

How to involve parents who have limited time to come to the classroom

As Joy's dad is dropping her off at preschool at 7:30 a.m., Joy asks, "Daddy, will you read to me and my friends today?"

Her dad replies, "Joy, I wish could, but I have to get to work."



In any given week, a child asks a similar question, and the mom or dad responds in a similar way. Many parents want to be involved in their children's schools, but they may have limited time to participate.

The issue affects lots of families. Research shows that in 2012, 61 percent of children 3 to 6 years old (who were not yet in kindergarten) were in center-based care arrangements (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2016). Families entrust child care facilities with their children for a number of reasons, such as employment, child social interactions, and child educational experiences (Bigner and Gerhardt 2014).

The time children spend in care and education is considerable. In spring 2011, among children younger than 5 whose mothers were employed, child care centers provided an average of 33 hours of care and education a week, and nursery/preschools provided an average of 25 hours (Laughlin 2013).

In some cases, children may spend more waking hours with their child care providers and teachers than they do with their own parents. Specifically, nearly 4 in 10 (39 percent) full-time employed mothers and 1 in 2 (50 percent) full-time employed fathers with children younger than 18 years old reported that they spend too little time with their children (Patten 2015).

Both parents and teachers are powerful socializing agents in children's lives (Berns 2016; Bigner and Gerhardt 2014). When parents and teachers collabo-

rate in the best interests of the children, this partnership may potentially enhance the lives not only of the children but also parents, families, teachers, and schools (Child Trends Data Bank 2013; Epstein 1995). One way that parents and teachers can work together is by parents being an integral part of their children's classrooms.

What is parent involvement in the schools?

Parent involvement can include attending parent-teacher meetings, attending class or school events, volunteering in the class or school, and participating on school committees (Child Trends Data Bank 2013; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, Lloyd, and Leung 2013).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) refers to parent involvement in its guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice. Guideline 1, "Creating a caring community of learners," for example, basically says that ideally



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

each individual within the learning community participates in promoting an enriching environment. Guideline 5 “Establishing reciprocal relationships with families,” says that family members and teachers will collaborate in the best interests of the children and that an open door policy for participation in the class and school is welcomed (NAEYC 2009).

Benefits of parent involvement

Many positive results may occur because of parent involvement in the schools (Child Trends Data Bank 2013; Epstein 1985; Grant and Ray 2013; Van Voorhis et al. 2013). This type of involvement may affect every member in the learning community.

- Parental knowledge of children’s school activities may lead to participation in learning activities at home, as parents talk with children about their daily activities.
- Children are more academically successful.
- Children have fewer behavioral problems.
- Children are more likely to graduate from high school.
- Teachers can rely on parental guidance and support for increasing children’s developmental success.
- Parent involvement continues through elementary, middle, and high schools. Involvement during the early years of children’s lives may help to build a foundation for parents to continue to be involved in their children’s educational lives at home and at school.
- Parents develop a sense of belonging to their children’s school community.
- Parents and children have opportunities to share time together.
- Children experience joy in seeing their parents as a part of their schools.

Parents’ reasons for limited involvement

Many reasons can exist for parents having limited time to participate in their children’s schools (Baker, Wise, Kelley and Skiba 2016; Child Trends Data Bank 2013; Epstein 1995; Grant and Ray 2013; LaRocque, Kleiman and Darling 2011).

- Communication about events and activities may not occur in a timely manner. This may lead to challenges for parents in planning their schedules.
- Parents may not have flexible work schedules. In March 2015, in families with children younger

than 3 years old, 94 percent of employed fathers and nearly 72 percent of employed mothers worked full time. In families with children 3 to 5 years old, the percentages of full-time working parents were almost the same (95 percent of employed fathers and 73 percent of employed mothers) (Women’s Bureau, 2016). Some parents have shift schedules or are working multiple jobs that are not conducive to their participation during school time.

- Parents care for other children, particularly younger children.
- Family structure varies. Parents could be non-custodial parents, non-residential parents, or military parents who live at a distance. In 2016, of children younger than 18 years old in the United States, 23 percent lived with only their mothers, and 4 percent lived with only their fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In other words, a little more than 1 in 4 children lived with only one parent.
- Parents have health conditions that limit their activities outside the home temporarily or for an indefinite period.
- Transportation is an issue. Parents may not have personal vehicles, or public transportation is not easily accessible or too expensive. Parents may have to rely on others for transportation.

Parent involvement activities

Some parents may believe that their inability to be physically on the school campus can inhibit their participation. But caregivers and teachers can support the involvement of parents in a variety of ways (Baker et al. 2016; Epstein 1995; Grant and Ray 2013; LaRocque et al. 2011; NAEYC 2009).

- A first step: Let parents know that their involvement is welcomed and supported by your staff and is instrumental to the success of their children’s development.
- Inform parents at least two weeks in advance of class and school activities. Use different types of communication (classroom bulletin board/door, e-mail, text, and newsletter, for example), and send announcements many times. Advance notice may be especially important for parents who work shifts and have to request time off or switch schedules with co-workers, those who have limited transportation and have to arrange for rides to and from school, and those who live at a distance.

- Allow flexibility in activity scheduling to accommodate parents' availability. For example, in the case of Joy, parent participation at story time was scheduled for 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Possibly her dad could have planned to read to Joy and her friends from 7:30 to 7:45—a more manageable time in his work day.
- Ask parents to participate by video or audio. They might share their talents (read a story, play an instrument, or demonstrate repotting a plant, for example) or contribute to curriculum themes (sing the class clean up song or identify geometric shapes, for example). Their video or audio can be played during class time.
- Use social media such as Facebook to post pictures or videos of children (with parents' permission) participating in class activities. This can provide a window for parents to learn of daily activities and use as conversation starters with their children.
- Ask parents to help with tasks that can be accomplished at their homes (cutting construction paper for alphabet activities, for example).
- Ask parents to provide items for snack or party time. This can include food, plates, utensils, napkins, and decorations.
- Develop a Parent Corner. Ask parents to contribute or loan books, toys, and other items that relate to the theme of the weekly curriculum.
- Develop a one-page weekly class newsletter. Items may include curriculum topics, class event dates, and pictures of children participating in class

activities. A Parent-to-Parent section allows parents to recommend nursery rhymes, children's books, snack recipes, and other information that other parents can use with their children.

- Conduct parent-teacher conferences through phone, or voice or video chats (Skype or Google Hangouts, for example).

Expand opportunities

Both parents and teachers play instrumental roles in children's development. Partnerships between children's parents and their teachers may yield invaluable benefits. One way that parents and teachers may work together is through parent involvement in their children's classrooms.

Parents who want to be active in their children's education can still participate despite factors that may limit their opportunities to be physically present in the classroom. Caregivers and teachers can be a key catalyst in supporting these parents in this process that can help facilitate "creating a caring community of learners" and "establishing reciprocal relationships with families."

References

- Baker, T. L., J. Wise, G. Kelley, and R. J. Skiba. 2016. Identifying barriers: Creating solutions to improve family engagement. *School Community Journal*, 26(2), 161-184. www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCI.aspx.
- Berns, R. M. 2016. *Child, Family, School, Community: Socialization and Support (10th Ed.)*. Stamford, Conn.: Cengage Learning.
- Bigner, J. J. and C. Gerhardt. 2014. *Parent-Child Relations: An Introduction to Parenting (9th Ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, N. J.: Pearson.
- Child Trends Data Bank. 2013. *Parental involvement in schools: Indicators of child and youth well-being*, www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/39_Parent_Involvement_In_Schools-1.pdf.
- Epstein, J. L. 1985. Home and school connections in schools of the future: Implications of research on parent involvement. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 62(4), 18-41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01619568509538471>.
- Epstein, J. L. 1995. School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-712. <http://pdkintl.org/>

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



-
- publications/.
- Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. 2016. America's children in brief: Key national indicators of well-being. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, www.childstats.gov/pdf/ac2016/ac_16.pdf.
- Grant, K. B. and J. A. Ray. 2013. *Home, School, and Community Collaboration: Culturally Responsive Family Engagement (2nd Ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- LaRocque, M., I. Kleiman, and S. M. Darling. 2011. Parental involvement: The missing link in school achievement. *Preventing School Failure*, 55(33), 115-122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10459880903472876>.
- Laughlin, L. 2013. Who's minding the kids? Child care arrangements: Spring 2011. *Current Population Reports, P70-135*. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D. C., www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p70-135.pdf.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*. Retrieved at www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/position%20statement%20Web.pdf.
- Patten, E. 2015. How American parents balance work and family life when both work. Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/04/how-american-parents-balance-work-and-family-life-when-both-work/.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2016. The majority of children live with two parents, www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html.
- Van Voorhis, F. L., M. F. Maier, J. L. Epstein, C. M. Lloyd, and T. Leung. 2013. The impact of family involvement on the education of children ages 3 to 8: A focus on literacy and math achievement outcomes and social-emotional skills, www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/The_Impact_of_Family_Involvement_FR.pdf.
- Women's Bureau. 2016. Working mothers issue brief. U. S. Department of Labor, www.dol.gov/wb/resources/WB_WorkingMothers_508_FinalJune13.pdf.

related to parent education, child development, and public policy. Her research interests are adoption, foster care, parent-child relationships, social cognitions, and academic achievement. She was a high school teacher in Louisiana and North Carolina and a teacher at an educational institute in Sri Lanka. ■

About the author

Nerissa LeBlanc Gillum, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Family Sciences at Texas Woman's University in Denton. She teaches courses