

Working
with

T E A C H E R S

to Support Children's Learning

Ben Silliman

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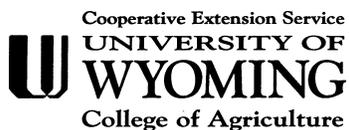
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This resource offers ideas to help parents and family members work cooperatively with teachers and activity leaders to support children's learning.

Parents as partners for learning

Parents and relatives are children's first and most important teachers. As children reach school age and become involved in community organizations, family members are important partners with teachers, coaches, and club leaders. All children benefit when parents build this partnership through various types of involvement:

- ❖ Establishing a home environment to support learning
- ❖ Communicating regularly with teachers and group leaders
- ❖ Volunteering in schools and community organizations
- ❖ Supporting homework and extracurricular activities
- ❖ Becoming involved in decision-making, advocacy, and committees
- ❖ Collaborating with the community to improve opportunities for all children

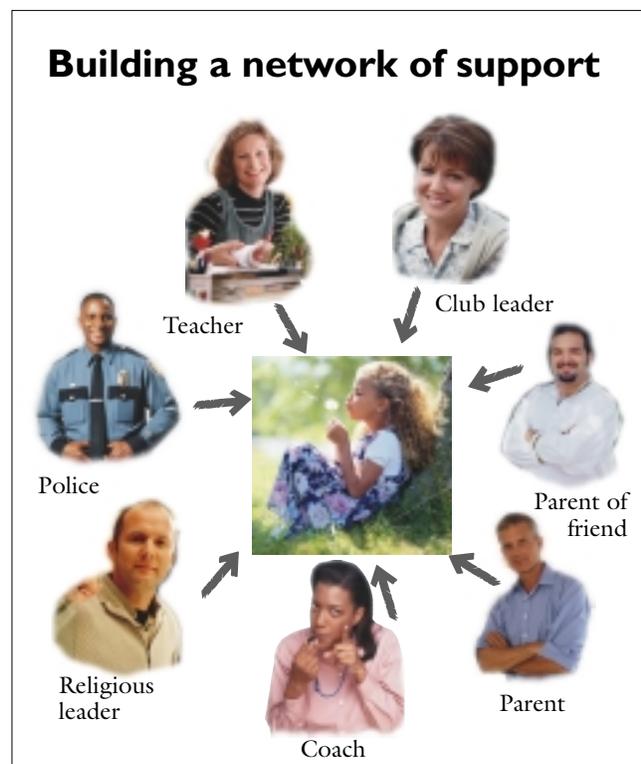
Parents who act as partners in their children's learning enjoy and enhance children's success, improve their own learning and belonging in a community, and help make their community a better place for all children.

Setting the stage: Establishing a supportive home environment

Children learn by example. Adults who enjoy learning and support children's interests provide a climate for their success.

Parent actions that build a learning climate are as follows:

- ❖ Modeling reading habits with a variety of books, magazines, or newspapers
- ❖ Encouraging and discussing learning-oriented TV, radio, internet sites, or computer programs
- ❖ Showing enthusiasm about learning at work, through hobbies, or with problem-solving around the home



When adults become involved, all children benefit.

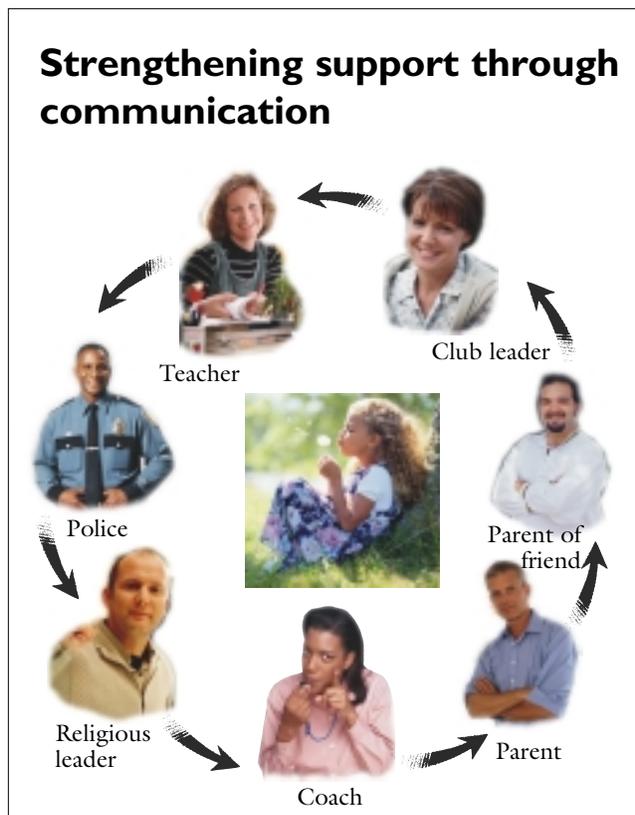
- ❖ Being aware of and discussing current events in the world, including those that are of particular interest to the family
- ❖ Discussing important personal, community, and national issues and values
- ❖ Being open to others with different ideas and interests
- ❖ Reading aloud
- ❖ Introducing children to a variety of people, places, and activities around the community
- ❖ Investing time and money in a variety of activities
- ❖ Rewarding hard work, responsibility, and creativity and avoiding comparisons

- ❖ Showing patience and encouragement, rather than apathy or criticism, of children's progress
- ❖ Encouraging regular chores and responsibilities that build self-efficacy
- ❖ Providing family activities, such as gardening or camping, that require new learning and responsibility

Staying in touch: Communicating regularly with teachers and leaders

Good partnerships require good communication. Parents and others can take initiative for staying in touch and working together to help children succeed. Children should be included in many of these exchanges, although adults should stay in touch with one another to avoid miscommunication. The following are strategies that help maintain good communication between family and teaching adults:

- ❖ Establishing early contact through home visits (by teacher) and school/club visits (by parent)
- ❖ Communicating information about children's interests, habits, abilities, and difficulties
- ❖ Checking on expectations (class or club rules and procedures)
- ❖ Calling to express appreciation or concern when something exceptional happens
- ❖ Checking the assignment sheet or school Web site for progress or grades
- ❖ Communicating regularly about school progress
- ❖ Scheduling informal parent-teacher/leader meetings when more information or support is needed



When caring adults communicate with each other, the network of support grows stronger.

Making the most of formal parent-teacher/leader conferences

- Be prepared to listen as well as talk; list specific questions and concerns.
- Understand school or club standards, rules, and expectations.
- Listen for specific details about the child's behavior or performance.
- Discuss the child's talents, skills, hobbies, study habits, and special sensitivities, such as weight or speech difficulties, which might affect learning.
- Indicate special needs or circumstances, such as a new baby, a family illness, or an upcoming move, that might impact ability to learn.
- Ask about specific ways to help the child at home.
- Think about the teacher's comments and discuss them with the child (i.e., setting new homework rules, bedtimes, weekend activities).

Working out parent-teacher/leader conflicts

- Know policies, rights, and responsibilities of students, parents, and teachers, as well as procedures for clarifying expectations and working through difficulties.
- Talk with the teacher or leader first to clarify expectations, misunderstandings, facts, and feelings.
- Maintain confidentiality by keeping facts and feelings exclusive to those concerned.
- Include the child in discussions and solutions with teachers.
- Avoid criticizing the teacher in front of the child—don't let adult anger or anxiety ruin his or her ideas or enthusiasm.
- Choose a good time and place to discuss concerns.
- Schedule appointments after fact gathering, reflection, and calming down.
- Invite a mediator to aid with problem solving when needed.



Getting involved: Volunteering in schools and the community

Parent involvement makes a difference. When parents share their talents and time, it makes a big difference in a classroom or community youth club. Parent contributions also show caring and concern to students, teachers or leaders, and other parents. The message of concern and commitment is more important than what job a parent does or how many hours he or she can contribute. Specific volunteer activities include these tasks:

- ❖ Assisting with practical tasks such as preparation of lesson materials, record keeping, room arrangements, or activity clean up

- ❖ Preparing learning materials (learning kits, play-dough, charts, etc.)
- ❖ Arranging for projects, guest speakers, field trips, or parties
- ❖ Mentoring children by listening, encouraging, or demonstrating a skill
- ❖ Coordinating fund raising activities for class materials or special activities such as field trips
- ❖ Facilitating contact with other parents through phone calls, newsletters, or e-mail networks
- ❖ Increasing school safety through parent patrols
- ❖ Supervising children in class, playground, cafeteria, computer lab, or reading group settings (which may involve screening and training in special skills)
- ❖ Presenting one's experience or expertise through guest speaking, demonstrating skills, or mentoring individual students or groups
- ❖ Assisting with out-of-school responsibilities such as field trips
- ❖ Tutoring and academic assistance
- ❖ Using or supporting parent meetings or resource rooms

Helping the child: Supporting homework and activities

Helping children learn to learn pays long-term dividends. Teachers typically assign homework to reinforce or extend in-class learning. Parents who help children organize and complete their own work pro-

mote study habits and self-confidence. The combination of watching homework and talking with teachers allows parents to balance helping (i.e., not too much or too little) and provide the right kind of assistance (i.e., monitoring habits, explaining simple assignments, encouraging teacher consultation, arranging for tutoring). Following are examples of positive parent influences on homework and extracurricular activities:

- ❖ Promoting a regular time and place for homework
- ❖ Providing and checking on good lighting, equipment (i.e., computer, calculator, tape player), and supplies (i.e., paper, pencils, ruler)
- ❖ Helping the child set priorities and schedules and providing a supportive environment (i.e., no TV or other distractions)
- ❖ Providing assistance with special needs (i.e., special supplies, transportation to library)
- ❖ Making sure the child understands the assignment and brings home the right materials
- ❖ Checking neatness, completeness, and where appropriate, accuracy of homework
- ❖ Helping the student build a study guide (key points and explanations), rehearse material, and understand problem solving as the parent is able



Leading change: Becoming involved

Family members can contribute much to the planning, decision-making, and leadership of school and club activities. Parent ideas, resources, observations, and cooperation help build a learning network in which both kids and adults grow. Caring adults can volunteer in the following roles:

- ❖ Serving on parent-teacher committees and helping with projects (i.e., committees for safety, multicultural learning, curriculum, fund raising, field trip planning)
- ❖ Helping to educate the community on learning and schooling issues and needs
- ❖ Serving as a mentor, coach, or project leader for a school or community club
- ❖ Participating in class evaluation and school reform efforts

Working together: Collaborating with the community to improve opportunities for all children

Adults involved in schools have work-related, membership and friendship relationships across the community. These connections can help a school or club maintain two-way communication with the community as a whole; schools and clubs share their programs and activities while students learn about events and issues in the larger community. Building relationships with other schools or youth groups, businesses or civic clubs, or special groups (such as elders, elected officials, or ethnic communities) can also expand learning and service opportunities and public support for



youth. The following activities help build school-community connections:

- ❖ Helping to inform students and families about community programs and services for health, cultural and recreational activities, and social support
- ❖ Publicizing community activities that link families to learning skills and talents (i.e., libraries, museums, fairs, cultural events)
- ❖ Building partnerships between community organizations, agencies, and businesses (i.e., school-to-work, youth assets, community service learning)
- ❖ Promoting youth leadership development (i.e., activities empowering youth to lead)
- ❖ Advocating for youth and youth-serving organizations with public officials and private foundations

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