

*Creating Environments that Work for All Students:  
Real Manuals for Real Teachers*



*Increasing  
Family Involvement  
for Special Populations*



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### *About the Department of Child & Family Studies*



The Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, a college of the University of South Florida, is the state's primary research and training center for mental health services and a nationally recognized source for its innovative research and training. The Institute was created over 25 years ago by the Florida legislature to expand knowledge about how best to serve the mental health needs of the state's citizens. The Institute's Department of Child and Family Studies is committed to the enhancement of the development, mental health and well-being of children and families through leadership in integrating research, theory and practice.

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# Introduction



Improving family involvement is both an individual goal for each teacher and a school-wide goal for the School Advisory Committee as reflected in the school Continuous Improvement Plan. This section will focus on activities for individual teachers, particularly in special education programs.

Family involvement is a significant factor in improving educational outcomes. The family makes critical contributions to student achievement from the earliest childhood years through high school, and efforts to improve children's outcomes are much more effective when the family is actively involved.

## When family involvement is increased

Students and families benefit by:

- ⇒ Higher grades
- ⇒ Better attendance and homework completion
- ⇒ More positive attitudes
- ⇒ Higher graduation rates
- ⇒ Higher rates of college enrollment

Teachers and schools benefit by:

- ⇒ Improved teacher morale
- ⇒ Improved school climate
- ⇒ Higher ratings of teachers by parents
- ⇒ More support from families

## Family Stereotypes – A Major Barrier

We often think in terms of stereotypes when we consider the families of children who have disabilities (i.e., they cause the problems of their children; they deny the problems; they don't really care; they are overprotective; etc.).

### Overcoming the Barrier of Stereotypes – Some Helpful Values

- **Strengths-Based.** Every person and every family has some strengths. We need to identify each student's strengths and use them as the foundation of our collaboration with families. Special education, by its nature, is very deficit oriented. This can wear away at a family. A focus on strengths is refreshing and leads to a more effective partnership with the family. Strength-based thinking does not rule out the existence of needs and problems in a family, but rather encourages collaboration with and support of families in the education of their children.
- **Cultural and Social Class Sensitivity.** Many racial and ethnic cultures have traditions, customs, and values that a member of a different culture may not understand or may even misinterpret with a negative consequence. The same may be true for social class differences. We all need to continue to educate ourselves about the diversity that makes up our community.
- **Accepting Families as Equal Decision-making Partners.** Professionals spend many years in training to learn how to help children. They develop a level of expertise that has been evaluated through university tests and state certification standards. However, we all need to realize that no single profession or agency has all the expertise and resources necessary to solve the broad range of complex problems that challenge children who have disabilities and their families. This does not diminish the worth or value of any individual but it does illustrate that we all need to collaborate and pool our expertise and resources in the best interest of our students. This includes accepting families as equal decision making partners and valuing the expert knowledge they have of their children. For example, children do behave differently at home and in school. When a parent reports this, it is a legitimate piece of information that should be as valued as the observations of any professional.
- **Unconditional Help.** When we help students and support families it has to be without strings attached. While it is perfectly sound science to develop interventions with students that are "contingency" based (a reward is given after some successful action) we need to be careful not to incorrectly expand this to our overall relationships with students and families. For example, we cannot have the attitude that we will help families if they conform to our middle class value system or that we will help students only if they dress a certain way or meet our expectations.

# Facilitating Family Involvement

## Home/School Communication

- ⇒ Communication is critical in establishing positive relationships with the families of children in special education.
- ⇒ Focus on successes rather than problems.
- ⇒ Parents/caregivers will be more receptive if they are not always hearing complaints.

## Communicating Classroom Information

- ⇒ Families need information about academic and behavioral progress to help their children meet expectations established by them and the school.
- ⇒ Developing early, frequent, on-going communication helps to establish positive relationships with families (see pages 11 – 15 for suggestions).



# Teacher's Suggestions

## Activities that Can Make a Difference

- ⇒ **Send home a welcoming note** at the beginning of the year or second semester. If a student joins your class during the year, send a note home. Make sure that families understand that while you may not respond to communication immediately, you will respond as quickly as you can. Provide families with a copy of your syllabus, if possible.
  - A syllabus works well if it includes an introduction to you and the course, the curriculum to be covered during the school year, your grading policy, supplies needed, and the best times and methods for communication with you. (See sample in the Resource Section)
- ⇒ **Make phone calls to the family** to say hello and relay some positive event. This will help establish rapport if you need to speak with the parents because of a negative incident later in the year. It will also help you understand family circumstances that might impact the student's performance in your classroom.
  - Document all communication with the family in a manner that works best for you (See sample log in the Resource Section). Make a note of the parent's/guardian's name and relationship to the student.
- ⇒ **Develop a system of communication** around the daily planner. This can have an amazingly positive effect on assignment completion. Tie this into frequent feedback on academic performance. Send home positive notes as often as possible. It's always nice to have a piece of paper to save or send to grandparents.
  - Use the student planner to communicate with parents/guardians.
- ⇒ **Compose a brief information sheet** for parents. List the services that are available to support their child. Let parents know how they can help in your class or in the school.
- ⇒ **Find out if you have families that do not speak English.** Make resources available to them to facilitate communication with the school including translators and school information in their languages.
  - Often students who are not identified as ESOL have parents who don't speak English. Make sure to ask at the beginning of the school year. (A good website about involving Hispanic parents can be found at [www.topher.net/~spurgeon](http://www.topher.net/~spurgeon))
- ⇒ **Enlist a core of parents** with whom you communicate regularly to reach out and invite other parents to school events. They can share their positive stories about the school and special education.

- ⇒ **Develop a partnership process** and encourage parents and teachers to participate.
- ⇒ **Be aware of and support parent involvement** activities developed by the School Advisory Committee. Make sure they include Special Education.
- ⇒ **Document contact that you have with parents** so that you are able to follow up on their requests and refer back to previous conversations.

## Suggestions for the School Advisory Committee

- ⇒ **Conduct a brief survey** to learn about family perceptions and needs. This survey should be short and easy to complete. Most questions could use a rating scale to get the opinions about how families view different activities, etc. These will be easy to score but there should be some open-ended questions to find out what families would like to see at the school.
- ⇒ **Promote a family support group** at the school. This is a parent run group to support each other and share information. It is not group therapy. Teachers and administrators may be invited to give specific information about a topic. There are support groups in other school districts that may help in the start up. USF staff can help.
- ⇒ **Offer a parent training program** based on local family needs and interests. There are parents who want help in raising their children. There are some low-keyed programs and topics that can be very helpful to these families. USF can help with this.
- ⇒ **Provide refreshments at family events.** This is a good way to increase attendance.

## Suggestions for Working with Parents

These are some suggestions for helping families to be more involved in their children's educations.

1. Always be professional.
2. Strive for clear, consistent communication.
3. Be honest and sensitive.
4. Be precise.
5. Inform parents of problems, and, when appropriate, organize a conference to discuss the problem. Keep summaries of conferences on file.
6. Stress the positive.
7. Work together.
8. Whenever possible, ask parents for suggestions about how to work with their children. They know their children best.
9. Don't use special education jargon. Use terms that everyone can easily understand.



# Getting Started

It is important to get families involved in your classroom as soon as possible. The panel recommended the following activities to help do this quickly and efficiently:

- **Send home a welcome letter** with school contact information and information specific to your classroom and routine.
- **Establish positive contact** with each student's family.
- **Establish a positive relationship** with each student.
- **Give parents a phone number** and email address and a time when they can reach you.
- **Help involve students** in special education and their families in school activities such as extra-curricular and volunteer activities.
- **Get involved in the School Advisory Committee (SAC)** and the school volunteer program.

## Family Involvement Checklists

It is important to have a clear picture of how your school interacts with students' families. There are several checklists to help you increase family involvement in your classroom and the school.

**Family Friendly Schools Checklist**

**School Climate**

- \_\_\_ Posted signs warmly welcome parents.
- \_\_\_ There are directions posted for parents to find their way around.
- \_\_\_ Office personnel greet parents in a friendly, courteous way.
- \_\_\_ There is a comfortable reception and information area for parents.
- \_\_\_ The principal is available for conferences.
- \_\_\_ There is an orientation program for incoming students and parents.
- \_\_\_ There is a program for students and parents who come to the beginning of the year.
- \_\_\_ There are regular social occasions where parents and school know each other.
- \_\_\_ The school permits parents to observe in class.
- \_\_\_ The school has an "Open Door" policy where parents are welcome during the school day.

**Communication**

- \_\_\_ There is a school newsletter with up-to-date information.
- \_\_\_ The school sends home a calendar listing dates of parent conferences, report cards and other major events.
- \_\_\_ The school sends home a directory of parent organization and school personnel, with phone numbers.
- \_\_\_ The school holds annual open houses and back to school.
- \_\_\_ The school has a plan for emergencies and burning questions.
- \_\_\_ Parents know where to go with concerns, questions and requests.

**Collaboration**

- \_\_\_ The school requires at least one parent-teacher conference.
- \_\_\_ The school provides in-service training to help teachers.
- \_\_\_ There is an early warning policy in effect for teachers.
- \_\_\_ Promptly if a child is falling behind or having social difficulties.
- \_\_\_ High schools require parent approval on students' choice of education programs regarding training and residence in the District.

*Continued*

**Ways Families Can Help Schools**

**Come to school to assist**

- \_\_\_ Share information with a student or class about a hobby.
- \_\_\_ Share information with a student or a class about a career.
- \_\_\_ Tutor one or a small group of students in reading, math, or other area.
- \_\_\_ Help coach an athletic team.
- \_\_\_ Help put out a school or classroom newsletter (can also be done at home).
- \_\_\_ Help sew or paint a display.
- \_\_\_ Help build something (such as a loft in a classroom or new playground).
- \_\_\_ Help students work on a final exhibition or project (can also be done at home or workplace).
- \_\_\_ Help answer the school's phone.
- \_\_\_ Help plan a new playground for the school.

**Help arrange learning opportunities in the community**

- \_\_\_ Help set up an internship or apprenticeship for a student at a business, organization, or agency.
- \_\_\_ Host a one-day "shadow study" for one or a small group of students at career in business or some other organization.
- \_\_\_ Go on a local field trip with a teacher and a group of students.
- \_\_\_ Go on an extended (3-5 day) cross-country field trip with a teacher and students.
- \_\_\_ Contact a particular local business or organization regarding possible education.
- \_\_\_ Help to create a natural area outside the building where students can study.

**Serve on an advisory or decision-making committee**

- \_\_\_ Serve on the school advisory committee.
- \_\_\_ Serve on a school committee that reports to the SAC.
- \_\_\_ Serve on a district committee representing the school.
- \_\_\_ Serve as an officer in the PTSA.
- \_\_\_ Help organize a parent organization for the school.
- \_\_\_ Help design a parent and/or student survey for the school.
- \_\_\_ Help conduct and/or tabulate results of a parent survey regarding the school.

*Continued*

**Home/School Communication Survey**

Check each of the following that applies to your school

- \_\_\_ We have formal conferences with every parent at least once a year.
- \_\_\_ We provide language translators to assist families as needed.
- \_\_\_ We provide clear information about report cards and how grades are earned.
- \_\_\_ Parents pick up report cards.
- \_\_\_ Our school newsletter includes:
  - \_\_\_ a calendar of school events
  - \_\_\_ student activity information
  - \_\_\_ curriculum and program information
  - \_\_\_ school volunteer information
  - \_\_\_ school governance information
  - \_\_\_ samples of student writing and artwork
  - \_\_\_ a column to address parents' questions
  - \_\_\_ recognition of students, families, and community members
  - \_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ We provide clear information about selecting courses, programs, and activities in this school.
- \_\_\_ We send home folders of student work weekly or monthly for parent review and comments.
- \_\_\_ Staff members send home positive messages about students on a regular basis.
- \_\_\_ We notify families about student awards and recognition.
- \_\_\_ We contact the families of students having academic or behavior problems.
- \_\_\_ Teachers have easy access to telephones to communicate with parents during or after school.
- \_\_\_ Parents have the telephone numbers of the school, principal, teachers and counselors.
- \_\_\_ We have a homework hotline for students and families to hear daily assignments and messages.
- \_\_\_ We conduct an annual survey for families to share information and concerns about students' needs and reaction to school programs.

(Fletcher, J.L., et al., 1997)

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## Internet Resources:

**[www.topher.net/~spurgeon/](http://www.topher.net/~spurgeon/)**

Involving Hispanic Families in Their Children's Education

**[www.ldonline.com](http://www.ldonline.com)**

LD online is a web site on learning disabilities for parents, teachers, and other professionals

**[www.behavioradvisor.com](http://www.behavioradvisor.com)**

Behavior Management: Dr. Mac's Amazing Behavior Management Advice Site

**[www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm)**

National Network of Partnership Schools: Epstein's Six Types of Involvement

# Sample Welcome Letter

Created by:

Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Welcome to a new school year. I am writing to let you know that I am \_\_\_\_\_'s teacher this year and will be working closely with \_\_\_\_\_ and you to ensure that the school year goes smoothly. As \_\_\_\_\_'s teacher, in addition to planning and delivering instruction, my responsibilities include:

- Keeping you informed of successes or problems that arise and asking for your feedback.
- Regularly monitoring your child's progress in class.

Your involvement in this process is crucial in helping me to help your child be successful this year.

Please feel free to contact me with your questions, concerns, and suggestions.

Call me at: \_\_\_\_\_.

The best times to reach me are: \_\_\_\_\_.

My email address is: \_\_\_\_\_.

I look forward to working with you and \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

# Family Friendly Schools Checklist

## School Climate

- Posted signs warmly welcome parents.
- There are directions posted for parents to find their way around the school.
- Office personnel greet parents in a friendly, courteous way.
- There is a comfortable reception and information area for parents.
- The principal is available for conferences.
- There is an orientation program for incoming students and parents.
- There is a program for students and parents who come to the school after the beginning of the year.
- There are regular social occasions where parents and school staff can get to know each other.
- The school permits parents to observe in class.
- The school has an "Open Door" policy where parents are welcome at any time during the school day.

## Communication

- There is a school newsletter with up-to-date information.
- The school sends home a calendar listing dates of parent-teacher conferences, report cards and other major events.
- The school sends home a directory of parent organization representatives and school personnel, with phone numbers.
- The school holds annual open houses and back to school nights.
- The school has a plan for emergencies and burning questions.
- Parents know where to go with concerns, questions and compliments.

## Collaboration

- The school requires at least one parent-teacher conference each year.
- The school provides in-service training to help teachers work with parents.
- There is an early warning policy in effect for teachers to consult with parents promptly if a child is falling behind or having social difficulties.
- High schools require parent approval on students' choices of courses.
- The school furnishes information to parents of students enrolled in exceptional education programs regarding training and resources available through the District.

*Continued*

## Family Friendly Schools Checklist (Continued)

### Advisors and Decision Makers

- The school publishes a policy handbook for parents.
- There is a mechanism for obtaining parent input on new policies and programs.
- There is a parent-teacher organization that meets at least once a month.
- The staff informs and enlists the help of parents immediately when serious problems arise in the school.
- Parents are readily consulted regarding major school policy changes.
- There are varied opportunities for parents to be involved in decision-making (SAC, PTA, school suggestion box, etc.).

### Outreach to All Families

- There is an opportunity for non-custodial parents to be informed about their children's performance and school events.
- Teachers communicate at times convenient to parents who have jobs and cannot easily get away during the workday.
- Written communications are provided in the primary language of the family.

### Partnership Philosophy

- The school has a written statement about partnerships with parents.
- Time is spent during staff meetings discussing working with parents.
- Teachers are encouraged to consult with the principal if they are having difficulty dealing with a parent.
- A staff member substitutes in the classroom to allow teachers and other staff to have meetings with parents.

### Volunteer Participation

- The school has an organized volunteer program with a coordinator.
- There is a wide variety of jobs available for volunteers, including ones that could be done at home or on weekends.
- All parents are expected to volunteer or participate in some way during the school year.
- The volunteer program is reassessed periodically.

Adapted from *Beyond the Bake Sale: An Educator's Guide to Working with Parents*. Henderson, Marberger, Odoms. 1986. National Committee for Citizens in Education.

From *Creating Family-Friendly Schools*

# Ways Families Can Help Schools

## Come to school to assist

- Share information with a student or class about a hobby.
- Share information with a student or a class about a career.
- Share information with students about a country you visited or lived in.
- Tutor one or a small group of students in reading, math, or other area.
- Help coach an athletic team.
- Help put out a school or classroom newsletter (can also be done at home).
- Help sew or paint a display.
- Help build something (such as a loft in a classroom or new playground).
- Help students work on a final exhibition or project (can also be done at home or workplace).
- Help answer the school's phone.
- Help plan a new playground for the school.

## Help arrange learning opportunities in the community

- Help set up an internship or apprenticeship for a student at a business, organization, or agency.
- Host a one-day "shadow study" for one or a small group of students about a career in business or some other organization.
- Go on a local field trip with a teacher and a group of students.
- Go on an extended (3-5 day) cross-country field trip with a teacher and students.
- Contact a particular local business or organization regarding possible cooperation.
- Help to create a natural area outside the building where students can learn.

## Serve on an advisory or decision-making committee

- Serve on the school advisory committee.
- Serve on a school committee that reports to the SAC.
- Serve on a district committee representing the school.
- Serve as an officer in the PTSA.
- Help organize a parent organization for the school.
- Help design a parent and/or student survey for the school.
- Help conduct and/or tabulate results of a parent survey regarding the school.

*Continued*

## Ways Families Can Help Schools (Continued)

### Share information or advocate for the school

- Serve as a member of a “telephone tree” to distribute information quickly.
- Write a letter to legislators about the school. Write a letter to school board members about the school.
- Go to a school board meeting to advocate for the school.
- Go to another school to provide information about this school.
- Help design a brochure or booklet about the school.
- Help translate information from the school into a language other than English.
- Help translate a parent-teacher conference for people who don’t speak English well.
- Provide transportation to a parent-teacher conference for a parent who needs a ride.
- Write an article for publication in a magazine about the school’s activities.
- Help arrange for a political leader (mayor, city council, state representative, member of Congress) to visit the school.

### Increase financial resources available to the school

- Help write a proposal that would bring new resources to the school.
- Donate materials to the school.
- Arrange for a business or other organization to donate materials to the school.
- Help with a fundraiser for the school.

# Home/School Communication Survey

Check each of the following that applies to your school

- We have formal conferences with every parent at least once a year.
  - We provide language translators to assist families as needed.
  - We provide clear information about report cards and how grades are earned.
  - Parents pick up report cards.
- Our school newsletter includes:
- a calendar of school events
  - student activity information
  - curriculum and program information
  - school volunteer information
  - school governance information
  - samples of student writing and artwork
  - a column to address parents' questions
  - recognition of students, families, and community members
  - other \_\_\_\_\_
- We provide clear information about selecting courses, programs, and activities in this school.
  - We send home folders of student work weekly or monthly for parent review and comments.
  - Staff members send home positive messages about students on a regular basis.
  - We notify families about student awards and recognition.
  - We contact the families of students having academic or behavior problems.
  - Teachers have easy access to telephones to communicate with parents during or after school.
  - Parents have the telephone numbers of the school, principal, teachers and counselors.
  - We have a homework hotline for students and families to hear daily assignments and messages.
  - We conduct an annual survey for families to share information and concerns about students' needs and reaction to school programs.

Adapted from *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Epstein, J. L., et al., 1997. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

# Parent/Guardian Information Form

Created by: Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School

Please type or print clearly

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Numbers:

Home: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_

Work: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_ Ext \_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you rather be contacted by:

- Phone
- Email
- Both

The best times to contact you are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to be contacted:

- Once a month
- Twice a month
- Once a quarter
- Twice a quarter

Additional Information: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Parent Input Questionnaire

*Created by: Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School*

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_ DOB: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parents/Guardians:

Please answer the following questions about your son/daughter. Your input is greatly appreciated and extremely important to us.

My son's/daughter's strengths are:

My area's of concern for my son/daughter are:

I would like my son/daughter to work on:

After completing high school, I would like my son/daughter to:  
(What kind of education or employment do you envision for your child?)

Other comments:

# Assignment Calendar

*Created by: Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School*

Parents will appreciate a simple assignment calendar that lists the major assignments for each month.

## Assignment Calendar

Month: \_\_\_\_\_

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday

# Parent Contact Log

Created by: Kari Kadlub, Holly Rockhill, and Becky Johnson, Wesley Chapel High School

Date	Person Contacted	Phone Number	Comments/Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			



## Conclusion

Families can be our greatest educational allies, and we can be theirs. If we make the effort to establish frequent, positive communication with families, the benefits to students, families, and the school will be great. This manual provides some basic strategies for increasing family involvement in the classroom and the school. Not all families will respond with the same amount of enthusiasm to your attempts to help them be involved, but some will, and these families will benefit greatly from your sincere efforts.