Barriers to Family Involvement

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The African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” has significant meaning with regard to family involvement. Undoubtedly, the child benefits most when the educational village—home, school, and community—is involved and supportive in the raising of that child. Family members are the most important people in a child’s life and the most effective in influencing and motivating that child. For this reason, it is important for professionals to have a close working relationship with families. Sometimes professionals are faced with roadblocks when trying to communicate with families and getting them involved in the education of their child. To successfully engage parents, teachers must recognize, address, and ultimately break down the barriers interfering with positive relationships.

Best Practice
In the process of building relationships with families, teachers should examine their own attitudes and beliefs about families. Self-assessment can help identify issues that may be getting in the way of building a bridge with families. Understanding the challenges that families face and working as a partner with them, instead of making judgments and assumptions on what appears to be parent disinterest, can go a long way toward building partnerships that may have a positive effect the child’s progress and outcomes.

Roadblocks and Detours
The National Parent Teacher Association has developed a document that describes barriers that typically keep families from classroom/school involvement, and some suggested detours to help overcome them. Four of these are included here:

**Roadblock: Pressures on families**
The number of single parent families, and families living in poverty, is growing. Stresses with jobs, finances, and the demands on their time may be reasons that families are not actively involved in schools. Time is reported by families as the greatest barrier to volunteering or attending meetings at school. School activities are often scheduled at times that interfere with work or other obligations.

**Detours:**
- Try a mix of mornings, evenings, and weekends to allow every parent the opportunity to attend.
• Consider pot luck dinners or brown bag lunches to meet the needs of working parents.
• Hold meetings in different settings—community centers, apartment buildings, church halls, libraries, parks, etc.—to make it easier for parents to attend.
• Sponsor community family events, and use part of the time to hold a meeting to share information with families and discuss important issues.
• Provide child care at school functions or meetings. Ask Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or community members, school service clubs, or other parents to volunteer to provide child care on a rotating basis. Hire high school or college students in child development classes or child-care professionals in the community.
• Keep families informed of what you are doing in school, and give them some suggestions about how to carry over the learning at home.
• Provide families with health and social services resource contacts in the community.

Roadblock: **Families feeling unvalued or unwelcome**
Some families may feel intimidated by teachers, principals, and other school personnel. They may not feel they have anything of value to contribute at the school. They may have had negative school experiences themselves and harbor negative feelings toward schools and teachers. They may have limited education or low literacy levels. Families may not feel welcome in the school if staff interactions and attitudes convey an environment that is not inclusive.

Detours:
• Provide in-service training to help all faculty and staff develop an awareness of the importance of family involvement and acquire the knowledge and skills to successfully interact with families.
• Extend a personal welcome to each family, and establish regular communication.
• Establish regular communication to build relationships with parents based on mutual respect and trust.
• Communicate to families that they are welcome to visit during the school day. Post welcome signs in all languages spoken at the school at each entrance and on each classroom door.
• Make phone calls, home visits, or provide video messages for families with low literacy levels. Work with local libraries to form literacy groups and provide adult literacy programs.
• Learn about the families’ interests and abilities; provide opportunities for them to use their experience and talents to share in their child’s classroom, or to benefit the school. Value what they do.
• Share the positive things that are happening with their child at school, not only the things that are not going well.
Roadblock: *Families not knowing how to contribute*
Some families believe they have talents but do not know whether they are needed or how to contribute them to the school. Many families are unfamiliar with the system and do not know how to become involved.

**Detours:**
- Do not wait for families to offer help; seek them out.
- Hold a meeting for families or conduct a survey to determine what kinds of teacher support and school policies that families think are needed to allow for active family involvement.
- At the beginning of the year, provide families with names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of key contact people in the school.
- Create a parent handbook that covers school and classroom rules and procedures, including where to go and who to ask to find answers to questions.

Roadblock: *Language and Culture*
Families may not understand, speak, or read English well and may not understand newsletters, flyers, notes home, or speakers. This may contribute to their hesitancy about becoming involved. Families from different cultures may feel disconnected and isolated from the school.

**Detours:**
- Provide printed materials that are sent home and distributed at meetings in all languages represented at the school.
- Identify and secure interpreters and translators for workshops and meetings.
- Have individuals available to answer the school telephone who speak the languages of families and record phone messages in other languages.
- Integrate bilingual and multicultural materials in school displays, publications, libraries, and classrooms.
- Provide English as a second language classes for families.

The Bottom Line
Children need a positive home-school connection in order to thrive in the classroom. Teachers need the support of families. Establishing that relationship sometimes takes time. Families may need help over the roadblocks and barriers that are preventing them from active participation. Families cannot be supportive if their own needs are not met. Being sensitive to and recognizing obstacles that families often deal with may provide insight on how to effectively communicate with and engage them. Move relationships with families forward by being a good listener, understanding their point of view, and demonstrating your care for the child and his culture.
Reflection
Although teachers and families may want similar goals for the child, they may have different perspectives. These differences may interfere with communication and collaboration. How might these different perspectives affect how families may be perceived?

_The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said._
–Peter F. Drucker

References and Resources


Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)
FINE is part of the Harvard Family Research Project. The work of the Network includes increasing teacher and administrator preparation in family involvement and community partnerships; dissemination of assessment methods in family involvement programs and training models; and highlighting opportunities for families and schools to participate in the design and implementation of teacher preparation programs. Current information on school/teacher/family partnerships is available through their resource link. [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html)

National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA)
The purpose of the NPTA is to encourage parent and public involvement in public schools. The Resource section of the Web site provides helpful suggestions for parents and teachers. [http://www.pta.org/](http://www.pta.org/)

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education
One component of its mission is to “increase opportunities for families to be more involved in their children’s learning at school and at home.” Partner organizations work with postsecondary institutions and local schools to develop teacher preparation and professional development opportunities in family involvement. [http://www.pfie.ed.gov](http://www.pfie.ed.gov)
Technical Assistance & Training System (TATS)
TATS is a statewide project providing technical assistance and training to programs in Florida serving prekindergarten children with disabilities. The TATS Web site provides information and resources on curriculum and instruction, evaluation and assessment, family involvement, inclusion, program effectiveness/quality, and transition as well as links to early childhood partners. [http://www.tats.ucf.edu](http://www.tats.ucf.edu)


TATS eUpdates are a service of the Technical Assistance & Training System Communities of Practice. The TATS eUpdates are intended to provide current information related to best practices or trends in the education of young children with special needs in the areas of Transition, Program Effectiveness, Inclusion, Curriculum & Instruction, Evaluation & Assessment, and Family Involvement. For more information about the TATS Communities of Practices and the TATS eUpdates, please log on to [http://www.tats.ucf.edu](http://www.tats.ucf.edu).