

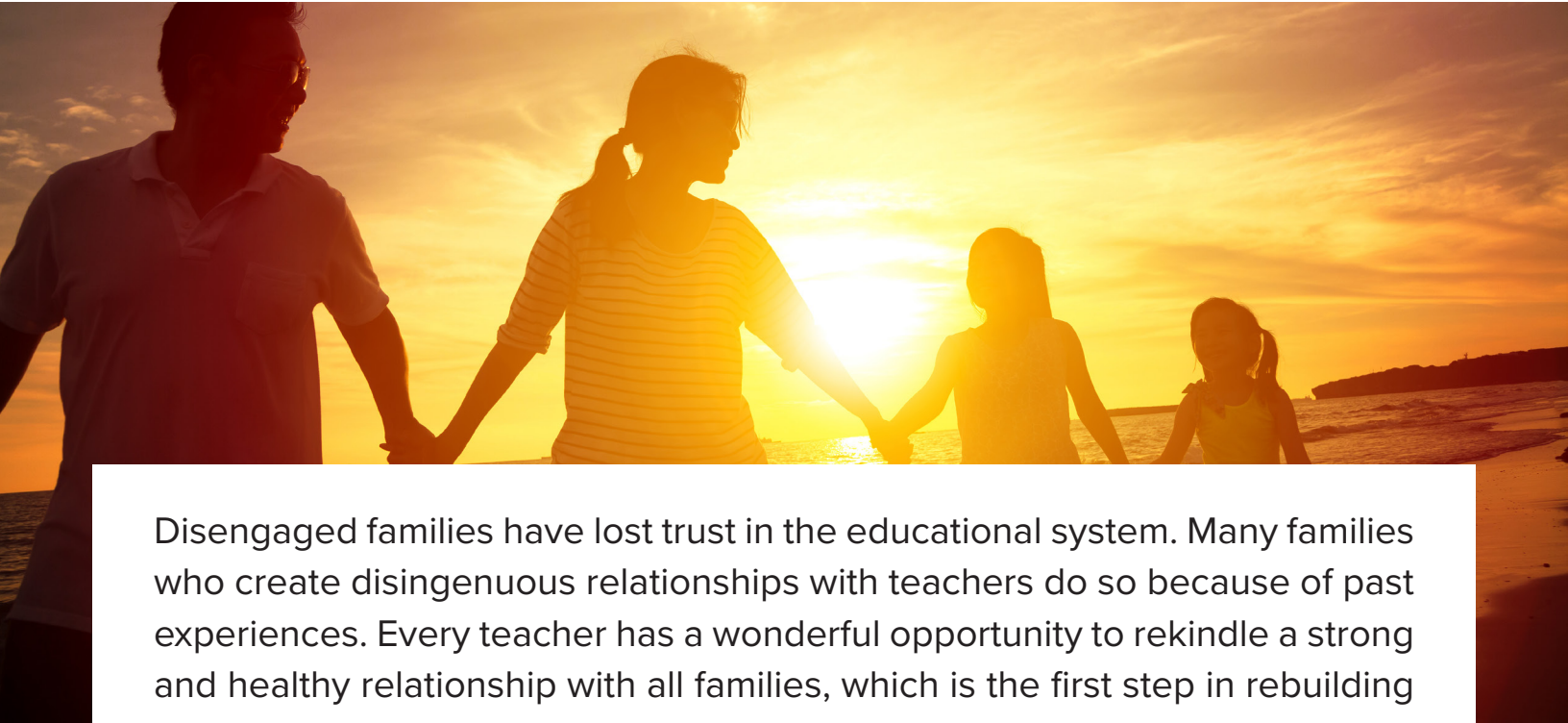


BUILDING SUCCESSFUL
RELATIONSHIPS WITH EVERY FAMILY:
**10 PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS
FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS**

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1

Relationships are the key



Disengaged families have lost trust in the educational system. Many families who create disingenuous relationships with teachers do so because of past experiences. Every teacher has a wonderful opportunity to rekindle a strong and healthy relationship with all families, which is the first step in rebuilding trust:

- Make your first contact with families a positive one, with no agenda except to say hello and begin a dialog.
- Use language that families can understand. Many disengaged families may have weak educational capital and are reluctant to get into dialogs with teachers.
- Ask parents to share their concerns and opinions about school and then address those concerns.
- Work within your professional-learning community to accommodate parents' work schedules.



2

Make learning meaningful and relevant.

Making learning meaningful and relevant to parents and families means providing families with information on current and upcoming classroom activities so that parents and families can ask their children better questions. When learning becomes more meaningful and relevant to parents and families, they are more engaged in supporting learning outcomes at home. Provide specific information to parents so that the questions they ask contain the attributes of the ones below:

- Tell me about (i.e., the order of operations, the book report draft that is due tomorrow, etc.)
- Show me (i.e., the story you have to read tonight, the book chapter that you are going to be tested on this Friday, etc.)
- Teach me (i.e., multiplication tables, Spanish, etc.)

3

Communicate what is coming, not what has past



Teachers spend a significant amount of time trying to communicate with families, only to feel frustrated at the relatively low response levels from the homes of their students. In many cases, the communication from schools, such as grade reports or weekly folders, communicate what has already taken place.

Change the premise of communication to upcoming learning instead of learning that has past. Send a weekly folder home that contains information about what is going to happen in class over the next week as opposed to what has already happened. Many teachers are using a variety of apps to share information with parents and families about what occurred in school today and what will occur tomorrow. Consistently communicating upcoming learning will begin to engage more families, because learning is now meaningful and relevant to families and they now have information so that they can support classroom learning at home.

4

Share hopes and concerns and make a plan



Parents and families desire the opportunity to dialog about the hopes and dreams they have for their children. All families, regardless of their ethnicity or socioeconomic stature, want what is best for their children so that each child can prosper and exceed them in quality of life (Constantino, 2003).

Teachers should seek avenues to have these types of discussions with the parents and families of their children. To enhance the traditional parent conference, take some time to understand the hopes and dreams of families. Listen to their concerns and fears about their children. Practices that honor the contributions of families help strengthen relationships (Mapp, 2003). Use the commonality of the desire of success to create goals and plans with parents and families that not only help children achieve at higher levels but send a clear and powerful message to families that teachers do care a great deal.

5

Link communication to learning

Many schools instinctively believe that the school newsletter is read by very few parents and families. Understanding that the goal in engaging families is to make their child's learning meaningful and relevant; how we communicate learning goals with families becomes a centerpiece of engaging them in the educational lives of their children.

Classroom newsletters that are short (one page) and more frequent (weekly) are read more often by more parents than a monthly newsletter that is distributed by the school. Whether sent home in a bookbag or posted on-line, newsletters are meaningful and relevant to families, because they are linked to their own child's learning. The classroom newsletter can be linked to learning in class that week. For example, share the state standard that is being met by the lessons that week. Choose one or two subject areas.

Share what is being taught and provide families an activity that can be done at home or provide information that families can ask their children to reinforce learning. For example, at the bottom of the weekly classroom newsletter, the teacher may write: Ask your child about dinosaurs. Write down what they tell you and send this back to class tomorrow. If there is a television program to be broadcast that will enhance learning that week, remind families of the program. Most importantly, provide an area for families to feed back information to you. Ask them to share their experiences or record the results of an activity. The engagement of families and students will begin to improve when communication is linked to learning.

In many of today's classrooms, the classroom newsletter has morphed into texts and tweets. However information is shared, it should inspire family empowerment in learning outside of the school.

6

Use a classroom website/ social media/other technology.

The use of teacher and classroom websites as well as apps and social media has increased in popularity. Keep in mind the following information when working with technology:

- Determine the percentage of families that have access to the Internet. If everyone does not have access, posting information to the web alone will not engage all families.
- Be current and consistent with information. The greatest detriment to classroom websites and other technology is the failure to keep information current. Families who visit and find old or outdated information do not visit again. Once information is being “pushed out” through social media, families will come to expect information on some sort of schedule. As a rule, always let families know when you will provide new information via technology.
- Use the website/technology to reinforce your classroom learning and activities. Post a PowerPoint or video to the Web, if possible. Allow parents and families to download information that was presented in class. Give parents the addresses of free information on the Web that will support your efforts. You might even try flipping your classroom for families!
- Invite feedback from parents and families about your website. Look at the statistical information to see how many visitors come to your site and what they look at while at your site.

7

Integrate families into lesson planning

Create a lesson that engages families. Design a lesson over a day or two or, better yet, over a weekend that requires the student to engage their family in the material. Keeping family engagement in learning simple will encourage and build confidence in the disengaged to participate. Family integration into lesson planning does not have to occur every day or every week. Initially, set a goal to create four or five family lessons a year. The components of an integrated lesson are exactly the same as any lesson you would plan. The significant differences are (a) the lesson requires family participation, and (b) there is a mechanism for families to record and feed back their experiences to the teacher. Call a few of the parents or families you feel might be reluctant to participate and encourage them. Let them know that their contributions are essential elements in the learning life of their child.



8

Support the knowledge and skills of every family

Having parents and families share their expertise is not a new concept in education. Unfortunately, there is less and less of this type of experiential learning because of limited time and the need to meet mastery objectives.

Determine knowledge and expertise held by the parents and families of students. Record that information for future use. Parents who work within the home can provide valuable resources to teachers. For example, skills like cooking can be incorporated into math lessons. A parent who is a house painter can support a geometry lesson by bringing a ladder to school and allowing the class to help determine the correct angle and placement of the ladder for its safe use. With the need to develop a 21st century workforce, enaging family knowledge has never been more critical.

Often, schools and classrooms gravitate to those parents who have interesting and exciting jobs. Remember though, every parent has value. Find that value and use it to support the learning that is taking place in the classroom.



9

Develop the efficacy of families



Family efficacy is the notion that parents can help to produce positive educational outcomes with their child. Traditional avenues of parent involvement do not take into consideration building the capacity—the efficacy of parents—to transfer knowledge from school to their children. The most common place to improve family efficacy is to start with those activities already in place that are designed to promote learning outside of the classroom. Math nights, reading nights, and so forth all have value in not only helping families understand what their child needs to learn and master but, more importantly, how they can participate in their child’s learning.

Even with the very best intentions of educators, attendance to these types of events is often sporadic. At times, just a handful of parents attend. Schools report that when they do fill a room with parents, the parents of those students who are struggling are usually absent. To understand why this happens is to understand the role of family efficacy.

The improvements sought in these evening events is not to increase attendance but to make sure that the parents of the children who need the support are in attendance or getting the support they need. Following these guidelines will improve the events and build efficacy in all parents and families.

Generally speaking, practices that promote parental efficacy

- Are grounded in student achievement and parent perceptual data
- Are action oriented, meaning parents learn by doing, then transfer the knowledge to their children
- Take parental levels of education into consideration
- Work around barriers to successful family engagement
- Meet parent and family needs
- Consistently provide materials to families who could not attend.

Parents and families need to know that they can play an important role in producing an effect with regard to their children's upbringing and education.

10

Believe that family engagement is essential

Believing in family engagement speaks directly to the culture of the classroom and the school. Consider the following two statements made by a teacher and a parent:

Teacher: *Parents who want to be involved are involved. Those who don't are not. I can't spend any more time chasing ghosts. Many parents simply don't care enough to do the right thing, or they just check out. My job is to teach children, not their parents. We talk about this all the time at lunch and my colleagues agree with me. We can't handle one more thing.*

Parent: *At some point you just give up. I want to know what my son is doing, but I don't get any information. I get the report card, but by then it's too late. I want to help him, but I don't know how. I have asked and asked for help and now, well, they just think I am a trouble-maker. You can only bang your head against the wall for so long, you know? The last time I went there I could see it on their faces that they didn't want me meddling in their school. I wanted a conference and they said ok, but half the teachers didn't come. I haven't been back since. I guess I will just pray that everything comes out all right.*

The statements above reflect what two people believe about the education of the same child. It is clear to the reader what each of the persons believes and how they came to believe it. New actions that beget new results is an effective strategy to modify ones' beliefs about issues and challenges.

All parents and families care about their children. On any given day, they may not express it in the manner we would wish, nor do they respond in ways that would help their children learn. However, parents and families are the first and most influential teachers of children. Believing that they choose to be disengaged will only serve to ensure that the struggles we face in successfully teaching all children will remain with us forever.

References

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Mapp, K. (2003). *Having their say: Parents describe why and how they are engaged in their children's learning*. *The School Community Journal*, 13(1), 35-64.