

Appendix D1

PARENT EDUCATION INITIATIVE

A METHOD OF ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Research and theory in the area of symbolic interactionism imply that a parent's role is, like a teacher's, not fixed but emergent, as Swick (1998) suggests. Parent roles in schools should evolve through learning and interaction with all school stakeholders. This concept is very different from the set and limited role usually assigned to parents in schools. It is being recommended today that parents and teachers discuss how to nurture collaborative and evolving roles on behalf of children and their caregivers. How does this happen? In the Midwestern school where a Parent Education Initiative model was begun in 1995, we used Glaser and Strauss's *grounded theory* (1967; Glaser, 1978) to inform our practice. Parents and teachers helped us generate a theory of how they and their children or students might all grow within a school context, their families, and their communities. Through focus groups and interviews, we kept listening to participants until no new information was gained. We used this information to shape our approach to parent-teacher relationships and development, and we recommend this methodology.

This process did not happen easily. It is very hard to recruit parents or teachers to discuss their own growth and development. They are very busy, and many parents are not comfortable talking with teachers. If there is time or interest, teachers point to the need to focus on learning how to help children. We hoped that parents and teachers would discover that understanding how an event (e.g., world events, their child's failing in a school subject or being labeled the class bully, or their student's not scoring high enough on standardized tests) impacts them is important information for the child's growth as well as their own. We believe we succeeded in doing this in our model program.

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The onsite parent coordinator organized focus groups and interviews for parents representing every grade, for teachers, and for representatives of all parent organizations in the school. Three months were spent with needs assessment to set a tone of empowerment and ownership for parents, teachers, and staff. Time was spent meeting stakeholders individually and in groups in the school, in restaurants, or wherever they were most comfortable. The coordinator both read about the school philosophy and goals and sat in on many school planning meetings of parents, teachers, and school staff. A parent initiative, it is believed, should develop along with and not supplant other parent and teacher activities.

In this case, because of a 5-year grant and designated funds, the coordinator also was able to define the unique role of a parenting educator within a school setting. Whoever that coordinator is (assistant principal, trained teacher or parent, counselor, school nurse, or ideally a parenting educator), these steps of shaping a parent initiative are recommended. While we believe that every school should have a trained parenting educator, we are realistic enough to know it may be a role taken on by someone already in the school, ideally with training and credentials in parenting education and support. This project happened to be in a school of primarily middle- and upper-class families, so when the grant was over, the infrastructure could support the continuation of the parenting education and support that evolved. This school also served families of lower socioeconomic status through its substantial scholarship program and its enrichment program for talented children attending Chicago-area schools with inadequate resources.

There are unique ways a coordinator is able to make parenting education and support available to school staff and faculty. Providing information on child development and parent-child and adult-child relationships to faculty, staff, and parents is helpful, of course, but moving to the level of understanding the education and support needs of parents themselves and teachers as parents and caregivers is unusual. Referrals to needed social and therapeutic services were made when appropriate. In some model schools and community schools, these services are also available within the school (see Finn-Stevenson and Zigler's writing on *Schools of the 21st Century* [1999] and the National Community Education Association for examples). Full-service schools are clearly the preferred model (Lerner, Rothbaum, Boulos, & Castellino, 2002). An office in a school where a professional parenting educator is available for everyone, from principal to parents to school engineer, whether struggling to deal with the birth of a new child, raising a foster child, or caring for an elderly parent while caring for children, not to mention all the issues associated with schools, parenting, and peers, is a source of comfort to school parents and all school staff.

Our model began with private grant funding, thus avoiding a school's reluctance to fund something for parents that might be seen as robbing student services to pay for family services. Our strong hopes were that once our model was institutionalized

and when its potential and real effects were better grasped, its ongoing school support would be easier to rationalize.

How much time and effort were involved in this initiative? Was there any skepticism or reluctance to be involved? Why and from whom? What are some of the natural ways to link up with faculty and even students to help them better understand the parent, teacher, and student roles in a school or community? Some solutions for us included:

1. Teaching human development and parenting skills to students from pre-kindergarten on in anticipation of their parent role. These skills were applicable immediately in their own interactions with others and as they cared for younger students in tutoring or mentoring projects (see Chapter 9 for details). We also gave parents an opportunity to learn the same parenting process in groups of 6–12 parents. They came in wanting to learn about what their children were learning, and they also learned a culturally sensitive approach to parenting.
2. Working with middle school students and teachers planning for a service learning activity with toddlers in a community settlement house.
3. Helping parents from other countries identify and share their beliefs about their parent role and look at those beliefs in terms of potential differences in understanding and enactment of the parent role by the rest of the parents in the school.
4. Working with faculty as they dealt with school programs such as character education, drug abuse and violence prevention programs, and so on, and working to prepare information and collaborations with parents on the same topics.
5. Conducting a concurrent seminar with parents and teachers on a topic being studied by students (caring in a competitive world), culminating in a joint session with the adult group “listening to students’ voices.”
6. Working with preschool parents to develop their own programming and peer support group to maintain throughout their children’s years in school.
7. Working with parents of special needs students and school counselors to better collaborate on behalf of students.

PRACTICE APPLICATIONS

We designed a program in a school based on all the current thinking and scholarship on adult and lifelong learning and alternative paradigms for parent and family

life education (First & Way, 1995; Morgaine, 1992). While school- or community-based initiatives often address so-called at-risk parents, rarely are there resources for the group that is often at risk for other reasons: middle- and upper-class parents. A willingness to be involved is essential in parent-child relations, and educational and financial resources do not guarantee this willingness, while evidence shows parents who are “disadvantaged” can indeed be involved in complicated, strategic, and thoughtful ways (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Thus, our project filled a research gap by looking also at parents traditionally assumed to have all they need to successfully rear their children. We know this traditional view is often not the case. Below is the mission statement that evolved after the first 3 months of the program.

Mission Statement

Background and Rationale

Parents are the adults who are responsible for their children and who are expected to make wise decisions about their care and development. This duty goes well beyond the child’s entrance into school. It involves a lifelong planning process. *The (name of school) Parent Initiative* seeks to collaborate with and support parents in their important role at a time when they seem not to be getting the support they need in society.

It is now acknowledged that parents, like children and teachers, have opportunities to learn and grow at every stage over their life span. Children provide parents and teachers continual opportunities to learn about life and caring. The Parent Initiative hopes to help parents reflect on the process of their own and their children’s growth and development within the community and the greater society in which they live. It is our hope to collaborate with parents, teachers, and staff to help them find self-fulfillment in their roles by realizing the challenges involved and the potential of each situation to guide children in ways consistent with identified values and goals. Together, we can discover the generative nature of parenting and caring and assist those we serve in feeling more competent, confident, and fulfilled in their roles.

The Parent Initiative seeks to collaborate with and support parents and child caregivers in their important role. To achieve this goal, we are committed to:

- Helping parents become more competent, confident, and satisfied in their effectiveness with their children, family, and community
- Making a clear commitment to our belief in the lifelong process of learning and growing for parents, teachers, and children
- Creating an environment that promotes opportunities for greater parental growth, self-understanding, and self-awareness

- Addressing the fact that we are a diverse parent community that respects cultural differences and still appreciates the common parenting experiences that bring us together
- Enhancing parent-child-school-community relationships
- Providing support for teachers and staff with their own parenting and family concerns
- Strengthening the partnership between parents, teachers, and staff

We will fulfill these goals by:

- Consulting with representatives of the school staff and parent community to identify areas of concern
- Designing and delivering innovative programming and learning opportunities tailored to the specific needs of the school-parent community
- Working to enhance more-effective parent-teacher communications and collaborations
- Integrating current parenting programs and activities into a coherent whole
- Providing information to help teachers and staff better understand key issues challenging parents and families in the 21st century

PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF DEFINE THE CENTER

In this school of more than 900 students, seven focus groups for parent grade representatives from preK to Grade 12 ($N = 39$) and many individual meetings with parents and staff ($N = 46$) representing organizations within the school helped determine the needed content, timing, structure, and methods of engagement of the Parent Initiative. Parents in this project were primarily concerned with the following issues:

- Having a place where they could discuss their concerns and needs without always having school staff present. Emphasis was on a “place of our own” within a learning environment or nearby community site.
- Having a coordinator to serve as a resource at already established meetings.
- Having a coordinator to help parents understand their role with teachers and staff. Part of this desire was related to better understanding children’s developmental needs. The coordinator could also help parents better understand adult needs and the changing social context in which they were trying to parent effectively.

What?

Narrative examples and lists of parent concerns uncovered throughout our 5-year project and survey of the literature are included in Chapter 7. Here is a brief list that came from the initial focus group sessions, beginning with interviews of staff regarding the Parent Education Initiative and what they needed it to be.

- From counselors and affective education teachers, we learned that parents were very happy that the staff taught the children antibullying skills, conflict resolution, sex education, drug abuse prevention, and so forth, but these practitioners would profit from sessions in which parents and teachers learn together about a topic of joint interest in an unstressful, informative meeting. (Meetings like this are presented in Chapter 7 and Appendix E4.) School counselors said parents called them with many concerns. Counselors are viewed as persons students can go to, so students are not thrilled to know counselors are also talking to parents a lot, and so the counselors were very supportive of a parent coordinator. They also do not have the time to work with parents as they should or could. Counselors suggested topics the parent coordinator might address as a parenting educator: transitions, peer pressure, drugs and alcohol, support for new parents, single parents, parents of children with special needs, and handling sexuality with teens in light of their developing bodies. The counselors suggested using the Internet more with school parents, helping parents use critical thinking skills to assess what they find on the Internet, getting information on topics of interest, and perhaps even setting up a confidential chat line to help parents adapt to their changing children. Access problems were not an issue at this school though access must be considered in other settings. Collaborative programs such as Parent Link, in Columbia, Missouri, in which volunteers work in libraries and shopping malls to help parents access family support materials, are one example of an alternative to communicating with parents in school. Of course, parents with computers may need to be encouraged to use them for communicating with the school.

- Administrators meeting new parents thinking about coming to the school believed the Parent Initiative was very important in helping parents as they transitioned to a new school or grade. The idea of a lounge and resource room for parents was attractive. They also felt there needed to be something for teachers on how new parents with diverse backgrounds might view teachers' communications in notes or conferences. Many felt teachers could use help in relating to parents. All that teachers had was information on difficult parents or expectations that a principal or daycare administrator would protect them from parents rather than

help them work out a relationship that respects everyone's needs as much as possible. While many excellent teachers are very well educated in their content area, most do not have enough background in understanding child, and especially adult, developmental needs and tasks.

- One principal acknowledged that principals and teachers did not know enough about parent and adult development to meet parents' diverse needs. Their primary job was meeting the learning needs of children. They would be glad to have the parent coordinator help parents, teachers, and staff better understand the developmental needs and other challenges facing children and adults in the school, home, and community.

- The director of the special enrichment and high school preparation program for students of lower socioeconomic status added, "Parents of my students are concerned about values. Also, they worry about how to handle teens that kind of know it all or think they do." The director said a mother had called and said she felt she couldn't give her child the guidance she felt he needed because he thought he was so smart. Parents ask about communication with children who are smarter than parents in some areas. They ask about their parent role. They want to create an atmosphere of openness, but this is hard. They feel that children want guidance but wonder how parents can provide it effectively.

While many other teachers were approached in an initial faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year, we felt the need to try to explain the Parent Initiative individually and informally at lunch tables, one on one, or whenever an opportunity arose. This approach allowed them to get information about their own family concerns. We sent them all the materials we sent to parents (e.g., newsletters, bimonthly fliers of coming events).

If there are no funds for a full-time parenting educator, partnering with a university to do focus groups and learn of parent concerns is a feasible alternative. Or staff can be retrained or reassigned. Having a mission statement is very helpful in the process to obtain buy-in from all parties.

RESOURCES

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