

TO BE SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY PROGRAMS MUST INVOLVE PARENTS IN A MEANINGFUL WAY

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Securing and maintaining active parent involvement should be a top priority of educational and social service programs. Child care centers, social service agencies, and elementary and secondary schools help meet the needs of children, adolescents, and other family members, but it is the parents who have the most significant and enduring impact. Most private, state, and federally funded programs do not, however, have successful parent involvement components.

The attitudes that program administrators and staff have about parents and their involvement are critical. First and foremost, parents are adults. For their involvement efforts to be effective, therefore, programs while addressing either parents' roles or social service needs must meet the interests of parents as adults. It is imperative that parents trust program administrators and staff to be interested in them as adults as well as parents. This trust can form only if program personnel have ongoing meetings with parents, both in groups and individually, to learn what makes up the adult within each parent.

Whether living in poverty or at higher socioeconomic levels, all parents have a variety of adult interests, abilities, talents, and skills that either lie dormant, are neglected, or have not been discovered, acknowledged, and given avenues for expression. The interests of the adult within the parent must be accurately assessed and then met or nurtured by education and social service programs.

What Makes It Work?

Research has demonstrated that if adults in educational and social service programs initiate and regularly participate in deciding upon and shaping project activities, they will develop a personal sense of ownership of those activities. Research repeatedly shows that adults participate in programs when they recognize that their involvement benefits themselves as adults, aids people they want to help, or furthers a cause in which they believe. It is this sense of personal ownership that attracts their involvement in the program. Their participation is sustained when they judge that the program has, in fact, met their expectations and been rewarding to them.

Children and adolescents will also benefit from parents' participation. They have strong developmental needs to make decisions and influence their lives. When parents successfully exercise their will, they will be more likely to permit their children to become self-asserting and autonomous.

Providing Decision-Making Opportunities

In our society, many parents were not regularly permitted to evaluate life options and make decisions when they themselves were children and adolescents, especially those who lived in poverty. Because they were affected by harsh problems and unmet needs, they did not have constructive choice-making opportunities.

Felt ownership, derived from ongoing, broad-based experiences in participatory program decision making, is like a magnet for these parents. It's not at all difficult to understand why. How often have people, especially those who live in poverty, had a legitimate sense of personal control over their lives? How often have they had a chance to participate in making decisions to develop programs important to them as well as to their children and families?

In education and social service programs that serve low-income families, hiring indigenous adult leadership contributes both to parent involvement and a sense of community.

Building Community

Since the time of the Puritans, the importance of the community to family life and parenting has been amply demonstrated. Today, the absence of a cohesive, effective community life is a problem that contributes to the isolation, loneliness and lack of support that adults at all income levels feel. Parents often inflict these frustrations on the vulnerable child or adolescent. Helping parents build community should be an important goal of education and social service programs. When program administrators and staff provide a group of parents the opportunity to decide that, as adults, they want the program to help them learn to cook nutritious meals for their families, they take a step toward building community. When a group of parents decides that they want to use a school or center for adult recreation such as a card party or a dance, they take a significant step toward building community.

In education and social service programs that serve low-income families, hiring indigenous adult leadership contributes both to parent involvement and a sense of community. These are people to whom other adults, living in the same neighborhood, turn for support in times of need.

Indigenous community leaders can best communicate the goals of the program to the community of parents. They are also sensitive to and can effectively communicate parents' problems or concerns to the program's administrators and staff. With a minimum of training, these neighborhood leaders can participate in the ongoing process of learning about the many characteristics of children, adolescents, parents and other family members. These neighborhood program staff members become positive role models for parents.

Program Administration

Education and social service programs should require parent representation on administrative policy boards and program committees. Parents should be empowered to ensure that program activities adequately respond to the concerns and interests of the other parents in the program as well as meet the needs of childhood and adolescence. The absence of these empowered parent policy boards and committees at most preschools, child care centers, schools, and social service programs significantly inhibits parent involvement.

The attitude of program administrators and staff toward parent involvement often discourages such involvement. Most directors focus their programmatic efforts solely on education and/or needed social services. Some programs fail to acknowledge that the parent is the primary influence on a child or adolescent. Many administrators lack the knowledge, ability, or motivation to involve parents in ways that are meaningful to them. As a result, these programs have no parent policy boards and no parent committees.

A large number of state and federally funded education and social service programs require parent participation on policy boards and committees. Many of these programs, however, do not involve parents successfully. Although the administrators and staff members at most of these programs may have standard, published program guidelines and procedures for parent

involvement, few encourage parents actively and meaningfully to participate on policy boards and program committees.

Some directors fear sharing program control with parents. They think that if parents are given too many opportunities for program oversight, their own administrative power and influence will diminish. Frequently, these directors feel that they may lose control of the program, resulting in an inability to administer the program in a manner that will satisfy themselves or their supervisors. To handle this fear, some directors involve only a limited number of parents or hand pick those from whom they will receive no administrative threats. Other directors outnumber the parents on these boards with favored professionals and/or staff. Therefore, parents feel their personal and collective power diminish.

Training can address administrators' fears and concerns about losing program control. Current and former education and social service administrators, who have a history of successfully directing programs in which parent groups regularly made decisions, should be selected to provide training.

When those responsible for supervising and administering programs urge, implement, and oversee strategies that bring about broad-based parent participation, we will see a marked improvement in the development and well-being of children, parents, families, and communities across the United States.

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