

On Parents and Schools: A Conversation with Joyce Epstein

Joyce Epstein has been conducting research on teachers' practices of parent involvement and the effects of family-school connections on students, parents, and teachers for over a decade—including her current work at the Johns Hopkins educational research centers (CREMS and the Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students [CDS]). Here she discusses five types of parent involvement and affirms that parents want to be more involved in their children's learning, especially at home, and that they need clear direction from the schools.

What do educators need to know about parent involvement?

We're much clearer about that now than just six years ago. In our work with administrators, teachers, policy leaders, and other researchers, we've identified five major types of parent involvement. These five types occur in different places, require different materials and processes, and lead to different outcomes. [See "Five Major Types of Parent Involvement," p. 25.]

The point is that any one practice—parent-teacher conferences or PTA activities or public relations efforts—can't cover the full range of ways parents and teachers need to work together for their children's education. Hundreds of practices can be selected or designed to promote each of the five types. [See "Examples" chart, p. 26.] And research is beginning to produce information on the likely results of different practices.

For example, several studies show that when parents help their child at home in a particular subject, it's likely to increase the student's achievement in that subject. By contrast, involving a

few parents in decision making on school committees probably won't increase student achievement, at least in the short term. Parent volunteers at school can help teachers think positively about parents, and increase teachers' willingness to involve parents in other ways, but a few volunteers at school won't help other parents know how to help their children at home. Educators' choices will be easier if they know these things—and if they know their goals for parent involvement.

Photograph by Jay Van Rensselaer



What goals might they typically have?

I've compiled some examples of outcomes for parents, for students, and for teachers related to each of the five types of involvement. [See "Examples" chart, p. 26.]

What else have you learned about the effectiveness of the various practices?

For one thing, commonly accepted practices aren't necessarily the best way to achieve the outcomes they're supposed to produce. For example, we've learned that to promote Type 1 involvement—helping parents fulfill their basic obligations as parents—most schools conduct workshops for the parents. But parents can't come to workshops if they're scheduled when the parents work or have other responsibilities. We want to change the focus of Type 1 activities from the number of parents who come to school at a given time to the number of parents who get the information at times more convenient to them. Administrators and teachers can get the

Five Major Types of Parent Involvement

- Type 1.** *The basic obligations of parents* refers to the responsibilities of families to ensure children's health and safety; to the parenting and child-rearing skills needed to prepare children for school; to the continual need to supervise, discipline, and guide children at each age level; and to the need to build *positive home conditions* that support school learning and behavior appropriate for each grade level.
- Type 2.** *The basic obligations of schools* refers to the *communications from school to home* about school programs and children's progress. Schools vary the form and frequency of communications such as memos, notices, report cards, and conferences, and greatly affect whether the information about school programs and children's progress can be understood by all parents.
- Type 3.** *Parent involvement at school* refers to parent volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms or in other areas of the school. It also refers to parents who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events, or to attend workshops or other programs for their own education or training.
- Type 4.** *Parent involvement in learning activities at home* refers to parent-initiated activities or child-initiated requests for help, and ideas or instructions from teachers for parents to monitor or assist their own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children's classwork.
- Type 5.** *Parent involvement in governance and advocacy* refers to parents' taking decision-making roles in the PTA/PTO, advisory councils, or other committees or groups at the school, district, or state level. It also refers to parent and community activists in independent advocacy groups that monitor the schools and work for school improvement.

information from workshops to the parents who couldn't attend by using, for example, audio recordings, videotapes, summaries or newsletters, computerized phone messages, and cable TV shows. In too many cases, schools blame parents for not coming to the school building. The parents feel guilty for not coming, and their children feel bad because their parents didn't participate. To reduce the guilt and distress, we need new methods of sharing information.

But maybe parents ought to feel guilty if they won't exert the effort to participate.

Not necessarily. Expecting people to come to school once in a while—for an open house, a student performance, a parent-teacher conference, a report card pick-up, and one or two other important occasions—may be reasonable, but expecting many parents to come often is not reasonable. In fact, it's almost discriminatory against working parents, parents who live far from the school, and single parents with other family obligations. I'd like to see more attention to the type of involvement parents want most: how to work with their own child at home in ways that help the student succeed and that keep the parents as partners in their children's education across the grades.

Why do you emphasize "across the grades"?

Typical efforts to involve parents start to drop dramatically as early as grades 2 or 3. The parents at all grade levels want to stay informed and involved. When teachers and administrators develop parent involvement programs in the upper grades, the parents respond.

Let's go on to talk about Type 2 involvement: communication from school to home.

We've learned that a real problem in this area is making sure that memos and notices are written so that all parents can read them. Communications from school to home need to be sent in simple, readable, jargon-free English or in the language spoken by the family. They may be in print form, but they can also be sent by computerized phone messages, local cable TV, radio, or in other ways. Schools need to design and test more effective ways to provide information. We need to know not only whether messages are going home but who understands them and who does not, who we are reaching and who we are not reaching, and why.

Type 3 activities are those related to parents serving as volunteers at school?

The five types of involvement occur in different places, require different materials and processes, and lead to different outcomes.

Yes, and they usually involve relatively few people. Schools need to review the procedures they use to recruit volunteers so that all who want to participate at the school building can do so. This can be done with a simple form at the beginning of the school year or twice a year to capture the interest of families who arrive after school starts. The skills, talents, and available time of volunteers need to be matched to the needs of teachers; this takes coordination, which can be provided by a parent-teacher team. And schools need to provide some training to help parents be effective volunteers.

But schools should also find ways for parents to volunteer other than during the school day so that those who work can offer assistance to the school, too. Some volunteer work can be done after school, in the evening, on weekends, on business holidays that differ from school holidays, or during vacations. We'd like to see the definition of *volunteer* change to include all parents (and others in the community) who give time anywhere to support school goals and student learning. This would greatly increase the number of parents who are recognized as volunteers and relieve the guilt of parents who aren't available to come to the school building during the school day.

Examples of Practices to Promote, and Outcomes from, the Five Types of Parent Involvement

Type 1 Parenting	Type 2 Communicating	Type 3 Volunteering	Type 4 Learning at Home	Type 5 Representing Other Parents
Help All Families Establish Home Environments to Support Learning	Design More Effective Forms of Communication to Reach Parents	Recruit and Organize Parent Help and Support	Provide Ideas to Parents on How to Help Child at Home	Recruit and Train Parent Leaders
A Few Examples of Practices of Each Type				
School provides suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level.	Teachers conduct conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-up as needed.	School volunteer program or class parent and committee of volunteers for each room.	Information to parents on skills in each subject at each grade. Regular homework schedule (once a week or twice a month) that requires students to discuss schoolwork at home.	Participation and leadership in PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, including advisory councils or committees such as curriculum, safety, and personnel.
Workshops, videotapes, computerized phone messages on parenting and child-rearing issues at each grade-level.	Translators for language-minority families.	Parent Room or Parent Club for volunteers and resources for parents.	Calendars with daily topics for discussion by parents and students.	Independent advocacy groups.
Weekly or monthly folders of student work are sent home and reviewed and comments returned.	Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.			
A Few Examples of Outcomes Linked to Each Type				
Parent Outcomes				
Self-confidence in parenting.	Understanding school programs.	Understanding teacher's job and school programs.	Interaction with child as student at home.	Input to policies that affect child's education.
Knowledge of child development.	Interaction with teachers.	Familiarity with teachers.	Support and encouragement of schoolwork.	Feeling control of environment.
Understanding of home as environment for student learning.	Monitoring child's progress.	Comfort in interactions at school.	Participation in child's education.	
Student Outcomes				
Security.	Student participation in parent-teacher conferences, or in preparation for conferences.	Increased learning skills receiving individual attention.	Homework completion.	Rights protected.
Respect for parent.		Ease of communication with adults.	Self-concept of ability as learner.	Specific benefits linked to specific policies.
Improved attendance.			Achievement in skills practiced.	
Awareness of importance of school.	Better decisions about courses, programs.			
Teacher Outcomes				
Understanding of family cultures, goals, talents, needs.	Knowledge that family has common base of information for discussion of student problems, progress.	Awareness of parent interest, in school and children, and willingness to help.	Respect and appreciation of parents' time, ability to follow through and reinforce learning.	Equal status interaction with parents to improve school programs.
	Use of parent network for communications.	Readiness to try programs that involve parents in many ways.	Better designs of homework assignments.	Awareness of parent perspectives for policy development.

From: J. L. Epstein. (Forthcoming). "Five Types of Parent Involvement: Linking Practices and Outcomes." In *School and Family Connections: Preparing Educators to Involve Families*.

You said earlier that Type 4—parent participation in learning activities at home—is the type of involvement that most parents want more help with.

Yes, we've learned that we can greatly increase this type of involvement when teachers design homework to include parents on purpose. Of course, some homework should be designed, as it presently is, for children to do on their own, but some homework—once a week in some subjects or twice a month in other subjects—should be designed to require students to talk with someone at home about an interesting, important, exciting part of schoolwork.

How can busy teachers be encouraged to design homework of that sort?

Our research reveals a few key components that should help. For example, we found subject-specific connections between teachers' practices of parent involvement in reading and gains in students' reading achievement. Now we're working with teachers on a process to increase parent involvement in mathematics and science, subjects that are more difficult to organize for parent involvement at home. We call our process TIPS, meaning "Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork."

We've also learned that homework that involves parents can be scheduled on weekends, when parents say they have more time to help and to discuss ideas with their children. Schools often assign homework for Monday to Thursday only, as if it were a reward to have no homework over the weekend. We think it's better to give weekend assignments but make them different—enjoyable, interactive homework or long-term assignments that require some discussion or exchange.

What about parents who do their children's homework for them?

I think that occurs mainly because parents and children don't have a good understanding of what the teacher expects. When parents are oriented to the teacher's policies and patterns of homework assignments, grading, and so on, they know how to help and how not to help.

Let's turn to Type 5 activities, involvement of parents in leadership roles, school governance, and so on.

These activities are important too, but they typically involve very few parents directly; every parent can join the PTA, PTO, or other organization, but few participate in leadership roles. And those who do rarely communicate with the parents they supposedly represent to solicit their ideas or to report committee or group plans or actions. We know that, to improve Type 5 activities, schools need to consider new forms of recruitment and training of parent leaders.

How might a school faculty go about trying to improve their parent involvement program?

One way to start is by assessing present practices. This can be done with questionnaires, telephone interviews, or meetings and discussions. The important thing is to get the perspectives of teachers and parents, then develop short-range and long-range plans to strengthen practices in all five types of parent involvement over a three- to five-year period. This kind of planning, with activities and responsibilities clearly outlined, is very important if schools are to progress from where they are to where they'd like to be.

We've learned, by the way, that the strongest programs are usually developed in schools where there's a part-time coordinator to work with teachers and develop materials. The position of coordinator or lead teacher for school and family connections is just as necessary as a guidance counselor, an assistant principal, a school psychologist, or a social worker.

Can schools expect to get supportive parent involvement in all types of communities? Some educators feel that poor families just don't have the same goals as middle class schools.

Data from parents in the most economically depressed communities simply don't support that assumption. Parents say they want their children to succeed; they want to help them; and they need the school's and teacher's help to know what to do with their

children at each grade level. Our data suggest that schools will be surprised by how much help parents can be if the parents are given useful, clear information about what they can do, especially at home.

We're seeing the same results emerge from many studies by different researchers using different methods of data collection and analysis. If schools don't work to involve parents, then parent education and family social class are very important for deciding who becomes involved. But if schools take parent involvement seriously and work to involve all parents, then social class and parents' level of education decrease or disappear as important factors.

But isn't it true that some children come from homes in which they're mistreated or badly neglected? And don't teachers and administrators have reason to feel concerned about that?

Yes, a small number of children and families need special attention from health and social service professionals. But in some schools educators have used these few as excuses for not developing partnerships with all parents. From research on parent involvement in urban, rural, and suburban schools, we believe that about 2 to 5 percent of parents may have severe problems that interfere, at least for a time, with developing partnerships; and we know, too, that about 20 percent of all parents are already successfully involved.

But the other 75 percent would like to become more effective partners with their children's schools. The percentages vary somewhat from school to school, but the pattern is the same, with most parents at all grade levels wanting and needing information and guidance from their children's schools and teachers. All schools have the opportunity to build strong partnerships with parents. □

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