# What Is the Parent's Role?

TIMOTHY D. TODD

The phone rings and the voice on the other end says "Hello, Mr. Todd, this is Mrs. Heimila, Becky's teacher. Did you find the note we sent home? You needed to sign it and return it, and since I hadn't seen it, I was concerned Becky wouldn't be able to participate in the field trip. Would you like me to send you another form? The trip will be so special we wouldn't want Becky to miss it. OK? Thank you!"

As I mumble my responses, several thoughts run through my mind. Mrs. Heimila's classroom is progressive and I'd like to ask her about her methods. Does she remember I'm a teacher, or will she think I'm just a nosy parent? I wonder how she feels about parental involvement. Really, now, how is Becky doing in the 1st grade? All of these questions remain unanswered as Mrs. Heimila deftly steers the conversation in her direction and quickly disconnects.

As I pondered this exchange, I began to realize that for the time I wasn't a teacher on the phone, I was a parent. The way in which I was treated by Mrs. Heimila was typical of how I treat parents. She was cordial, pleasant, and direct. I'm sure our conversation was another checkmark on a things-to-do list. She needed something from me. She got it. That was it. Our relationship remains cordial but distant.

The day before this conversation, our team of middle school teachers had a parent conference. It was an unusual conference because it had been requested by the parent about a child who wasn't causing trouble at school. (Usually we call the parent in to see what brought forth such a demon.) Our parent conference was also cordial, but distant. We dealt with some specific issues, exchanged pleasantries, and terminated the visit.

Although we team members often complain that the parents could make our lives so much easier by supporting our objectives, we did not discuss with this parent any of these topics.

Among the questions we didn't ask were: Does your child have a comfortable place to study at home? Does she have a library card and do you take her there? Do you model learning behavior by reading? Do you subscribe to any magazines? Do you discuss what your child watches on TV? Does she have any hobbies or other interests it would help us to know? Can we give you some information that might help tie in home with school? All these questions that might have made this parent more a part of our educational efforts went unasked. We dealt with the issues at hand, but went no deeper. We remained cordial but distant.

When I spoke with my building principal, Mr. Rich Masciarelli, about parental involvement, he began with the usual administrative bluster: Parents are vital to their children's education. When I pressed him for what that meant, he relaxed a bit. According to Rich, the parent's place is in the home, providing an atmosphere that will help the child fit in at school. Although parents are encouraged to get involved at school, the day when parents truly have a say in the operation of the school is still in the distance. Of course, Rich was speaking of our particular circumstances as an urban school with little parental involvement, and perhaps things would be different in a different community. We have a hard time even getting parents to participate in the PTO. Rich went on to explain that even though some parents are capable of decision making at an administrative level, they are not representative of the school population and are already busy enough with PTO work. His conclusion was that the place for parents was in the PTO — raising funds, being chaperones. At this time, any deeper involvement in the school is unrealistic.

Perhaps parents don't really want a true partnership with teachers. One of the more active parents at B.F. Brown Middle School is Linda Gallant. Linda has always been involved in schools, organizing a PTO when her daughter started kindergarten. When I asked Linda about what she felt her role should be, she replied that she wanted her point of view as a parent known in the schools. In fact, her involvement with the schools began because she wanted to know what was going on. Additionally, she felt it was up to the parents to fill in any holes in schools that teachers couldn't fill. She

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didn't express any desire to have a voice in the way the school was operated. She was comfortable with the cordial but distant attitude of the teachers.

I try to think of an analogy to the relationship between parents and teachers, but I can't. We certainly aren't salesclerks with parents in the role of customers. We aren't wizards who parents seek out for sage advice. We don't see or communicate enough to be considered teammates. There are parents whose vision, or lack thereof, of schools baffles me. If anything, parents seem to be a third party with whom we have a cordial, but distant, relationship. □

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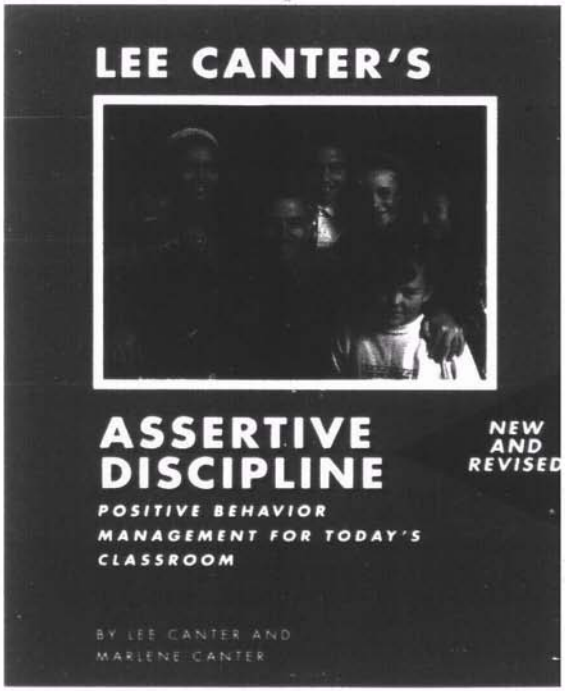
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