

WHAT IS FAMILY INVOLVEMENT?

We use the term “family involvement” in this sourcebook in an expansive way to include and recognize the value of a broad spectrum of activities that involve family members and/or guardians helping children to learn, both at home and at school. The single parent who works two jobs to support her three children and makes sure they are safe, loved, and fed each morning before school is “involved.” The significant other who attends the IEP meeting of his partner’s child is “involved.” The grandparents with temporary custody of their two grandchildren who clear a space at the kitchen table for them to do homework are “involved.” The foster parents who keep their foster children’s birth parents informed of their children’s progress in school are “involved.” The immigrant parents who cannot speak English and are unfamiliar with the American school system but are passing on a strong work ethic to their children are “involved.” The father serving in the Air Force Reserves who is deployed on a military mission and records audiotapes of himself reading books for his preschooler to hear while he is away is “involved.” The stepfather who volunteers to judge a debate tournament at his stepson’s high school is “involved.” The Bosnian parents who volunteer to teach their daughter’s school staff about the Bosnian language and culture are “involved.” So too is the aunt caring for her nephew with spina bifida who becomes a strong advocate for his needs.

Ten Truths of Parent Involvement

1. All parents have hopes and goals for their children. They differ in how they support their children’s efforts to achieve those goals.
2. The home is one of several spheres that simultaneously influence a child. The school must work with other spheres for the child’s benefit, not push them apart.
3. The parent is the central contributor to a child’s education. Schools can either co-opt that role or recognize the potential of the parent.
4. Parent involvement must be a legitimate element of education. It deserves equal emphasis with elements such as program improvement and evaluation.
5. Parent involvement is a process, not a program of activities. It requires ongoing energy and effort.
6. Parent involvement requires a vision, policy, and framework. A consensus of understanding is important.
7. Parents’ interaction with their own children is the cornerstone of parent involvement. A program must recognize the value, diversity, and difficulty of this role.
8. Most barriers to parent involvement are found within school practices. They are not found within parents.
9. Any parent can be “hard to reach.” Parents must be identified and approached individually; they are not defined by gender, ethnicity, family situation, education, or income.
10. Successful parent involvement nurtures relationship and partnerships. It strengthens bonds between home and school, parent and educator, parent and school, school and community.
(RMC Research Corporation, 1999)

Family Involvement Strategies

This guidebook includes more than 80 promising practices that have been implemented effectively by schools to encourage family involvement in education. These practices have been organized into the following eight “cluster strategies,” each of which is described more fully in corresponding sections of this sourcebook:

Strategy 1: Creating a family-friendly school environment

- Host family-friendly social events
- Develop a family-school-community partnership policy
- Establish policies that recognize the variety of parenting traditions and practices within the school community
- Create an “open-door” policy and a responsive climate for parents
- Provide translations of printed materials in all languages spoken in the school and/or hire minority language teachers
- Provide interpreters for all languages spoken in the school
- Provide flexible options for routine tasks that accommodate family needs
- Consider varied family needs when scheduling events
- Coordinate school tours and orientations for new families
- Offer child care, transportation, and refreshments to encourage family involvement
- Foster “total teacher commitment” to family involvement among school faculty
- Maintain a parent-friendly office
- Hire a family coordinator/liaison
- Post welcome signs in all languages spoken in the school
- Post user-friendly school maps
- Reserve parking places for family visitors
- Create classroom/school environments that reflect the school’s diversity
- Maintain a welcoming bulletin board
- Create a welcoming booklet and/or videotape for new families
- Link new families with mentors
- Adopt “father-friendly” practices

Strategy 2: Building a support infrastructure

- Create a family center
- Hire a family coordinator/liaison
- Provide administrative support for family involvement activities
- Devote staff time to family involvement activities
- Commit resources to family involvement activities

Strategy 3: Encouraging family involvement

- Hire a family coordinator/liaison to coordinate volunteer program
- Take an inventory of family involvement
- Involve parents in planning, implementing, and evaluating family involvement activities

- ___ Survey family and community members for prospective volunteers
- ___ Identify barriers to family involvement in your school
- ___ Acknowledge the many different ways families can be involved
- ___ Create culturally appropriate volunteer opportunities
- ___ Host an orientation program to prepare volunteers
- ___ Help volunteers feel welcome
- ___ Show appreciation for volunteers
- ___ Invite family involvement with a family-friendly letter
- ___ Host a “You Can Make a Difference” orientation to volunteer activities
- ___ Match volunteers with meaningful activities
- ___ Announce volunteer opportunities throughout the school year
- ___ Develop a screening process for potential volunteers
- ___ Provide volunteer information packets
- ___ Develop a volunteer database and directory
- ___ Encourage local businesses to support family involvement
- ___ Establish a process for evaluating the volunteer system
- ___ Involve parents in decision-making roles

Strategy 4: Developing family-friendly communication

- ___ Host neighborhood meetings
- ___ Organize neighborhood walks
- ___ Hold family focus groups
- ___ Make home visits
- ___ Host informal principal meetings
- ___ Make positive “warm” telephone calls
- ___ Exchange home/school communication
- ___ Host conferences
- ___ Communicate via newsletters
- ___ Use a variety of technology tools
- ___ Make audiotapes of written materials for families with emerging literacy
- ___ Translate all written information into families’ native languages
- ___ Develop a process for resolving family concerns

Strategy 5: Supporting family involvement on the homefront

- ___ Develop programs that involve homefront activities
- ___ Provide guidance on developmentally appropriate practices
- ___ Provide guidance on student learning
- ___ Involve parents in action research projects
- ___ Involve parents in behavioral assessments
- ___ Provide homework assistance

Strategy 6: Supporting educational opportunities for families

- ___ Conduct assessments of educational needs of families
- ___ Involve diverse parent and community members in planning
- ___ Make home visits
- ___ Offer parent workshops
- ___ Offer opportunities for parents and children to learn together
- ___ Offer opportunities for parents to develop leadership skills
- ___ Organize family support groups
- ___ Develop teen parenting programs

Strategy 7: Creating family-school-community partnerships

- ___ Bring together families, schools, and community organizations for mutual benefit
- ___ Develop comprehensive, wraparound services for families
- ___ Develop schools as community learning centers
- ___ Develop full-service schools
- ___ Cultivate school-business partnerships

Strategy 8: Preparing educators to work with families

- ___ Provide ongoing professional development in family involvement
- ___ Provide opportunities for staff, families, and community members to learn together
- ___ Imbed family involvement in preservice education programs
- ___ Include family involvement in educational policy
- ___ Make encouraging family involvement an expectation of new faculty and staff members
- ___ Include parents as teachers and faculty members
- ___ Include parental perspectives in planning and implementing professional development opportunities