

# **Communicating With Families: Working with Special Groups**

**This article provides strategies for involving certain kinds of parents who are often ignored or served poorly. Parents with limited English skills are increasingly common in many localities, and various tips on how schools have assisted them are provided. Single and working parents are found everywhere, and schools can use the practices suggested here to be sensitive to their circumstances. Fathers are also key family members, and their involvement with children's education is much needed. The last set of strategies shows different ways that schools and educators can reach out to them.**

## ***Involving Parents With Limited English***

**Involving parents with limited English proficiency in their children's education can present special challenges. Creative approaches may be required as schools work to become partners with parents who have different cultural backgrounds and whose English is limited. Some strategies that have helped others include the following**

- **Translate letters, notices, progress reports, school handbooks, and information packets into the languages of families of all students.**
- **Have individuals available to answer the school telephone who speak the languages of parents.**
- **Translate newsletters or key newsletter articles.**
- **Record phone messages in other languages so non-English speaking parents can also keep track of their children's coursework and school events.**
- **Use school newsletters to announce cultural and other events sponsored by other language groups represented in the school.**
- **Integrate bilingual and multicultural materials in school displays, publications, libraries, and classrooms.**
- **Use paid or volunteer interpreters to promote communication with limited English parents.**
- **Hire bilingual parent coordinators or find volunteers to meet with parents in their homes and at parent centers, churches, and other gathering places to talk about school-related issues.**
- **Recruit, train, and hire bilingual parents to be paraprofessionals in the schools.**
- **Make special efforts to welcome limited English proficient parents who visit the schools.**

## **Developing Innovative Programs**

**Many schools have also developed innovative programs to help parents with limited English take part in their children's education:**

- **School-Based Literacy and Family Nights**—Literacy and other adult basic education programs are offered in schools with activities for children, such as homework tutoring and recreational activities, available at the same time.
- **Enrichment Programs**—Schools work with adult education agencies to conduct enrichment programs designed for parents with limited English proficiency. These programs include workshops for skill development, field trips that provide educational experiences, and other special events.
- **English as a Second Language Adult Education Programs**—These programs coordinate the education of parents with the education of their children. Materials used for English as a Second Language and literacy training are also used by children in their classrooms.
- **Utilizing All the Community's Resources**—Ethnic communities often sponsor activities and events that enrich children's appreciation of their parents' cultural heritages. In connection with these events, teachers can integrate specific cultural knowledge into the curriculum by inviting parents to make presentations and undertake projects with students. Activities could include cooking classes, celebrations of holidays, craft fairs, and international dinners.

## **Respecting Culture**

**Communicating with limited English proficient parents will take sensitivity, time, and effort. It may involve, for example, respecting religious and cultural holidays when planning school events. Schools will need to help all teachers and other staff to:**

- **Explore research on stereotypes and prejudice toward the school's ethnic populations so as to challenge any misconceptions about them.**
- **Learn about these groups' cultural, family, and social structures and expectations regarding school systems.**
- **Identify community leaders and include them in school improvement efforts.**

**An advisory committee composed of parents and teachers from many cultures may help foster a positive climate for culturally diverse parents and students in the school.**

## ***Involving Single and Working Parents***

**An increasing number of children live in single parent and step families. Many also live in foster families and other non-traditional family forms. And in many two-parent families, both parents work full days, so children come home to an empty house. Involving single and working parents presents many challenges to schools.**

## **Communication**

**Communication with single-parent and other non-traditional families will be more effective if schools:**

- **Avoid making the assumption that students live with both biological parents.**
- **Avoid the traditional "Dear Parents" greeting in letters and other messages, and instead use "Dear Parent," "Dear Family," "Friends," or some other form of greeting.**
- **Develop a system of keeping non-custodial parents informed of their children's school progress.**
- **Demonstrate sensitivity to the rights of non-custodial parents. Inform parents that schools may not withhold information from non-custodial parents who have the legal right to see their children's records.**
- **Develop a simple unobtrusive system to keep track of family changes, such as these examples:**
  - **At the beginning of the year, ask for the names and addresses of individuals to be informed about each child and involved in school activities.**
  - **At mid-year, send a form to each child's parents or guardians to verify that the information is still accurate. Invite the parents or guardians to indicate any changes.**
- **Place flyers about school events on bulletin boards of major companies in the community.**

**These approaches use different and more sensitive ways of communicating with non-traditional families and do not require much more material resources.**

## **Involvement**

**The following practices can make the involvement of single and working parents in school life more feasible:**

- **Hold parent-teacher conferences and other school events in the evenings.**
- **Welcome other children at such events, and provide organized activities or child care services.**
- **Provide teachers and counselors with in-service training that sensitizes them to special problems faced by children of single and working parents and the parents themselves.**
- **Gather information on whether joint or separate parent conferences need to be scheduled with parents.**
- **Sponsor evening and weekend learning activities at which parents can participate and learn with their children.**
- **Work with local businesses to arrange release-time from work so that parents can attend conferences, volunteer, or in other ways spend time at their child's school when it is in session.**

## **Workshops**

**Schools can also offer parent education workshops on topics such as**

- **Understanding the impact of separation and divorce on children.**
- **Developing a safe and secure environment for latchkey children.**
- **Handling the multiple roles of the single parent.**

## **The Community**

**Draw on the community. Schools can facilitate the involvement of single and working parents in their children's education by seeking cooperation and collaboration with resources in the community.**

- **Approach human service, cultural, social, and other organizations to suggest the development of programs and services that meet the needs of children and parents.**
- **Enlist the aid of high school students and senior citizens with whom before- and after-school recreational and child care programs can be developed.**
- **Form partnerships with organizations that can provide programs for children.**
- **Work with employers to encourage them to institute flexible hours for working parents who want to attend school activities.**
- **Use a variety of approaches to enable as many parents and children as possible to benefit from these programs.**

## ***Involving Fathers***

**Fathers are often the forgotten ones in family-oriented programs. Mothers have traditionally been more involved in the schools and community organizations. However, with more mothers in the labor force and a growing recognition of the father's importance for child development, there is new interest in meaningful ways of involving dads in their children's education.**

**Schools can reach out to fathers in at least three ways: their basic orientation, their in-school programs, and encouragement of out-of-school learning activities.**

### **Basic Orientation**

**All forms of communication to families need to mention fathers as well as mothers, assume that both will be interested, and encourage both to participate in school-sponsored activities. Further, non-custodial parents, who are usually fathers, need to be informed of these activities too unless there are strong reasons for not doing so. (See *Involving Single and Working Parents* section also.)**

## **In-School Activities**

**These should be scheduled at times when all parents can attend, such as before school, in the evenings, or on weekends. They could include the following**

- **Father-child breakfasts or dinners could provide an informal setting to meet teachers and school staff where adult male friends or father substitutes are also encouraged to come.**
- **In parent-teacher conferences, draw out the views of fathers and give them suggestions on ways to help children learn more at home.**
- **For school leadership positions such as PTA officers or advisory committee members, seek a balance of fathers and mothers.**
- **Volunteer positions should be filled from among both fathers and mothers who are free during the school day to help with activities such as being classroom aides or chaperons for field trips. The presence of fathers or even older men as hall monitors may help reduce school discipline problems.**
- **Fathers should be invited to help with special events such as constructing exhibit booths or judging contests.**
- **On career days, ask fathers and mothers to tell how their education helped prepare them for their careers.**

## **Out-of-School Activities**

**Fathers contribute to children's learning and development in many ways, and schools can assist them by:**

- **Making a point to invite fathers and make them feel welcome at workshops and courses on topics such as parenting skills, helping students learn non-violent ways to resolve conflicts, and exploring college and career opportunities.**
- **Creating support groups for parents experiencing the death or departure of a spouse, a difficult or disabled child, alienated teenagers, and other traumatic events.**
- **Providing training for fathers and other men, as well as women, to learn how to tutor students in basic subjects and mentor them in long-term relationships.**
- **Working with major local employers to adopt family-friendly policies such as releasing workers to attend school conferences, allowing flexible work schedules, and creating lunchtime seminars on family and home-school relations topics.**

**Adapted from: *Reaching All Families Creating Family-Friendly Schools*- August 1996.  
Available at [www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/index.html).**