as you can about the children in the context of their family, culture, and communities and using that knowledge to support learning
- learning from families about the child
- contributing to families’ understanding of their child and appreciation of their child’s uniqueness
- promoting the importance of the family in the child’s life.

Just as is the case with personal relationships, partnerships with families are built on many small, often brief, sometimes seemingly insignificant and taken-for-granted encounters — the little things you do and say.

Questions for reflection

In reflecting on partnerships with families, ask yourself:

- What is there in the physical environment that says to families “You are welcome here, you belong here”?
- What messages do families get about their ‘place,’ their role, in the service — from the communication and the ways professionals go about their work?
- If you genuinely take on board the message that what matters most in a child’s life is the relationship with family and the family’s ability to support the child’s well-being, how will that affect your work tomorrow? What might you do differently?

References and resources


The importance of fathers in the lives of their children

by Christophe Beard

One of the most significant changes to have occurred in the family structure over the past few decades has been the increased number of children living in father-absent households. Nationally, over 24 million children, or one out of every three, are living in a home without their biological father. Surprisingly, the general public seems to be largely unaware of the true scope of the problem. The issue is better known, perhaps, at the local level where fathers are a rare sight in the family-focused programs of community-based organizations. Unfortunately, most participants are mothers struggling to make ends meet without the help of their children’s father. Although most parents would agree that children are better served when their biological father is actively involved in their lives, getting fathers involved has proven to be the greatest challenge of them all. Even though child development experts will tell you that men by their very nature are an integral part of the child development process, the reality is that men are significantly underrepresented in virtually every area of the child development field, and in many ways equally undervalued.

Most families simply try to make the best of a challenging situation. Despite the heroic efforts of many single mothers, a number still feel ill-equipped and financially insecure to handle the emotional and financial needs of raising children alone. Although local government agencies have tried to meet the growing needs of today’s single parents, there are still too few programs to fill the gaps. State governments have stepped in by toughening child support laws and imposing harsher punishments for fathers who fail to make child support payments, including jail time. These punitive efforts may be effective in raising much needed funds from ‘deadbeat dads,’ but they do little to dispel the notion that fathers are more than just a paycheck.

The growing tide of social science research over the past 25 years has confirmed what many already knew: prolonged father absence can have negative effects on the development of children. Now, not every child growing up without their biological father is negatively affected, but most are at an increased risk of some of our worst social problems. Children in father-absent homes are:

- Five times more likely to live in poverty.
- Three times more likely to fail in school.
- Two times more likely to develop emotional or behavioral problems.
- Two times more likely to abuse drugs.
- Two times more likely to be abused and neglected.
- Two times more likely to become involved in crime.
- Three times more likely to commit suicide. (Horn & Sylvester, 2005)

Children and their single mothers aren’t the only victims of father absence. Especially during these difficult economic times, meeting the needs of a growing family has become more than some parents can bear. Consequently, grandparents are increasingly being identified as the primary caregiver when both biological parents are incapable of raising their children. In 2006, it was estimated that 2.4 million co-resident grandparents were playing the role of primary caregiver for their grandchildren, with grandmothers making up the largest percentage of caregivers at 65% (Whitley & Kelley, 2006). Of course, this puts a tremendous burden on grandparents, many of whom are already living on the fringes of financial security. Some have come to call this burden the ‘collateral damage’ of absentee fathers.

So, where are the fathers?

Fathers weren’t always this difficult to find. In the 1950s, federal statistics reported that 77% of African American homes were headed by a mother and a father. In White
households that number was a whopping 85%. Today, census figures show that nearly 70% of all African American children are being born to single mothers, more than twice the national average and almost triple the rate of Whites. Latinos, now considered to be the nation’s largest minority group, fall on average in between Blacks and Whites in this statistic. However, recent statistics suggest that there is a surprising rise in father-absent families in the Latino community, a cause of great concern in this historically family-focused society.

Across ethnic and cultural boundaries, there are several barriers to explain why men are sometimes discouraged to take a more active role as a parent, but two barriers are probably the most common. First, for non-custodial fathers, the most often cited explanation is a negative relationship with the child’s mother. A poor relationship with the child’s mother makes it difficult for some fathers to maintain a close relationship with their children. Although frequency of contact with nonresidential children may decrease over time, the majority of low-income, nonresidential fathers maintain some contact. Second is the lack of financial security. Men often wrap their self-worth in their ability to provide for themselves and their families. For many fathers — particularly young fathers with few skills and few years of schooling — the lack of a stable job and income can cause these men either to evade the responsibility of supporting their children or turn to the underground economy to provide income. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, shame, or guilt, causing many fathers to withdraw from their children, both emotionally and physically (Sylvester & Reich, 2002). For some men, however, becoming a father can be a powerful motivating factor to find and keep a job (Kotloff, 2005).

Custodial fathers can also face barriers of a different sort at home. Sometimes, fathers are seen by mothers and other family members as ‘second class parents.’ Historically, the traditional caregivers for children in the family have been women. Some cultures emphasize this attitude more than others and assume that dads don’t want to be involved. Unfortunately, this mindset can lead fathers to see themselves more as a ‘part-time assistant’ to mothers than as a full-time parent partner. This can contradict the fact that most fathers do care, even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways. A father’s love and support may assume different forms — from emotional commitment to children’s development to hands-on support in the home and responsibility for child care (Sylvester & Reich, 2002).

In today’s difficult economic times, even families with two solid incomes feel challenged to pay their bills on time and provide for their children. This is especially true for low-income families. However, when some fathers struggle to meet their financial responsibilities, expanding the definition of what it means to be a responsible father must move beyond being the chief breadwinner and financial provider.

Time, research, and empirical data from grassroots programs have brought clarity to the debate about the importance of fathers in the lives of children. The consensus is that when fathers are positively involved with their children and attentive to their physical and emotional needs, children’s well being increases. Studies now show that children with involved fathers display: better cognitive outcomes, even as infants; higher self-esteem and less
The consensus is that when fathers are positively involved with their children and attentive to their physical and emotional needs, children’s well being increases.

It has been a long hard battle to get to this point. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, significant changes took place in American society that would change the country’s cultural and political landscape forever. These changes had a tremendous effect on America’s families. The role of fathers began to evolve beyond the role of just a financial provider. The most traditional view of fatherhood held by previous generations of men was best summed up by the old maxim that “if a child has a roof over his head and food on the table, a father’s job is done.” Today, whenever the discussion turns toward what roles fathers should play within the family unit, the conversation still focuses heavily on his financial responsibilities.

Historically, the importance of a father’s emotional connection to his children has largely been minimized by our popular and political culture. Public policy discussions have especially been one-sided, choosing to focus attention on codifying paternity and child support issues in state and federal law, largely ignoring the benefits of promoting fathers as caregivers. Consequently, the challenge for those interested in increasing fathers’ involvement in the lives of children is to shift the focus of the conversation, not away from the mother’s equally important parenting role, or even away from the father’s financial responsibility to his children, but more toward how shared, involved, committed, and responsible parenting by the father can increase the happiness and wellbeing of the child. The promotion of increased fatherhood involvement should emphasize the interdependence of all family members for the benefit of all.

Nationwide, more organizations are taking steps to reach out to fathers to get them involved in their programs with their children. Despite the difficulty inherent in these efforts, some of the most successful fatherhood programs have earned praise and recognition for increasing father involvement, especially when fathers weren’t very inclined to get involved. It’s wise to note that there are many family situations where the dad is simply not in the picture. Either by choice or by circumstance, some men are unable to fulfill their role as father. When this happens (the biological father is not present), positive male role models are vital. However, programs must resist the urge to promote male involvement activities alone without calling for fathers to get more involved. This, of course, must be done with the greatest amount of sensitivity and care. There are a variety of ways to encourage fathers to get more involved, but every effort must consider each individual family’s unique situation.

There is a growing body of knowledge about what it would take to increase positive fatherhood involvement with their children. Some of what we know is working, but there still is a lot of room for improvement. Nevertheless, when fathers are proactively engaged and empowered to become nurturing, caring parents, they do rise to the occasion and become more involved. Unfortunately, all of this comes at a time when more and more children are growing up without a committed father in their lives. The challenge moving forward is to continue to support the strengthening of America’s families and build the capacity of those organizations committed to empowering fathers to become full partners in their children’s lives.

References


Parent engagement has long been a basic principle of Head Start. From its inception, Head Start programs across the nation have worked closely with parents living in poverty to involve them in their child’s education and make meaningful changes in their lives. Many child care centers, at one time or another, struggle with how to work with families that seem to be overwhelmed with meeting just their basic needs. How can we add to their stress by asking them to come to the center, or attend a parent meeting, or even a parent-teacher conference? And why don’t they follow through on our requests?

There are no cookie-cutter methods for working with families in poverty. There is no ‘one size fits all’ quick fix to help each family that comes into your program. Each family will respond to different methods of engagement. It is important to understand that parent engagement with families living in poverty takes time and consistency. Understanding the family, their history, and family dynamics is important. The parent that grew up in poverty has had a lifetime of rejection, stress, alienation, isolation, and exclusion, and suffered the physical impacts of these. They may have trust issues with schools or other institutions based on their past history. They may have had bad experiences in school and may have dropped out or barely graduated. This has a significant impact on their ability to obtain and maintain a job and to provide for their family. Most likely they live from day to day without much planning for the future. Their priority is to make it through today.

Many years ago, when directing an inner-city child care center, I remember one parent stopping at a store to pick up dinner every afternoon on her way to the center. Dinner consisted of a frozen 8-inch pizza, a bag of chips, and a bag of candy to feed a three year old, a nine month old and herself. Her choices were influenced by her immediate need to feed her family and not focused on the long-term effects of the nutrition she was providing.

In more recent times we find families that are new to poverty. The parent may have lost a job or been injured and, as a result, the family’s circumstances changed. This group of families has more resources to call upon in crisis. They are generally better educated and have a stronger work history.

Each family is unique and these descriptions are very general. While there are patterns in poverty, “patterns have exceptions” (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2000). When working with families from poverty:

- **Don’t make assumptions.** Let the parent tell you about themselves and their family. They may not fit a general description. All people bring their own history and their own way of dealing with their current situation.

- **Have a welcome, open feeling to your classroom/center.** Make sure the classrooms are not only child-friendly but parent-friendly. Hang a parent information board near the entrance and keep it free of clutter. Make it simple and inviting. Smile at parents and make eye contact with them when they enter the classroom. This may sound basic, but many teachers fear parents being in the classroom and tend to withdraw from them.

- **Respect every family.** Every family deserves respect, no matter how they came to be in their current circumstances. Calling each parent by name communicates respect and makes them feel good. When you do this, you become someone they want to be around. They feel welcomed and they are more open to working with you.

- **Make the parent your partner.** It is much easier to work on the tough issues with parents when you have come alongside them to help their child learn. The partnership is focused on what is best for the child. When you show the parent that your focus is on the best outcomes for their child, they can’t help but get on board.
Allow parents to fail. As with children, parents will make some wrong choices along the way. It is not for us to judge. We are there to support and encourage parents to get back on track, always. Remember that many families living in poverty have been judged by other agencies and institutions and they dread a similar response from you. “For our clients to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school, at work, and in the community” (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2000).

Evaluate your classroom and your events. Ask former and current parents about how they felt when visiting the center or their participation in parent events. Consider their responses seriously. Make adjustments based on this feedback and the needs of your current families.

Look for ways to remove barriers to a positive relationship. Parents who live in poverty may fall into the trap of offering excuses for their lack of participation. This builds barriers between you. Take steps to hear the excuses and find ways to eliminate them. “I can’t come to the parent event next week because I don’t have gas for my car.” The staff person could:

a) offer to pick them up;
b) find others to carpool with;
c) move the time of the meeting (now and then) to coincide with the time the parent picks up their children from the center.

Don’t give up. Just because the parent did not respond to your invitation this month doesn’t mean they won’t accept it next month. Be persistent. Parents who have lived in poverty all their lives may find it difficult to trust. It may take months of partnership-building to get a positive response from the parent.

Families may move out of poverty in time with support. It could also take a lifetime. We continue to persevere because it may make a difference in a child’s life and to their future.

References
Eight parents are clustered around a kidney-shaped table, shoulders hunched and legs askew as each sits perched on a 14-inch chair. They lean in closely as they listen to a mother share her story. It’s the first she’s spoken all night. There has been lots of sharing and laughter as everyone tells tales of bedtime woes and sibling wars. “But I want to do better by my kids,” she says, “I’ve learned a lot, and it’s not easy, but I’m trying to do what I have to do to be a good mom.”

To the Head Start teacher sitting in this circle of grown-ups, it’s familiar. It’s the moment that parent engagement becomes real. It’s the moment the parent’s heart speaks, and her peers nod and give her affirmation.

You’ve read of the magic of the kitchen table. The Head Start model of home visits and relationship-based work is a powerful tool for parent engagement.

Equally important, but sometimes overlooked, is the group process. Head Start Performance Standards require monthly Parent Center Committee meetings and shared decision making with a Policy Council comprised of parent representatives elected by their peers. This is no easy task. Parents appear to be very busy with work, school, appointments, and other obligations. Head Start parents are a diverse group; language barriers, a lack of understanding of cultural norms, and perception of education as “the teacher’s job” make group work feel pretty one-sided.

Head Start programs try many different formats and strategies to get parents to monthly meetings and other group events. Unfortunately, parent-only business meetings can become gripe sessions and scare off many parents. Parent-child events are fun, making memories and messes, but with little meaning. Staff send home cheery flyers, provide suppers, and have the best of intentions, only to wind up spending the evening with two or three parents out of a classroom of 17 children. It’s more exhausting than a field trip to the fire station!

After 48 years, how does Head Start continue to make room at the table for parents? Are the Performance Standards archaic and unattainable? How do we fill those chairs? Where is everybody?

In their book, The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century, psychiatrists Jaqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz (2009) assert that although people are busier than ever and even more connected by technology, they are also lonelier. Olds and Schwartz cite data from a General Social Survey (GSS) which found that between 1985 and 2004, the number of people with whom the average American discussed ‘important matters’ dropped from three to two. Shockingly, the number of people who said there was no one with whom they discussed important matters tripled to nearly a quarter of those surveyed. This is not surprising to Head Start staff. It is not uncommon for some parents to struggle to identify a single contact to put on their child’s emergency card.

Social isolation and poverty are not strangers, and most Head Start parents live at or below the federal poverty level. When a parent feels lonely, the usual ‘cures’ like going shopping, driving around, or ‘going out’ are not an option. And it’s pretty hard to phone a friend when the minutes are gone and there’s no money to pay the cell phone bill.

‘Flopping’ is a term Olds and Schwartz use to describe the phenomenon of being busy all day and coming home and flopping on the couch to watch television or DVDs. Children are parented by ‘remote control’ as mom or dad begs the children to ‘get to bed’ without getting up off the couch.

Too much time alone can cause a parent to lose perspective. Lonely parents are more likely to fear that a blip on the screen of their child’s developmental path has to be something serious and intervention or at least medication is needed.

Room at the table: Parent engagement in Head Start

by Shanna Grefsrud

Shanna Grefsrud has enjoyed working with children and families for the past 17 years. She has been a home visitor, classroom teacher, and is currently a Community & Parent Involvement Coordinator for Lakes and Prairies Community Action Partnership Head Start. Shanna also makes sure the wheels on the Head Start bus go ‘round and ‘round every day. Training and supporting staff in family goal setting, parent engagement, and adapting written materials for parents are her passion. Shanna enjoys playing with her three-year-old granddaughter Lucy and absolutely loves watching her daughter Megan become the wise and wonderful parent she was meant to be.
needed. There’s no one to reassure them that “this too shall pass” or that all preschoolers can be a little quirky sometimes.

If lonely parents are flopping and not engaging, then it’s going to take more than a flyer sent home in a backpack to get them to the table. “If you aren’t too busy, we’d love to have you come to our Parent Meeting on Tuesday,” and other polite invitations are easily passed over by lonely parents. If staff accept busyness as both a reality and a façade, we can change our message to, “I know you’re busy, but I know your child is important to you, and I need you to come.”

Head Start staff are not above using children as motivators to get their parents to monthly meetings. If a child goes home and tells his parent he can’t miss the eruption of the “World’s Largest Volcano,” she may just take time to bring him back for the fun and to attend the Parent Meeting. Yes, child care for meetings can be expensive, but a box of baking soda and a jug of vinegar are cheap.

Whether a parent is incredibly busy or incredibly lonely, time has a way of slipping by. Dates on a calendar are easily missed, but a colorful sticker on a child’s shirt can be a great reminder that there is an important event at Head Start that evening. Everyone feels the need to belong. Both children and parents need to be supported in their social and emotional growth.

Although Head Start staff often have dual roles, many feel less comfortable working with parents than with children. The parallel process can help staff think about their interactions with parents in a less threatening way. A parent venturing out to his first parent meeting and hovering near the doorway can feel much like a preschooler on the first day of school. How often do teachers immediately drop to their knees to greet the child without even giving the parent eye contact? A caring teacher will draw the parent in, show him where to sit, and introduce him to his peers.

‘Old School’ parent education — holding a meeting for parents and speaking at them for an hour about a parenting topic — can leave teachers frustrated and uncomfortable, and parents bored and restless and not likely to return next month.


Adult learning theory tells us that adults learn best from each other and when their emotions are engaged. Galinsky would agree that when parents are paying attention and listening and learning from one another, they are able to build the connections in their brain and with each other to take on the challenge of parenting their children and self-directing their lives.

The use of metaphors can prime the pump of emotion and get parents’ attention. Staff can talk to parents at length about child or family development, but when they use props such as bungee cords, sponges, and other concrete objects, abstract concepts become meaningful. The way a child ‘soaks’ up knowledge is real to every parent, in every language, in every home.

Hands-on activities give parents with rusty social skills practice in non-threatening ways. Family collages with photos or magazine cut-outs help parents share who they are and who they want to be. Making home routine charts and making homemade toys and games brings out hidden talents and a shared sense of purpose.

Several Minnesota Head Start programs have started holding annual events called “Families Doing Good Together,” a concept started by Jenny Friedman of Minneapolis. The events involve gathering parents and children together to tie fleece blankets, make greeting cards, assemble lunches, etc., to donate to homeless shelters, nursing homes — anywhere they are needed. It has been fascinating to see how much parents with low incomes are motivated by giving back to others.

When parents begin to share their experiences and feel comfortable with each other, it is inevitable that they begin to try to help each other. While parents can Google for information, it is seldom as meaningful as listening to someone who has “been there, done that.” Professionals may have the knowledge, but seldom the context. We know kids need to get to bed on time, but how do you do it with three kids in a two-bedroom apartment when you are single, work the late shift, and haven’t seen your children all day?

When parents are welcomed to the table, they feel less lonely and more alive.
Head Start Policy Council gives parents an opportunity to practice essential life skills and engage in the business of Head Start. Representatives share decision making with staff on hiring, enrollment criteria, grant goals, and the budget. Just as a classroom takes time to develop relationships, rules, and routines, so does a council. At the beginning of the year parents are intimidated, sometimes a little antagonistic, and often concerned only about their own child. By the end of the program year, the group has become a collective, can easily reach consensus, and sees the big picture. Former Policy Council members continue their engagement by mentoring other Head Start parents as they transition to their public school’s parent-teacher organization.

Some Head Start parent representatives are also elected to serve on state, regional, and national Head Start association boards. Almost all of them have a story to tell about a time when they felt alone, with no voice. Now these parents crave opportunities to gather with other parents to share what they have learned. At a Minnesota Head Start Association Parent Leadership Retreat this fall one father said, “It was so good to be with other people who were going through the same things. I had time to think about the kind of parent I really want to be. And since I’ve been home, even my four-year-old son talks about how I’ve changed.”

To move parents from flopping to flourishing requires critical thinking and creativity. Head Start staff and other early childhood professionals must pull up their own social-emotional skill set. It is not enough to schedule events, send home flyers, and hope for the best. Invitations must be genuine and the table must be set for all parents. Parent groups must be engaging and not just educational. The focus must be on the dynamic and not on the decorations. When parents are welcomed to the table, they feel less lonely and more alive. Emotions are engaged, conversation flows. Everyone belongs, everyone grows.

References


For more information on the “Families Doing Good Together” project see www.doinggoodtogether.org.