

# Positive Parental Partnerships



For all children, including children with disabilities, parents can be an invaluable resource to teachers, providing them with information about their child and what works best in terms of learning and positive behaviour support.



Parental involvement in their children's education is associated with better achievement, greater completion of activities assigned to be done at home, increased ability to self-regulate behaviour, and higher levels of social skills. Joyce Epstein of John Hopkins University has written about the importance of school-family-community partnerships, and provides these ideas for creating positive partnerships with parents.

## Parenting

A school can support the parenting role by providing a place in the school where parents are welcome to sit down together, have a cup of tea or coffee, and meet with other parents. This is an excellent place to collect and display information about community resources and groups that may be of interest to parents.

## Collaboration with the community

Schools can provide links for communities to help families. For example, school supplies donated by community members can be distributed through schools to students who need them.

## Communication

Schools can communicate with groups of parents through websites, class emails, or using district software. Communication with individual parents is best face-to-face to ensure that nonverbal cues are attended to. We know that 80% of communication is nonverbal, and only 20% is based on the words that are spoken. Telephone conversations, daily communication books sent back and forth with the students, or individual emails are also useful tools.

## Volunteering

Research shows that parent involvement has positive impact on student achievement. If both parents are working, their volunteer work may not be in school; volunteering includes helping children at home with their learning or homework.

## Learning at home

Parents are the first teachers of their children, and this role continues after children begin formal instruction at school. Parents are actively teaching attitudes, beliefs, values and skills. They provide experiences that schools cannot. Parents often have developed extensive activities through which they support their child's development in the area of disability.

## Decision making

All parents can be involved in School Councils, which offer advice and assistance in the areas of school policies and practices.

Epstein, Joyce L., et al. (2002). *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (2nd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.



# Strengthening Collaboration Between Schools and Families



The child is the center of all collaborative efforts. Successful collaboration with families can provide for meaningful learning opportunities and supportive learning environments.



Fruitful, effective collaboration requires sensitivity and planning. Suggestions for achieving this goal include:

- In preparation for an initial meeting, the teacher can take a strength-based approach when thinking about the child's abilities and skills. For example, perhaps a child is not yet reading independently, but can follow print and pay attention to a story when others read aloud.
- Similarly, behavioural observations need to be descriptive and as matter-of-fact and non-judgemental as possible in order to invite collaboration. A statement such as, "He's violent and dangerous" is not only judgmental, but also shuts down positive communication. It is more accurate, and more useful, to carefully describe what was observed, as in "On Tuesday morning he threw a chair at another student."
- Prior to the meeting itself, the teacher can email, phone or send a note home inviting parents to think about the strengths and preferences of their child. Parents need to feel they are prepared for the meeting as well.
- If there are reports that will be discussed, provide a copy to parents prior to the meeting so they are not trying to read and absorb new information while discussing the report at the meeting.
- If there are areas of concern, ensure that parents have been told about these immediately after they occur, so there are no surprises at the meeting. Communicating frequently, honestly and openly develops trust.
- Enquire whether the parents have any concerns they would like to discuss at the meeting. It helps the teacher to have time to check into concerns before the meeting, rather than being surprised by them. Ensuring there are no surprises for parents or teachers helps to build collaboration, and trust.
- Agree on a time for the meeting, and include both a start and a finish time. Both parents and teachers are busy people with other commitments, including their families. If the meeting is not completed within the set time, it is better to meet again on another day rather than disrupting people's schedules.
- If notes are to be taken, let the parents know that a copy of the notes will be provided to them at the end of the meeting to check for accuracy and to ensure everyone has a record of what was decided.
- An inviting way to start any meeting is to do a "round robin" with each person sharing one strength of the child.
- Move from what the child can do to what parents and teachers would like the child to be able to do.
- Finally, talk about how progress will be monitored and what will be indicators of success.
- Parents have an important role to play in supporting this, and providing additional practice and feedback at home. Collaboration ensures that parents know what is expected, and how to support and reinforce their child's learning at home.



# Building Relationships and Trust



Trust is important in building and maintaining relationships and resolving conflict.

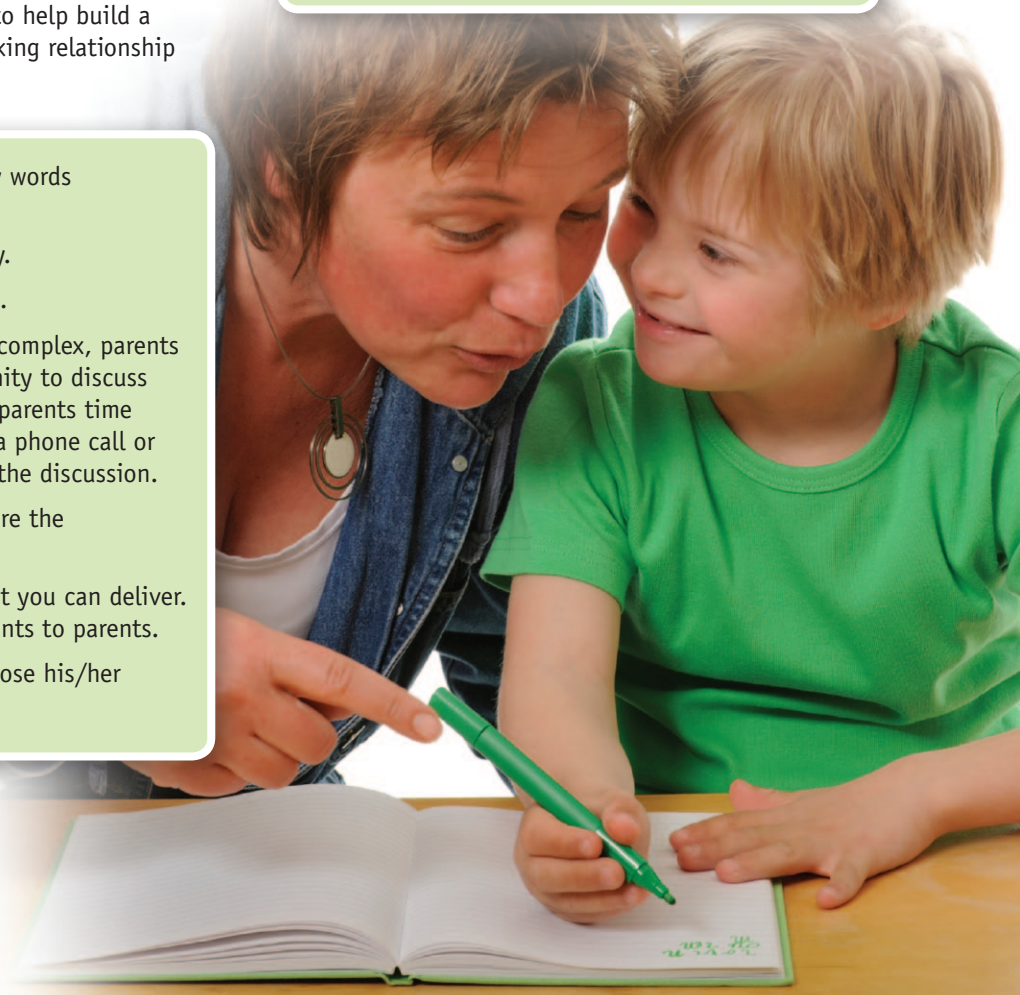


- Some of the personal qualities and attitudes that contribute to trust are: reliability, competence, honesty and openness.
- As parents deal with the many school-related transitions for their children with disabilities, they may experience a range of emotions. Fathers and mothers may react differently, simply because they are different people. They may have different ways of coping with feelings of grief or loss related to their expectations for their child.
- Teachers can use specific strategies to help build a positive and mutually rewarding working relationship with parents:

- Trust in interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers develops when:

- Both teachers and parents are seen as knowledgeable and competent.
- All decisions are made based on what is best for the child.
- All parties honour their commitment to supporting the child's success.

- Use terminology in clear, everyday words rather than educational jargon.
- Listen to what parents have to say.
- Accept feelings that are expressed.
- When information is new or more complex, parents may need more than one opportunity to discuss it. Introduce a new idea and give parents time to think about it. Follow up with a phone call or meeting a week later to continue the discussion.
- Communicate frequently, and ensure the communication is two-way.
- Be accountable. Only promise what you can deliver. Follow through on your commitments to parents.
- Respect each parent's right to choose his/her own level of involvement.





# Supporting Collaboration Through Active Listening



Active listening is a skill that teachers can learn and use to help establish meaningful relationships with parents. Strong collaborative relationships are important so that teachers

and parents can work effectively together to ensure students are supported and successful learners.



Active listening involves empathetic comments, appropriate questions, and paraphrasing or summarizing for the purpose of verifying what has been heard.

There are four parts in active listening:

- Listen, empathize and communicate respect
- Ask questions and ask permission to take notes
- Focus on the issue
- Find a first step

## LISTEN

- Empathy communicates that the listener is doing his or her best to understand the other person's thoughts and feelings.
- Respectful listening communicates that how the speaker is feeling is important to the listener.
- In active listening, the goal is not to reach agreement. In fact, there is no expectation of agreeing or disagreeing; the goal is simply to understand and acknowledge the other person's point of view.
- Activelistening involves listening not just with your ears, but also with your eyes and heart. It involves listening for feeling and listening for meaning. It uses skills, but it is rooted in our attitudes.
- The process of talking, explaining and being listened to can be very powerful for a parent. It can serve as a release of emotion, particularly if the parent was feeling anxious about the meeting with the teacher.
- It can also help the parent clarify his or her own thinking, feelings and beliefs about a concern.

## ASK QUESTIONS

- It is respectful to ask for the permission of the parents to take notes. Let the parents know that a copy of the notes will be provided to them at the end of the meeting to check for accuracy and to ensure everyone has a record of what was decided.
- When asking questions, phrase them as open-ended questions that cannot be answered by a simple "yes" or "no". An easy beginning for open-ended questions is "Tell me about..." Another, non-threatening beginning for open-ended questions is to use a statement instead, such as "I wonder..."
- If the teacher is the person taking notes (which will then be shared by both teacher and parents), repeating or paraphrasing what has just been said is a good way to ensure the accuracy of what is being written down as well as checking for understanding.
- The process of asking questions, paraphrasing, clarifying and writing notes down is also a strategy that will help the teacher to organize the information the parent is sharing, so that it will be easier to summarize what the parent has said. This summary is critical in the next step of the process.



## FOCUS ON THE ISSUE

- This step brings the information gathering to a close, and begins to focus on the issue or problem.
- Signal the change to this step in the process by saying, "I want to make sure I have everything" OR "I want to make sure my notes are accurate."
- Then carefully review the notes with the parents, checking that the content is accurate.
- At the end of the review, ask if the parents would like anything changed or added.
- Make sure that there is a clear understanding of the issues – what they are, and what each issue involves – before moving on to the final step.

## FIND A FIRST STEP

- Stephen Covey talks about the Circle of Concern and the Circle of Influence. A person's Circle of Influence includes those things s/he can affect directly. A person's Circle of Concern comprises all matters about which s/he cares.
- As we look at our concerns, we realize we can control some issues, but we cannot control others. Proactive people focus their efforts on the Circle of Influence. They work on issues they can directly influence. By undertaking and making positive changes, these people can gradually enlarge their Circle of Influence.
- By focusing on issues they can influence, teachers can expand their knowledge and experience, and build trustworthiness.
- A reasonable "first step" is often to find out more about the issue. This might involve observing the student and speaking with other teachers to find out what they have observed.
- If the issue is outside the teacher's Circle of Influence (for example, a challenge in riding the bus) then the role of the teacher is to link the parents to someone who can help them.
- When an issue is outside the Circle of Influence of the teacher, it is important to clearly state to the parents what the teacher's role will be. Clearly defining the teacher's role helps to eliminate confusion or unrealistic expectations.



Covey, S.R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.



# Resolving Differences through Collaboration



Because teachers and parents are individuals, there will be times when there are differences of opinion.



- Differences of opinion, or even conflict, are not in themselves a problem. What is important is how it is handled.
- Genuine interest in finding out about the parents' view of the child's needs is important.
- Sometimes there are constraints in what a school can offer, particularly in the area of resources — people, materials, or time.
- Conflict can be an opportunity for true solution-based collaboration, as parents and teachers brainstorm possibilities: (e.g. peer support, volunteer time, donated materials, or fund-raising for specialized equipment).
- When differences of opinion do arise, it is important to listen to concerns, explore common interests, focus on strengths, and seek solutions.
- Some strategies that may be helpful include:

- See each child as an individual – Children, including children with disabilities, are all different. Be careful not to view a child with a disability as “one of a group” of a certain disability. It may not be an accurate view.
- Pay attention to the long and short-term goals and dreams parents have for their child – Parents will have their child for a life-time; a teacher has the child for five hours a day for a year. As much as possible, look for ways to address the parents' goals through the curriculum.
- Look at the whole child – A strength-based approach allows parents and teachers to see the whole child, with his or her unique gifts.
- Share knowledge – Parents need to feel that they know enough about what and how their child is learning that they can feel confident that their child is receiving an appropriate education.
- Talk about things proactively – Knowing what is coming gives parents an opportunity to ask questions or discuss their concerns. It also is a strong indicator of the teacher's planning for their child.
- Present available options – When there are different viable options for learning, make parents aware of these. Choice is important in helping people feel a sense of ownership.
- Regular commitment with home can support positive relationships.

- To help resolve differences through collaboration other key skills include: communication skills, problem-solving or solution-finding skills, and negotiation skills.
- We can develop skills to minimize the occurrence of conflict by building relationships, developing trust and collaborating with others. When issues do arise, we can also use our skills to actively listen to concerns, explore common ground, focus on strengths and seek collaborative solutions.



# Collaborating for Smooth Transitions



Transitions are life-long, from one grade to another, from one stage to another. Transitions affect children, as well as their parents.



- Transitions form a bridge from childhood to adulthood. A major transition occurs from preschool, which may include early intervention programs, to school. The transitions through the grades are part of school life. Another transition takes place from high school to post-secondary, the community or a workplace setting.
- The first transition for many parents of children with disabilities may occur when their child is diagnosed with a disability. The period of loss and grief is a transition from the original hopes and dreams parents had for their child, to a new reality and a new vision of the future.
- Transitions through the school years may lead to parents feeling that they are “starting all over” each time their child moves to a new grade, a new class or a new school. With each transition, there can be a feeling of loss and a resurgence of emotions. Being aware of this can help teachers support parents.
- A few critical transitions include:

- **Diagnosis of a disability** – Diagnosis of a disability may have occurred at birth, but may not occur until the child is several years old, or even in school, depending on the type of disability. **What a parent needs** is emotional understanding and support.
- **Beginning school** – Starting school, usually at age 5 or 6, can be a major transition for a child, particularly one who has had extensive one-on-one early intervention experiences. **What a parent needs** is information – facts about the school, about expectations, about daily routines, and about the supports their child will have to ensure they are successful.
- **Nearing puberty** – As children near puberty, there are hormonal and growth changes, but also emotional changes. Children are becoming adolescents; they are beginning to explore their sexuality and learning how to relate appropriately to others. They have a desire to have more independence,

and are coping with a new range of emotions. Often they will be moving to a new school for their junior high school years.

**What a parent needs** is active participation in planning for the transition to junior high school, to help allay their fears of this new stage, and help them adjust to a different level of direct involvement.

- **Career planning** – As adolescents move through junior high school and prepare to move to high school, longer range planning, including career planning, becomes critical. Program choices for high school and, in some cases, greater community involvement all need to be addressed. **What a parent needs** is a thorough understanding of their changing role as their adolescent matures and moves toward independence as an adult.





- Understanding the changing needs of parents at different transition points can help teachers to meet these needs of parents, assisting them to manage the transitions of their children effectively.
- Although transitions do have a component of “change”, the more that can be done to reduce the unknown elements, the easier the transition will be.
- The keys to successful transitions are:

- Planning for change or transition,
- Including parents in the planning process,
- Establishing at least one individual who the parent can feel comfortable approaching, and with whom a closer relationship will be established,
- Ensuring that people have an opportunity to meet each other prior to the transition occurring,
- Providing opportunities for parental peer support by linking parents to parents of older children,
- Using multiple modes of communication, and
- Celebrating successful transitions by recognizing the roles parents and teachers have played in meeting student needs through collaboration.





# Solution-focused Collaboration



Solution-focused collaboration between parents and teachers works on building solutions together based on a strength based approach.



- A positive approach is to assume that part of the solution may already be happening. Often careful observation can give clues about what works.
- Focusing on seeking solutions and highlighting what is already being done is a way of recognizing parents for their skills and strengths in working with their child.

Some questions that can help inform the search for positive solutions and build on students strengths:

- What are your child's strengths and interests?
- Describe successes your child had in school.
- Describe any challenges your child had in school.
- What are your child's learning needs for this school year?
- What type of learner is your child? How does your child learn best?
- Does your child display any behaviours that are of concern to you? If so, please explain how you deal with this type of behaviour at home.
- What are your goals and hopes for your child this year?
- Where do you see your child five years from now?
- Is there any other information that could help us gain a better understanding of your child?
- Are there any specific concerns that you would like us to address at this meeting?

