

# On second thought.... Why some families don't seem involved

*"Half our parents never come to the events we plan, like 'Donuts with Dad'! What's the deal? Don't parents want to be involved in their child's education?"*



We know children benefit when their families are involved in their care and education, but sometimes it seems that parents don't want to be involved or are just too busy. This can be frustrating for teachers who work hard to promote family involvement.

Maybe it's time to look at why some families don't meet our expectations for involvement. Might we need to change our expectations?

## Benefits of family engagement

There are numerous benefits to children when their families (not just parents) get involved in their education. From improved attendance, achievement, and

graduation rates to increases in appropriate behavior and positive self-esteem, nothing gets kids more excited about learning than having families that are excited about learning (Cotton and Wikelund 1989).

There are also benefits to families, such as pride in themselves and their child, confidence as a parent, feeling valued and respected, and being seen as an expert on their child.

Just imagine that cooking is not your favorite pastime but you decide to cook an entire dinner for your family. Now imagine that during and after the meal your family tells you how great the food was and how much they enjoyed sitting down and talking with one another. For most of us, this kind of praise and recognition would encourage more frequent cooking adventures.

The same holds for families that are engaged. They realize it wasn't that hard, they enjoyed it, and felt good about it afterward. So how do we get families engaged so they can have this positive experience?

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## What may affect family engagement?

As humans we tend to think that everyone should think about education the same way we do.

However, we didn't all grow up in the same place, have the same experiences, or share the same culture. These differences can be seen in a family's willingness to be engaged in the classroom.

**Culture.** Cultural identity—and differences—is frequently cited as having a significant impact on family engagement. Unfortunately, there is no simple formula to describe the cultural attributes, preferences, values, or responsibilities for all members of one cultural group. Indeed, if you try to rely on cultural characteristics—grouping all people who identify with a particular cultural identity—you will have stereotyped all the varied people of that culture into one mold.

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### WORK TO KNOW EACH FAMILY INDIVIDUALLY AND UNIQUELY.

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Certainly cultural—as well as educational, economic, and geographic—differences can affect which parents ask questions about their child and which families are hesitant to hang around in your classroom. But remember that common perceptions of how culture can impact family engagement don't apply to every group member. Is every Asian American mother responsible for encouraging academic success in her children? Does every African American grandmother employ strict discipline? Are all Hispanic families fearful of being too pushy? Are all Middle Eastern families large and interdependent? Clearly the answer is no—just as there is no single description for white families.

Rather than rely on common perceptions of cultural differences, work to know each family individually and uniquely. Learn each family's needs and aspirations for their children and use this knowledge to forge strong partnerships with all families.

Be aware, however of potential differences in communication styles. Among some people, how you say something is as important as what you say

(Lynch and Hanson 1998). When speaking with parents, we have to keep in mind our body language (eye contact, gestures, proximity).

It's great if your program sends home a monthly newsletter, for example. People in some cultures, however, think the information may be less important if you send it home in a letter.

In addition, it may be difficult for parents to understand papers sent home when there are language barriers. If you want to get their attention, you may need to talk face to face when possible and be ready to repeat yourself. Family members are not being stubborn; they may just need more time to really understand you. Remember, too, that your goals for their child may be different from theirs, not better or worse.

**Individual temperament and preferences.** We think about individual differences when we are working with children, but we sometimes forget that adults have individual temperaments too.

According to one source (Mangione, Lally, and Signer 2000), a person's temperament can be described in nine traits: activity level, biological rhythms, mood, intensity of reaction, sensitivity, adaptability, distractibility, approach/withdrawal, and persistence. Two traits—approach/withdrawal and persistence—have special impact on the likelihood of a family's positive and enthusiastic engagement.

A family member's inclination to approach or withdraw—how a person responds to a new situation—has clear implications for family involvement in early childhood programs. Some of us are eager to try new things. Satisfy this need by offering frequent and varied opportunities for participation. On the other hand, some of us are cautious, hesitant, and threatened by things that are new and different. For these family members, offer time. Invite participation but avoid communicating disapproval if the invitation isn't accepted. Relaxed, friendly communication will be key to increasing comfort and involvement.

Similarly, persistence—how a person stays on task despite obstacles—can guide you in the support you seek from family members. If, for example, you are planning a fund-raising fair, strive to make use of the skills and interests of family members with both high and low levels of persistence. Someone with high persistence may be willing to serve as a key organizer or planner. This person can manage long-range goals and timelines. A family member with low persistence, on the other hand, is perfect for specific,

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time-limited tasks like bagging popcorn for 30 minutes on the day of the fair. Recognize that these traits are neither good nor bad—they are simply facets of a person’s temperament.

**Family circumstances.** For even the most committed families, circumstances can make involvement difficult. Family members may rely on public transportation, have more than one child, work more than one job, or have a significant other who expects Mom to be home in the evening.

As teachers, we have strong beliefs about what families should do. However, we don’t live their lives and don’t know all their reasons for not coming to our open house.



## IT IS HUMAN NATURE TO FEAR THINGS WE DON'T KNOW.



**Hidden rules.** Sometimes we let our thoughts on what we think families should do affect our actions. Do you get annoyed if a parent asks why you did something? Maybe you are telling the parent not to question your professional judgment. Do you think that if parents don’t come to the Thanksgiving lunch that they don’t care about their kids? That might show in your body language and tone of voice. Do you get frustrated during a parent-teacher conference when a mom brings her newborn and needs to change a diaper? Rushing to finish the conference and getting them out of the room may let her know how you feel.

These are all “hidden rules” (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, and Simon 1997) that we might mistakenly adopt making families feel unwelcome.

## Reaching all families

For many years we have heard about the importance of family involvement. Maybe now we need to reconsider what that looks like for each family and think of ways to get families engaged.

For example, we might hear: “I don’t feel comfortable at the class party but I’m more than happy to post information on the class Facebook page” or “I’m aware of what is going on in my child’s class

and can maintain communication with my child’s teacher through Facebook.”

Parents who are informed and communicate: Isn’t that what we are really looking for? Family engagement doesn’t have to mean Mom brings cupcakes to the class party and Dad comes and talks about his job on a construction site. Meaningful engagement can be so much more powerful and productive if we consider the family culture and the individual preferences of the family members.

Something to think about: It is human nature to fear things we don’t know. Most parents and teachers don’t know each other. Families need time to get comfortable and be able to engage in the way that suits their culture and personal preferences.

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