

# CHAPTER 3

## COLLABORATING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES



**After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:**

- List some of the strategies teachers can use to establish positive relationships with students' parents and families.
- Describe the four interrelated elements of the family systems model.
- Describe the three concepts of family interaction and functioning levels.
- Summarize the eight family functions.
- Explain the family life cycle.
- Differentiate between family involvement and family engagement.
- List strategies for working with the parents and families of diverse students.
- Describe how academic optimism applies to teachers, families, and students.
- List the standards for professional relationships with students' parents.

## UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S FAMILY

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“It takes a village” is a phrase that is used extensively in connection with education, emphasizing the importance of teachers, administrators, parents, and community service providers working together to ensure the academic success of children in public schools. While the overuse of this African proverb has resulted in its diminished impact, the idea the phrase represents is still a crucial component of behavior and classroom management. Both Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model and Bandura’s social cognitive theory stress that a child’s family and environment influence the child’s behavior. Additionally, the concepts of universal design for classroom management, school-wide positive behavior support (Chapter 13), and wraparound services (Chapter 13) stress the involvement of the child’s “village.” Thus, it is important that teachers develop collaborative relationships with students’ parents and other family members early on, even prior to the beginning of the school year. It is often too late for a teacher to develop a positive relationship with a student’s parents if the teacher waits until that first parent–teacher conference or until an academic or behavioral concern arises.

The best strategy is for teachers to build parent–teacher relationships before they have a need to contact parents to address academic concerns or students’ infringement of behavior expectations. When a teacher contacts parents for the first time because of a perceived problem, the parents may view the school as an unwelcoming and negative setting. Future phone calls may go unanswered, parents may not attend parent–teacher conferences, and the child’s academic and behavior difficulties may be blamed on the teacher.

### **Demographics**

Students in American schools today are increasingly diverse. It is predicted that by 2035, children of non–European American heritage will make up the majority of students in U.S. schools, and by 2040 they will represent 62% of the school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Hispanics make up both the largest and the fastest-growing group. The number of Hispanic children in the United States increased from 5.3 million in 1980 to 17.4 million in 2010 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012). Additionally, the number of English language learners increased from 4.1 million students in the 2002–2003 academic year to 4.7 million in the 2010–2011 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Poverty has a significant impact on the emotional and behavioral development of children (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). The proportion of children living in poverty in the United States increased from 15% in 2000 to 22% in 2013, and the proportion living in extreme poverty in 2013 was 9.8% (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012; Children's Defense Fund, 2013). With 12.4% of European American children, 39.1% of African American children, and 35% of Hispanic children living in poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2012), teachers need to understand how poverty can affect academic performance and behavior.

### **Cultural Issues**

With the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in today's classrooms, it is more essential than ever for teachers to establish relationships with their students' families. Teachers need to understand the cultural expectations of students' families and how to respond to the families in a culturally sensitive manner. Teachers need to remember that children acquire the values, beliefs, traditions, and languages of their cultures through interactions with their environments. Understanding the effects of enculturation and acculturation (see Chapter 1) may help teachers understand the cultures of their diverse students and help them to interact with students' parents. For example, Tom Yu, a first-generation Asian American student, is having academic difficulties in several of his classes. Many Asian American families take a collectivist view, focusing on the well-being and the needs of the whole rather than the individual. If an Asian American student is having academic difficulties, this may seem to be an affront to the family. In discussing Tom's academic difficulties with his parents, the teacher needs to be culturally sensitive. For example, the teacher may want to focus first on Tom's strengths: He participates well during group activities and always contributes to the group projects; he is always respectful and is especially helpful to other students needing assistance. Teachers should also keep in mind that the enculturation and acculturation of their diverse students' parents also play a role in the students' behaviors in the classroom.

## **ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES**

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Teachers can use a number of different strategies to establish positive relationships with the families of their students. Whatever strategies a teacher uses, it is a good practice to begin establishing these relationships prior to

the beginning of the school year. Sending a postcard or an introductory letter two weeks prior to the start of school is a good way to lay the foundation for successful relationships with families. A postcard might simply give the teacher's name and include a message stating how much the teacher is looking forward to having the child in her classroom. An introductory letter could provide a little more information about the teacher and the goals for the year. By introducing themselves through postcards or letters in this way, teachers can take the first step in establishing what will become ongoing communication and collaboration with parents throughout the year (Dardig, 2005).

Establishing communication with parents at the start of the school year is only the beginning of the process. Teachers must engage in ongoing communication with their students' families. A teacher might create a monthly newsletter of class activities to keep parents and families informed about what is going on in their children's classroom. The teacher could also use the newsletter to share information about scheduled school events, such as conferences, and school activities in which students from the class are involved. The primary focus of the newsletter, however, should be the teacher's class and not the school.

Teachers should also send notes home when students are doing well academically (e.g., informing parents that their child received a good grade on a test or completed all assignments for the week) and when students have exhibited expected behaviors (e.g., praising students for never being late for class or for helping other students with assignments). Teachers might also make personal phone calls to parents or guardians to let them know how well their children are doing—this is an exceptional strategy for developing relationships with parents.

Teachers can also use electronic media to establish and maintain communications with students' parents and families. Many school websites provide space for teachers to set up their own home pages. Teachers might use these to post lists of assignments that are due for class as well as information about upcoming events and activities. Teachers should also provide parents with their school e-mail addresses. This is particularly important because many school websites are not very user-friendly, often requiring codes to access directories; some do not even make staff and faculty directories available. By giving students' parents their e-mail addresses, teachers enable the parents to contact them at the parents' convenience. Also, e-mails are a relatively nonintrusive, neutral means of facilitating communication between home and school.

**CASE STUDY Jane and Mr. O'Neill**

Jane is a third grader at Abydos Elementary School. Her teacher, Mr. O'Neill, recently noticed that Jane has not been completing her assignments, has not been interacting with peers, and seems withdrawn. Mr. O'Neill tried the basic intervention strategies (i.e., nonverbal and verbal interventions, redirection, and reinforcements), but nothing was effective in reducing Jane's academic and behavior difficulties.

Mr. O'Neill had previously established a good relationship with Jane's mother, Mrs. Gage, through positive communications (notes sent home, a classroom newsletter, e-mails, and phone calls), but now he felt that a face-to-face meeting was necessary. Unfortunately, from feedback he had received from Mrs. Gage, he knew it was going to be difficult to set up a face-to-face meeting with her because she was working two jobs: a day job at a grocery store and a night job at a fast-food restaurant. Mr. O'Neill decided to have dinner one night at the restaurant, hoping that he could talk to Mrs. Gage during her break.

Mr. O'Neill carried out his plan and was able to meet with Mrs. Gage at the restaurant. After he informed her about the change in Jane's academic performance and behavior, Mrs. Gage explained that Jane had been "feeling down" lately because of a number of school events. Earlier in the month, the school had held a father-daughter banquet, and next week students were to bring in parents to talk about their jobs during Parents' Day. These activities reminded Jane that she did not have a father—her dad, a marine, had died in a war 2 years ago.

As Parents' Day approached, Mr. O'Neill thought about what he could do to help Jane. As he tried to develop a strategy, he was in constant communication with Mrs. Gage. Finally, he thought he had a way to help Jane feel part of Parents' Day.

On Parents' Day, when the last of his students' parents had talked about her job, Mr. O'Neill went to the front of the classroom and opened the door. Three marines, wearing dress uniforms, and Mrs. Gage walked in. The marines stood at attention at the front of the classroom while Mrs. Gage sat in a chair near the front of the room that had been saved for her.

Mr. O'Neill called Jane to the front of the room. One of the marines came forward and crouched beside Jane. He addressed the class: "Jane's father was a soldier. He died 2 years ago in a war. He died protecting the freedom that we all have. He died so that parents could be here with their children today." The second marine came forward and presented Jane with a glass case containing a picture of her father in uniform and a folded American flag. A third marine, who had known Jane's father, came forward and told a couple of stories about Private Gage. Finally, the marines fell back in line and saluted Jane. Mr. O'Neill felt that on that day, Jane's father had attended Parents' Day.

With the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in today's classrooms, it is important that teachers quickly understand the backgrounds of their students. For example, if Maria's parents speak only Spanish, then sending home letters, notes, and newsletters in English will not help establish

a relationship with Maria's family. Teachers should make every effort to have all such materials translated into the home languages of their students.

Teachers' strategies for building relationships with students' families need to go beyond the classroom setting. When teachers see their students and their families out in the community, they should make an effort to engage the parents in brief and friendly conversation. On these occasions there should be little to no discussion regarding the children's progress at school. These are opportunities to build rapport with parents.

If teachers are successful in establishing relationships with their students' parents from the beginning of the school year, when they need to contact the parents about academic or behavioral concerns, the parents are more likely to be receptive to the communication. When a student's behavior difficulties occur with some frequency, the teacher needs to involve the parents and the family in developing an intervention plan. Parents need to feel that their input is valued and that the teacher is as concerned about their child's academic success as they are. Parents need to know that the teacher cares.

There are times when no matter what strategy a teacher uses to establish rapport with parents, the parents will be unresponsive. Sometimes this is due to the parents' own experiences with schools when they were students. They remember schools as uninviting and inhospitable places. This does not mean that the teacher should quit trying to establish a relationship with the parents. Sometimes the teacher just needs to try harder. For example, Roberto's father never liked school. He was always in trouble as a student, and he never felt that anyone at school really cared about him. Now Roberto seems to be experiencing the same difficulties as his father. However, Mr. Salyers, Roberto's high school history teacher, continues to send positive notes home regarding Roberto's progress, even to the point of recommending certain colleges for Roberto, who is interested in a career in computer science. When he sees Roberto's father in the grocery store, Mr. Salyers approaches him and tells him how much he likes Roberto's creativity and spirit. Because of Mr. Salyers's repeated positive attempts, Roberto's father begins responding to the teacher. Communication is further expanded when Mr. Salyers encourages Roberto's other teachers to reach out to Roberto's father.

Again, there will be times when a teacher cannot establish a collaborative relationship with a student's parents no matter what strategy the teacher uses. Yet the teacher needs to continue to try. It is possible that the teacher's attempts may have a ripple effect, influencing a later relationship. For example, Mrs. Daily tried to communicate with Mayra's mother the entire academic year, but she never received any responses to her attempts. However, 2 years later, Mrs. Daily had Mayra's sister, Erika, in her class. Again, Mrs. Daily tried

to establish positive communication with the mother. Remembering the communications she received from Mrs. Daily when Mayra was in her class, the mother was more open to communicating with Mrs. Daily regarding Erika.

Teachers need to realize that many of their diverse students' parents are dealing with a number of difficult conditions. Aside from issues of cultural identity, they may be socioeconomically disadvantaged, may have health problems, and so on. As in the ecological systems model, these factors influence how parents interact with their children's environment. These factors cannot be taken in isolation, and teachers need to understand the conditions from which their students come. While many of these factors are beyond teachers' ability to improve, by gaining an understanding of them, teachers may be better able to understand their students' families and, by extension, the students themselves.

### A FAMILY SYSTEMS MODEL

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The idea of teacher collaboration with students' families is aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) concept of the mesosystem, in which home, school, neighborhood, and peers interact with one another. When the child interacts with school, peers, and neighborhood, the family develops reciprocal relationships with these environments through the child. Thus, the family is an interactive social system, and teachers need to take a family systems approach to working with families.

In the **family systems model**, the family is seen as an interrelated and interactive social system in which the events and experiences of each member of the family unit affect other members of the family. The model "considers communication and interaction patterns, separateness and connectedness, loyalty and independence, and adaptation to stress in the context of the whole as opposed to the individual in isolation" (Christian, 2006, p. 13). The family systems model can be illustrated as a mobile, a kinetic sculpture with a number of moving objects hanging from rods that take advantage of the principle of equilibrium. When one object in the mobile moves, it affects the other parts of the system, and they also move. This system will also pull the moving object back to the way it was before. Like family members, the objects in the mobile do not exist in isolation from one another.

Understanding family systems can help teachers better understand the interactions between students and their families and thereby meet the academic and behavior needs of their students and work collaboratively with families. A working knowledge of family systems can also enable teachers to understand the family dynamics of their culturally and linguistically diverse students.

The family systems model has four interrelated elements: family characteristics, family interaction, family functions, and family life cycle (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011).

### **Family Characteristics**

Definitions of *family* are as diverse as families themselves. The traditional, normative view of the family in the United States has been described as conjugal; this is the family that includes a husband, wife, and children. In some cultures, the common family form is consanguineal; these families include parents, children, and other related members. Such extended families are common among Hispanics, whose families may include grandparents, parents, and children living together in one household. Blended families—in which divorced parents remarry, bringing children from two former families together to form a new family—have become increasingly common. Family characteristics include all those qualities that make a family special and unique.

Each family member has a specific role and is expected to behave in a certain manner. The father may be the strong leader who guides the family through difficult times. The mother may be the nurturing member of the family, the person the children go to when they are upset or hurt. The older brother may be the responsible one, watching over his younger siblings and doing well in school. The sister may be the extrovert of the family, outgoing and friendly to everyone she meets. Another brother may be the athlete, and the youngest brother may be the “clown” of the family, always making everyone laugh. No matter what roles the various family members play, they affect each other, and if one member does not play his or her expected role, the family becomes imbalanced. Roles are also dynamic. As family members go through the various stages of the life cycle, their roles change; family members age, and children become adults and form their own families.

Family characteristics also include socioeconomic factors, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the health of family members, family size, the presence of members with substance abuse problems, and the presence of members with disabilities. All of these factors can affect how a child interacts within the family, community, and school. For example, 9-year-old Randall has an older brother who has an intellectual disability. Randall’s parents feel that somehow they are to blame for his brother’s disability, so they spend an inordinate amount of time taking care of the brother. As a result, Randall feels neglected and unloved. He exhibits inappropriate behaviors at school to get attention from peers and teachers. School personnel inform Randall’s parents of his



behavior difficulties at school, which increases the stress level at home. The parents complain to Randall that they have enough problems taking care of his older brother, and that Randall should do what the teachers tell him to do. This leaves Randall feeling even more isolated at home, and his behavior at school escalates. The characteristics of the family affect the functioning level of the family members and how they interact with others both within and outside the family structure.

### **Family Interaction**

Like the mobile with its many parts, the family as a whole is affected by the behaviors and characteristics of individual family members. The family members' reciprocal interactions contribute to the functioning level of the family. There are three basic concepts for understanding family interaction and functioning levels: family cohesion, family flexibility, and family communication.

#### *Family Cohesion*

**Family cohesion** is the emotional bonding or closeness that family members have toward each other (Ide, Dingmann, Cuevas, & Meehan, 2010; Olson, 2011). Three levels of family cohesion have been described: disengaged, balanced, and enmeshed. Families that are disengaged experience little emotional bonding. Children from disengaged families have difficulty trusting or respecting others and thus have difficulty developing healthy relationships.

Families that are at the other extreme of family cohesion are enmeshed. These families experience an excessive amount of emotional closeness. The parents may appear overly protective, and the children have little autonomy or independence. They may not have friends outside the family.

In families that have balanced cohesion, members develop caring and trusting relationships with one another and with individuals outside the family. Time with the family is important, but family members also have time with friends. Families that have balanced cohesion tend to be more functional than either disengaged or enmeshed families.

#### *Family Flexibility*

**Family flexibility** is the amount or degree of change that takes place in family leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules (Olson, 2011). Three levels of family flexibility have been described: rigid, balanced, and chaotic.

Families that are rigid have strictly enforced rules with no exceptions. Usually, one family member is in charge and wields nearly absolute control over other family members. For example, Samantha was late for dinner because she stayed after school to receive some tutoring in fractions, a subject in which she was having some difficulties. However, the family rule states that if anyone is late for dinner, that person does not receive a meal. Even though Samantha had a legitimate reason for being late, she did not have dinner that night. Families that are rigid have difficulty adjusting to changes and may become dysfunctional under stressful situations (Michael-Tsabari & Lavee, 2012).

Conversely, families that are chaotic have rules, but they are not consistently enforced. The parents do not set guidelines, and the roles in the family are unclear and constantly changing. For example, Jack is a very active 9-year-old. He is constantly in motion, from the moment he wakes up until he goes to bed. His younger brother, Daniel, is quiet and does not tax his parents' energy or patience. While Jack is required to go to bed at 8:00 p.m., which is the boys' established bedtime, Daniel is allowed to stay up 10:00. However, on many nights the parents do not enforce bedtime even for Jack.

In families that have balanced flexibility, rules are firmly enforced for all members of the family, but they are negotiated when circumstances require it. Family members are treated equitably. Family roles are adjusted to best meet the needs of the family in different situations. As with balanced cohesion, families that have balanced flexibility are more functional than families in which flexibility is rigid or chaotic.

### *Family Communication*

**Family communication** encompasses the talking, listening, and understanding skills that family members use in facilitating levels of family cohesion and flexibility (Olson, 2011). Families at the extremes of cohesion and flexibility have poor communication skills. Communication in these families ranges from critical and harsh (rigid) to very little communication of any kind (disengaged). Families that have good communication skills generally fall within the balanced dimensions of cohesion and flexibility.

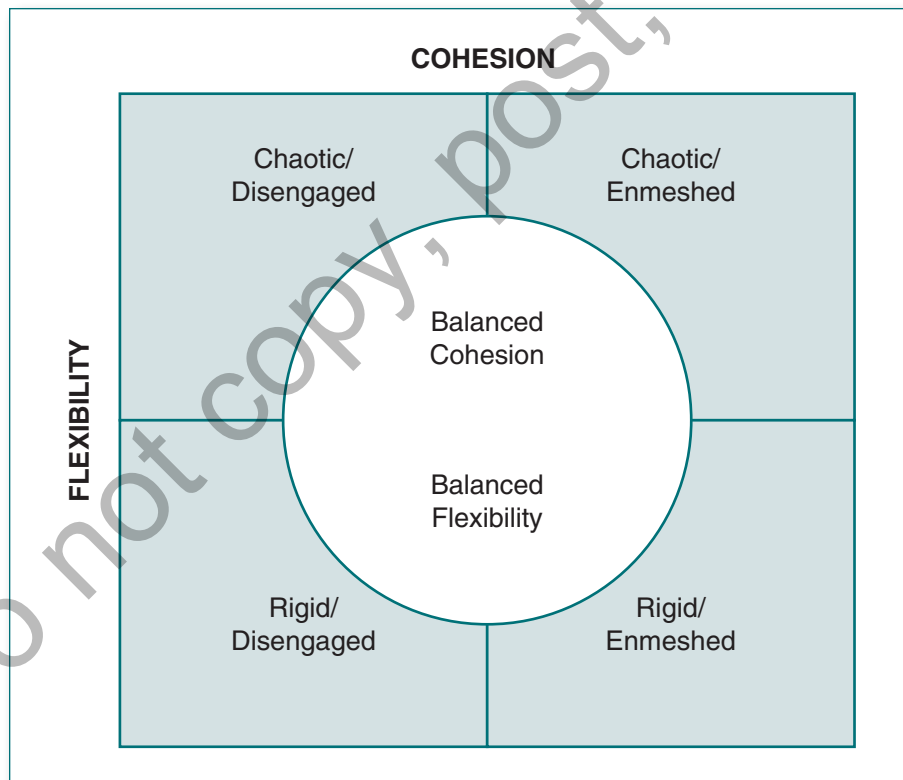
As we have noted, families that are balanced in their cohesion and flexibility are more likely to function well than are families in which extreme levels of cohesion and flexibility exist; children from the latter kinds of families may have difficulties interacting with family members and with people outside their families. The implication for teachers is that by gaining some understanding of their students' family dimensions, they may be able to develop strategies for engaging families in their children's education.

For example, if a teacher is dealing with a family displaying rigid flexibility, discussing the student's academic or behavior concerns with the parent who is not in charge may not yield any support from the family. The teacher will need to determine which parent is in control and specifically invite that individual to a conference.

### Family Functions

**Family functions** are the routines, tasks, and activities individual family members perform to meet the members' diverse needs as well as those of the family as a unit. Aberrations of family functions can result in unmet familial needs and affect the development of children, resulting in academic and behavior difficulties

**Figure 3.1** Family Interactions



in school. Family functions may be broken down into eight types: affection, self-esteem, spiritual, economics, daily care, socialization, recreation, and education (Turnbull et al., 2011).

*Affection* is the emotional support family members receive from one another. A child's development is predicated on the interactions that occur between the child and the child's immediate environment. Families in which members show affection for one another provide children with a warm and nurturing environment. Affection can provide a foundation of love and trust that children will carry with them throughout their lives. Parental warmth and affection significantly affect children's psychological adjustment, development of positive dispositions across cultures, and development of prosocial skills (Khaleque, 2013). Children who experience parental affection are able to build positive relationships with peers and adults. *Self-esteem* is a sense of worth, or how an individual judges him- or herself. For students, self-esteem is a critical factor in academic achievement, behavior, and relationships with peers and adults. Just as a positive parent-child relationship can have a good affect on a child's self-esteem, a positive teacher-child relationship (support, availability, or approval) can also affect the child's self-esteem (Leflot, Onghena, & Colpin, 2010). Many educational professionals are concerned with the self-esteem of students, and many schools have implemented strategies to improve students' self-esteem.

*Spiritual* family functions are those related to religious or spiritual beliefs. For many individuals, culture and the role of the church are intertwined. The *economics* function of the family is to provide members with the necessities of life, including food, shelter, and clothing. Children who are not provided with these necessities often do not perform well in school. Rising levels of poverty have had devastating effects on the functioning of American families. School meal programs for children in need reflect these changes. During the 2011-2012 academic year, 59% of the five billion school lunches served across the United States were provided free of charge to children who qualified because of family income level; 9% were provided at reduced price. Of the two billion school breakfasts served, 84% were provided free of charge or at reduced price. In the 1969-1970 academic year, only 15% of school meals were provided free or at reduced price (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013). The *daily care* functions of families are those concerned with meeting members' physical and health needs. These include cooking, cleaning, health care, and transportation. Through the family, children learn *socialization* skills, which prepare them for integration into the world outside the family. Children initially learn societal expectations and morality from parents and other family members, preparing them to interact and socialize with others outside the family unit. *Recreation* is

a quality-of-life component of family functioning. Families involved in recreational activities provide opportunities for members to interact positively with one another and with people outside the family. Families that provide opportunities for children to develop personal hobbies aid them in growing in multiple ways: expanding their knowledge, enabling them to feel the satisfaction and pride associated with developing skills, and creating opportunities for them to interact socially with others who have like interests. Children from families that engage in recreational activities are also more likely than other children to be involved in extracurricular activities in school. Finally, through their *education* function, families provide children with the knowledge, skills, and experiences to be successful in life.

Many family functions affect students' academic performance and behavior in school. Teachers have the opportunity to influence the well-being of students by supporting and encouraging many family functions. They may also be able to help families that are having difficulties with some family functions. By developing positive relationships with students' families, teachers might find that they can provide some families with needed resources and thus improve the children's academic performance and school behavior. For example, a teacher could provide information about an organization that provides free services in reading development for a parent with reading difficulties.

### WHAT WOULD YOU DO? Ana

Ana is a student with mild intellectual disabilities in your seventh-grade English class. You have been following the accommodations listed in her individualized education program, and Ana has been making modest progress; however, recently she has had academic difficulties, and you are concerned about her behavior. Ana has begun bringing a doll to school, and she gets upset when you try to take it from her. She has been defecating in the classroom, and you have had to call her mother several times to bring clean clothes for Ana. After a conference with Ana's mother, it has been decided that some additional clothing for Ana will remain at school, and when she has one of her "accidents" she will go the laundry room with a paraprofessional and wash her clothes. However, this has not alleviated the problem, and Ana has developed new atypical behaviors. She has begun isolating herself increasingly, and she no longer likes being patted on the back. At another conference, the team members ask Ana's mother if anything has changed at home, but the mother adamantly denies that anything is different. One of the team members asks if the father is involved in Ana's life. The mother responds that he works all the time and doesn't have time to deal with Ana's problems at school.

Considering the family systems model, what do you think needs to be done to help Ana?

### **Family Life Cycle**

Every family goes through a life cycle. According to Carter and McGoldrick (1999), the **family life cycle** is composed of developmental stages that families pass through, from childhood to retirement. At each stage, family members gain knowledge, skills, and experiences that prepare them for the challenges of life. If individuals do not gain the skills, knowledge, and experiences associated with a given stage, they can transition to the next stage, but they are more likely to have difficulties with relationships and subsequent transitions to the later stages. Additionally, individual development can occur only through strong emotional relationships with significant individuals. The family is often where these significant relationships begin (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2011).

The family life cycle is influenced by a number of factors, one of which is culture. Extended family forms are common in many cultures, and this factor can affect the framework of the developmental stages of the family. However, through acculturation—that is, adoption of the values, beliefs, and traditions of another culture—the family cycle is altered after several generations.

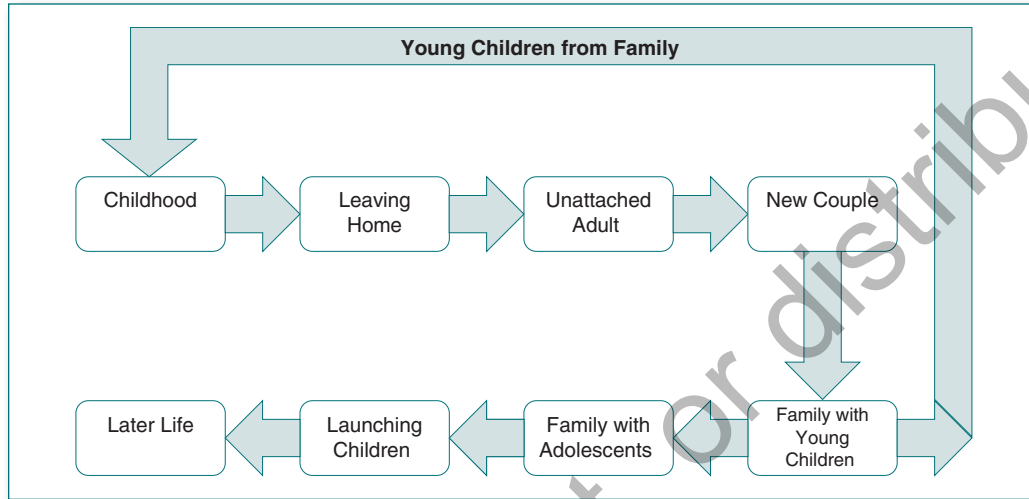
The family life cycle is also influenced by the time in which the individual lives. The attitudes, beliefs, and values of individuals who grew up during the 1960s are profoundly different from those of individuals growing up today. For example, interracial marriages are more commonplace and accepted today than they were in the 1960s.

The family life cycle has the following eight developmental stages (see Figure 3.2):

1. Childhood
2. Leaving home
3. Unattached adult
4. New couple
5. Family with young children
6. Family with adolescents
7. Launching children
8. Later life

The transitions from stage to stage are unique for every individual who traverses the life cycle.

Figure 3.2 Family Life Cycle



### Family Life Cycle Stages

The *childhood* stage reflects the microsystem in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). The family is the epicenter of the child's life, and the child's development hinges on the interactions that occur within the family. It is through the childhood stage that children learn concepts, rules, boundaries, and expectations of the family. At the *leaving home* stage, the individual becomes independent from the family and develops adult relationships with parents. It is at this stage that the individual begins a career and develops financial independence. The *unattached adult* develops adult and intimate relationships with peers. When two individuals decide to marry, they enter the *new couple* stage. The couple learn to live together, and the relationships of each with family members, adult friends, and childhood friends are adjusted to include the spouse. When the couple decide to have a child, the family system is adjusted to make space for the child. The *family with young children* changes the dynamics of the extended family to include child-rearing roles for parents and grandparents. As the children grow older, the family transitions into the *family with adolescents* stage. At this stage, the relationships between the parents and the children change to allow adolescents to have more autonomy but still retain the support of the family. Parents begin to shift their focus from their children to their spouses and their careers. They also begin providing more care and attention to their own parents, their children's grandparents.

The adult children leave during the *launching children* stage and begin their own lives. The parents now have adult relationships with their children and their children's spouses, as well as relationships with their grandchildren. Additionally, the parents have to adjust to being a couple again, and they may have to contend with the deaths of their own parents.

In the final stage of the family life cycle, *later life*, parents have to cope with their own declining physical and mental functions, and also experience the loss of spouses, siblings, and peers. Parents at this stage often reflect upon their lives and begin thinking about death. Their children become the center of the family unit (McGoldrick et al., 2011).

## FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

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Family involvement and family engagement are two different approaches that teachers can take in working with students' families (Ferland, 2011). **Family involvement** tends to be one-sided: Teachers inform parents about how they can contribute to fulfilling their children's academic and behavior needs, and parental response or feedback is seldom necessary. For example, a teacher contacts parents about homework assignments and asks parents to make sure time is set aside at home for students to complete their homework. The family involvement approach is often not conducive to reciprocal communication between teachers and families.

In contrast, **family engagement** encourages reciprocal communication between teachers and families. Teachers actively seek input from families regarding the children's academic and behavior needs. In most instances, parents are the experts on their children. For example, when an individualized education program is being developed for a student, the parents need to be engaged in the process. The parents need to provide input regarding what they see as their child's strengths and needs, and they should help to determine the goals that will be set forth in the IEP. At these types of meetings, school personnel need to listen to parents' concerns and seek to understand the dreams the parents have for their children.

Teachers can take a family engagement approach in many other instances as well. For example, when meeting with parents on parent-teacher night, teachers often inform parents how their children are succeeding in school, but many do not also seek parental feedback. At these meetings, teachers could encourage parent engagement by asking questions and actively listening to the parents' responses. The teacher's goal in taking the family engagement approach is to gain collaborative partners (Ferland, 2011).

Teachers do not have to choose either family involvement or family engagement. Each has its place in working with families, and many schools generally



pursue both approaches. Teachers need to know which approach is the best practice to use in communicating and working with parents in different situations, and which approach is appropriate for obtaining the desired outcomes from interactions with parents.

### WORKING WITH DIVERSE FAMILIES

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Currently, 83% of teachers in the United States are European American females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010)—a proportion that is hardly reflective of today's student population. Many of these teachers have little understanding of the lives of families that are culturally and linguistically different from themselves, or of the lives of families living in poverty. Efforts to address the academic and behavior concerns of diverse students are likely to be ineffective unless teachers understand the impact of poverty (Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, & Bogan, 2013). They often view these families as dysfunctional and blame them for their children's academic and behavior problems (Hyland & Heuschkel, 2010). Given that students whose families are involved in their education often have higher academic achievement and fewer behavior difficulties than do students whose families are not so involved, it is imperative that teachers engage the families of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Teachers need to be culturally responsive to their students' families.

For some European American teachers, becoming culturally responsive to the families of their culturally and linguistically diverse students can be difficult. They often do not understand how their perceptions of diverse families, or of families of low income, affect how they interact with parents. Teachers first need to understand their own culture; however, many European Americans seldom evaluate their own culture. Cultural self-awareness is a key element in a person's consideration of the cultures of other groups. Teachers then need to have some knowledge of their students' cultures and, by extension, the cultures of their families. While teacher education programs try to prepare new teachers for working with diverse students and families, many preservice teachers give little thought to interacting with diverse families (Uludag, 2008). Once teachers have explored their own culture and how their beliefs affect their interactions with the families of diverse students, they can use several strategies to help engage parents of diverse students. We discuss some of these below.

#### **Maintaining High Expectations**

Some teachers perceive culturally and linguistically diverse students as lacking intelligence, having little interest in academics, and causing behavior problems.

They blame diverse students and their parents for the students' poor academic achievement and behavior difficulties (Amatea et al., 2012). Parents expect teachers to care about their children and want the best for them. If parents perceive that teachers do not think their children are capable of success in school, this sets up a barrier that makes it very difficult for teachers to establish collaborative relationships with the parents. Teachers should demonstrate to both students and their parents that they have high expectations of *all* students.

### **Avoiding Stereotypes**

Teachers need to discard their preconceived notions of diverse students and families and see beyond the stereotypes. It is important for teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultures of students and their families so that they can avoid the misconceptions of stereotypes. Teachers often do not understand the lack of involvement or lack of communication skills they observe in some of the parents of diverse students. For example, while most European Americans speak in a straightforward manner to convey information, many Asian Americans engage in more indirect communication. This is simply a form of politeness. Additionally, many Asian American cultures prefer to maintain harmony with others. Filipino Americans practice *pakikisama* to create group harmony. *Pakikisama* is getting along with others even if it conflicts with one's own desires. Chinese Americans also prefer to maintain harmony by conforming to societal expectations. Both groups often use shame or a sense of propriety as a means of creating conformity (Van Campen & Russell, 2010). Teachers may sometimes view these cultural differences in communicating as parents' lack of concern for their children's education, when in fact Asian American parents view their children's educational success as extremely important.

### **A Family Affair**

The families of children from some cultures may view parent-teacher conferences, school activities, and even special education conferences as invitations to participation by all family members and friends. It is not unusual for aunts and uncles to show up with the parents at a conference to discuss a child's individualized education program or for close family friends to accompany parents to a parent-teacher conference. Teachers should make sure that there are enough chairs and materials to accommodate these extended families (Christian, 2006).

## Family Engagement

Teachers need to build partnerships with parents by engaging them in school activities. Establishing culture afternoons at school, where parents are invited to talk about their cultures, is one strategy for encouraging engagement. Such gatherings might include the sharing of information on what kinds of foods the participants eat that are unique to their culture, or what activities their families take part in that are culturally based. For example, a breakfast taco blends the American breakfast of eggs, potatoes, and bacon with Mexican tortillas, cheese, and salsa. In some parts of Texas, this is called a breakfast taco, while in other parts it is called a breakfast burrito, and in Laredo, it is called a mariachi (Vine, 2011).

It is crucial for teachers to involve and engage parents in their children's education. Research has shown that students whose parents are involved in their education—including culturally and linguistically diverse students—have higher academic outcomes and fewer behavior difficulties. Teachers need to make the effort to understand their own cultures and beliefs, learn about the cultures of their students, and develop strategies for interacting with diverse families.

## FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN ACADEMIC OPTIMISM

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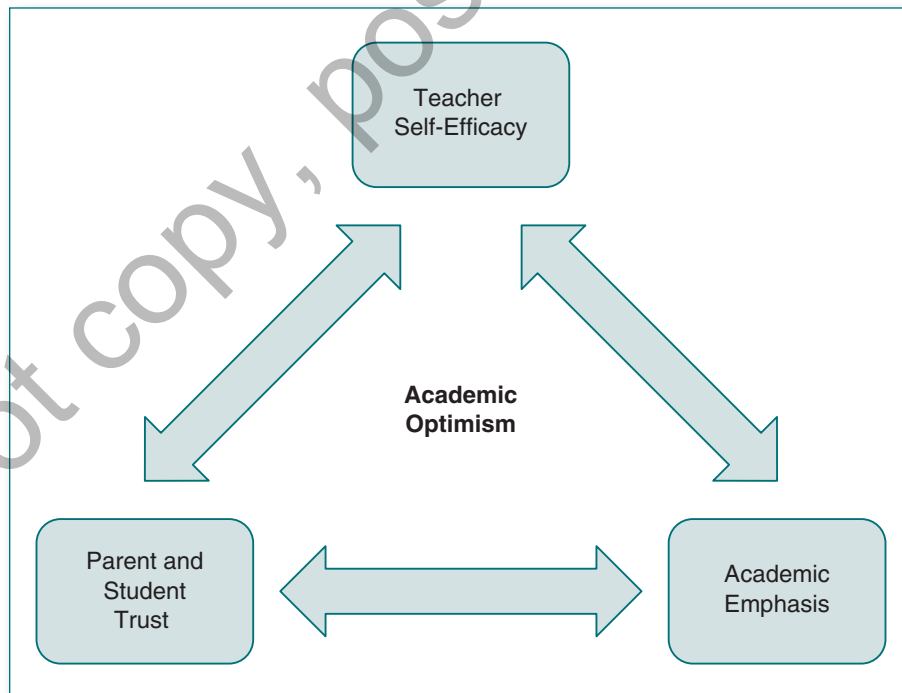
One of the most important—but often ignored—dispositions of highly effective teachers is academic optimism. **Academic optimism** encompasses a teacher's belief that he or she can make a difference in the academic performance of students, academic emphasis, and trust between the teacher and family (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, & Kurz, 2008). The first component of academic optimism, teacher self-efficacy, has always been an important factor in students' academic achievement. When teachers believe that they can successfully affect student learning, even with students who have behavior difficulties, they are more effective teachers, and students' academic achievement increases. Teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy also are more resilient; they are more likely to continue to be effective teachers despite minor setbacks.

The second component of academic optimism is academic emphasis, which includes high academic expectations of students and a safe and secure classroom environment in which learning can take place (Hoy et al., 2006)—the mantra for behavior and classroom management. Academic emphasis is the implementation of innovative teaching strategies designed to increase student engagement in appropriate academic tasks (Beard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2010). Teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy are more likely to use innovative strategies, which generally result in higher academic achievement of students, which intrinsically reinforces teachers' self-efficacy.

The final component of academic optimism is trust between the teacher and the family. Trust is an essential element in the development of positive relationships among teachers, students, and parents. Students trust teachers to provide a safe environment in which they can learn, express opinions and beliefs, and receive needed academic and behavior support. Teachers trust students to do the best they can on assignments and activities, respect others, and behave in a manner that promotes learning in the classroom. Parents trust teachers to have the best interests of their children at heart. Parents want their children's teachers to care about their children and want their children to succeed. Teachers trust parents to be involved in their children's education at school and at home. High levels of perceived teacher caring, parent educational involvement, and perceived student potential result in higher teacher-family trust (Bower, Bowen, & Powers, 2011).

The three components of academic optimism interact and reinforce one another (see Figure 3.3). Academic optimism is one of the few organizational

**Figure 3.3** Elements of Academic Optimism



characteristics that affects student achievement when socioeconomic status is considered, promoting high levels of achievement and appropriate behavior (Beard et al., 2010).

### STANDARDS FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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The Council for Exceptional Children (2008) has established the following professional practice standards for relationships between teachers and their students' parents. While these standards were developed specifically for special education teachers, they can easily be adapted for use by all teachers.

1. Teachers develop effective communication with parents, avoiding educational terminology, using the primary language of the home, and other modes of communication when appropriate.
2. Teachers involve parents in all aspects of the education of their children.
3. Teachers maintain communications between parents with appropriate respect for privacy and confidentiality.
4. Teachers provide opportunities for parent education by providing educational information through materials, workshops, and online resources.
5. Teachers inform parents of the educational rights of their children and of any proposed or actual practices that violate those rights.
6. Teachers recognize and respect cultural and linguistic diversities that exist in some families.
7. Teachers recognize that the relationship of home and community environmental conditions affects the behavior and outlook of students. (p. 3)

### SUMMARY

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Working with students' parents and families is a critical component of behavior and classroom management. The best strategy is for the teacher to begin developing positive parent-teacher relationships before the need arises to contact parents in regard to any academic or behavior concerns. With the increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in U.S. schools today, it is more essential than ever that teachers establish positive relationships with their students' families.

There are a number of strategies that teachers can use to establish positive relationships with the families of students in their classrooms, and these strategies need to go beyond the classroom setting. They should include proactive and reactive strategies aimed at developing collaborative relationships.

Understanding the family systems model can help teachers better understand the interactions between students and their families. The four interrelated and interactive elements of this model are family characteristics, family interaction, family functions, and family life cycle. Family characteristics define the family in terms of roles and factors that affect how the student interacts within the family, community, and school. Family interaction—which includes family cohesion, family flexibility, and family communication—contributes to the functioning level of the family. Family functions are the routines, tasks, and activities that meet the needs of the family. The family life cycle includes developmental stages that families pass through, from childhood to retirement.

Family involvement and family engagement are two approaches that teachers can take in working with parents and families. Family involvement is usually a one-sided approach in which teachers inform parents how they can contribute to their children's education, with little reciprocal communication from parents. Family engagement, in contrast, encourages parents and families to participate more actively in their children's education. Both approaches are useful in increasing parental involvement.

Teachers need to use culturally responsive strategies when communicating with families of diverse students. Cultural self-awareness is a key element in teachers' efforts to consider the cultures of their students and their students' families. Teachers need to maintain high expectations for all students, avoid stereotypes, include extended families in various student-related activities and events, and engage diverse parents in school activities.

An important disposition of highly effective teachers is academic optimism, which encompasses a teacher's belief that he or she can make a difference in the academic performance of students, academic emphasis, and trust between the teacher and family. Trust is an essential element in the development of positive relationships among teachers, students, and parents. Parents want their children's teachers to care about their children and want their children to succeed.

By understanding the characteristics and the diverse needs of families, and by maintaining professional standards for family relationships, teachers can develop positive, reciprocal relationships with their students' parents and other family members, and this in turn can improve the academic performance and behavior of all students. By taking a proactive approach to developing family and parent relationships, teachers can establish effective partnerships between themselves and their students' families.

**REVIEW ACTIVITIES**

1. Develop a plan for establishing positive relationships with the families and parents of your students. Remember to consider the different aspects of culture, including socioeconomic status, in your plan.
2. Generally, the parents who attend parent–teacher nights are those whose children do not have any academic or behavior difficulties. What could you do to encourage the parents of children with difficulties at school to attend parent–teacher nights?
3. Examine your own culture, and then examine your preconceptions of the culturally and linguistically diverse students in your classroom.

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