

68 Parent Involvement Ideas That Really Work

1. Know THE SECRET to getting parents to attend meetings at school—make sure they know they're genuinely invited.
2. Establish a friendly contact with parents early in the year, "In Time of Peace."
3. Insist that teachers not wait until it's too late to tell parents about potentially serious problems. Early contact helps.
4. Ask teachers to make at least two positive phone calls to parents each week. Add a phone line or two if needed. Parent communication is a cost-effective investment.
5. Remember the 3 "F"s for success—Food, Families, Fun.
6. Focus on the strengths of families—they know their children better than anyone else. Find ways to get that information to teachers, other school staff.
7. Learn how to deal with angry parents—separate the parent from the argument he is making. Use active listening. Don't get angry. Look for areas of agreement, "We both want your child to do well." Find a win-win solution. If you're not sure about a parent suggestion say, "I'll certainly keep that in mind." If necessary, devise a temporary solution.
8. Provide a brief parent newsletter. One sheet of paper is best.
9. Remember "30-3-30" in writing school newsletters. Eighty percent of people will spend just 30 seconds reading it. Nineteen percent will spend three minutes. One percent will spend 30 minutes (your mother).
10. Remember the dollar bill rule for newsletters. A dollar bill placed anywhere, at any angle, on any page should touch some element of graphic interest—headline, box, screen, bullets •, bold type, picture—or it's too dull for most people to read.
11. Develop written policies encouraging parent involvement. If it's not in policy, the message is we don't care much about it.
12. Write for parents at 4th to 6th grade level. Use a computer to check the reading level.
13. Know why parents say they are not involved: 1) Don't have time, 2) Don't know what to do, 3) Don't know it is important, 4) Don't speak English.
14. Take heart from the "one-third rule." Research says if you can get one-third of a school's parents involved, you can begin to make significant improvement in student achievement.
15. Be aware that teachers are more reluctant to contact parents than vice versa. Solution: get parents and teachers together—just as people—in comfortable social situations.
16. Stress two-way communication between schools and parents. "One-way" isn't communication.
17. Conduct school surveys to reveal family attitudes about your school.
18. Use "key communicators" to control the rumor mill. Keep those to whom others turn for school information well informed, especially the three "B"s—barbers, bartenders & beauty shop operators.
19. Use simple evaluation forms to get parent feedback on every meeting or event. If we ask, they will tell us what they want.
20. Try "quick notes" home—notes the day something happens. A parent helps the child with a spelling test and the child does better. Shoot an immediate note home to say, "It's working!"
21. Take parents' pictures. Tell them in advance that pictures will be taken with their child, and prepare for a crowd.
22. Encourage teachers to assign homework that requires talking with someone at home.
23. Ask teachers what they would like to tell parents if they had the chance—and ask parents what they would like to tell teachers. Then exchange the information! Great program.
24. Put up a "Welcome" sign in every language spoken by students and parents at your school—get parents to help get the words right.
25. Have handy a ready reference list of helpful materials parents might use to help them cope with student problems. Better yet have a lending library.
26. Set up a parent center in your school stocked with resources to help (and lend to) parents.
27. Offer parenting classes—with videos and lots of handouts.
28. Know the facts about the changing structure of the family—and consider how schools can cope to best help children.
29. Consider an inservice program for staff on facts about single-parent families—it can be a real eye-opener.
30. Breakfast sessions at school draw busy parents like crazy.
31. Be very careful to monitor how your school telephone is answered. Phone impressions are lasting ones!
32. Provide "Go to the Office" slips for teachers to give students who do something good. Student takes slip to principal who compliments child, writes note to parents on the slip (or calls parents), sends it home.
33. Be aware that parents are looking for a school where their children are likely to succeed—more than a school with the highest test scores. Show parents that you care.

34. Send a school bus filled with staff around the school neighborhood to meet and welcome students. parents just before school starts.
35. Solicit parent volunteers at the Kindergarten Registration Day program. Make it easy to sign up when parents are most enthusiastic.
36. Don't make judgments about parents' lack of interest in their children's education. You'll probably be wrong. "Walk a mile in their shoes" and understand that what looks like apathy may be exhaustion.
37. Try day-long parent academies with short repeated workshops on topics such as building self-esteem, language development, motivating children, encouraging reading, discipline, talking with kids about sex, dealing with divorce, etc. Test weekdays vs. weekends.
38. Provide training and lots of school information for parent volunteers. They are powerful goodwill ambassadors.
39. Invite parents to fill out interview forms detailing child's special qualities—interests, abilities, accomplishments. Teachers can use information to write story about child to read at school program, post on bulletin board.
40. Investigate "voice mail" systems to keep parents up-to-date on homework, school activities.
41. Find ways to provide positive reinforcement to parents. Everyone responds well to recognition.
42. Involve parents in goal-setting for their children. It promotes working as a team.
43. Use research findings that one of the best ways to get parents involved is to simply ask them, and also tell them what you'd like them to do.
44. Give parents specific suggestions about how they can help their children. Many just need to know things like: "Read aloud every day." "Turn the TV off during homework time."
45. Try a short student-written newsletter for parents about what students have been learning. (You still need your own parent newsletter. You cannot fulfill your obligation to communicate by delegating the job to students.)
46. Help parents understand why excessive TV hurts children—TV robs them of needed play, exercise, reading practice, study time, dulls critical thinking, encourages obesity through snacking.
47. Understand the diversity of single parent families. Living with one parent can be wonderful for some children, destructive for others
48. Offer school sponsored sessions on single parenting.
49. Help parents understand that student effort is the most important key to school success, not just ability.
50. Encouraging (and assisting) parents to network among themselves to solve common problems builds parent support.
51. Provide some parent education classes at the workplace. Convenience works for 7-11 stores and it also works for schools.
52. Try providing "Good News Postcards" for teachers to write short positive note about students and mail them home. One thousand postcards cost less than \$200 to mail.
53. Ask parents' help in developing questions for a school "audit" to see if your school is family friendly.
54. Invite parents to a program about helping children do well on homework and eliminating things that distract them. Most have never had such information.
55. Ask parents to fill out a "Contact Sheet" listing home and work addresses and phone numbers—and the best times to be contacted in either place.
56. Have children write personal notes to their parents on school papers, surveys, invitations to school programs, etc. Watch parent response rates soar!
57. Help all school staff understand the central role they play in building parent attitudes, support and involvement—secretary, custodian, food service staff, bus driver, librarian, aides, everyone
58. Try sending home "Resource Bags" filled with games, videos, reading materials and instructions on specific activities parents can do with children at home. They're very popular.
59. Having problems getting parents involved with a child who's having discipline or other problems? Try videotaping class sessions. Showing the "candid camera" tape to parents and children works wonders.
60. Make sure all staff know the top things parents report they want to know about school: 1) How they can be involved with their child's education, 2) How they can spend more time at school, 3) How to talk to teachers, other school staff, 4) How to help their child at home.
61. Try holding "non-academic" social events to draw parents to school to see students' work.
62. Try an evening Curriculum Fair to give parents a better understanding of what's being taught.
63. Try a "Family Math Night" to inform parents about the math curriculum through math games.
64. Try "refrigerator notes." Ask students to "Take this note home and put it in the refrigerator." That gets attention!
65. Know that parents are also looking to schools for help in dealing with non-academic problems (child care, raising adolescents, advice on drugs, sexual activity). Providing help can build parent support.
66. Understand one key reason for parent non-involvement: Lack of information. One memo won't do. Try letters & notes & signs & calls & newspaper & radio & TV. Repetition works & works & works.
67. Transition Nights (or days, or afternoons) for parents and students getting ready to go to a new school help answer questions, relieve anxieties, build involvement and support.
68. Want to get parents out for school meetings? Make children welcome by offering child care.

—These ideas from a presentation by John H. Wherry, Ed.D., President, The Parent Institute, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474. The Parent Institute publishes the Educators' Notebook on Family Involvement newsletter for school staff (from which all ideas for this handout have been taken), the Parents Make the Difference! newsletter for schools to distribute to parents of elementary grade children, the Parents STILL Make the Difference! newsletter for parents of secondary school children, as well as booklets and videos for parents. For information about publications and services call toll-free: 1-800-756-5525. Copyright © 1996, The Parent Institute. Permission granted for reproduction of this material if this credit message is included.