Family Systems and Home-School Partnerships

This chapter will help you answer the following questions about your learners:

• What are some ways to bring the parents of my learners closer to my school and classroom?

• What are some of the reasons parents of my learners might not be involved in school as much as I would like?

• How can I help uninvolved parents become more interested and concerned?

• How can I plan, organize, and execute a parent conference that is cordial and upbeat?

• What are some ways I can let parents know more about my classroom and their child’s progress?

• How can I help parents become more involved with their child’s homework?

• What can I do to encourage greater involvement among parents who are linguistically and culturally different from the majority?

In this chapter you will also learn the meanings of these terms:

*active listening*
Tamara, a first-year teacher at Cedar Creek Elementary, and Christie, Tamara’s mentor, are carpooling this week. Tamara looks forward to the drives to and from school as a time to share with Christie her thoughts, flashes of insight, and frustrations because they rarely have time to talk at school.

Tamara: I went to this great workshop last Saturday on teaching students how to write. They talked about how to get children to write poetry, short stories, fables, biographies, and all sorts of things from their personal experiences.

Christie: Teaching writing takes a lot of time when you consider all the editing and correcting you have to do. Giving students feedback on their writing and getting them to rewrite is the problem. Long delays in getting things back really slow things down.

Tamara: Having only about 10 students would be nice.

Christie: Dream on. But have you thought about getting some volunteers who can answer student questions and correct things like spelling and grammar?
Tamara: Sure, but from where?

Christie: Well, a few years ago when I got involved in the “Write to Read” program for my first-graders I had the same problem. Here was this company ready to donate some computers, software, workbooks, the whole nine yards. But I had 27 in my class, none of whom knew the first thing about keyboards and computers. So I put the word out in my class newsletter that I needed some parents every day from 9 to 10:30 to help with the program.

Tamara: What was the response?

Christie: I was amazed. From October through June I had one or two parents almost every day.

Tamara: How good were they?

Christie: Well, at first they were as unfamiliar with computers as the kids, so I held a Saturday workshop for all the volunteers. After that things went fine. I was surprised at how much writing got done and how fast the kids improved in punctuation, spelling, and grammar, as well as computer literacy. I couldn’t have run the program without the help of those parents.

Tamara: Did the kids like having parents there?

Christie: More than that. They improved their classroom behavior because of it. Even more important, it gave parents a chance to meet each other and to learn what a teacher’s life is like. I can’t tell you how many parents commented on the respect they had for me after seeing what I do each day in my classroom.

Tamara: Was it just the parents of some of the kids who came?

Christie: No. And that’s what was so great. It really helped bridge the different cultures I had to work with in that class.
Tamara: I never thought about involving parents; they never seemed to care—or maybe that was just my perception. In my university classes the only time we discussed parents was how to get them to help you make their kids behave and do their homework. It never occurred to me that they could be a part of my classroom.

Christie: That’s the whole point. If the only time we involve parents is when there are problems, we’re wasting a valuable resource.

Introduction

In 1990, the National Governors’ Conference for educational reform set forth a formidable agenda for psychologists and educators. At this conference, the following goals were to be achieved by the first decade of the twenty-first century:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter in the sciences and humanities.
4. American students will be the best in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
A theme throughout the commentaries on the governors’ agenda was the realization that schools will have to develop genuine partnerships with parents to achieve these goals. Only the active participation of parents, community groups, and educators in partnership with one another will bring about the desired objectives (Lambert, 1991).

In the dialogue above, Christie created such a partnership. Her partnership—or network of parents—not only improved learner behavior and achievement but also helped bridge the different cultures with which she had to communicate in her classroom. In addition, it gave Christie a nearly inexhaustible supply of motivated adults to help in the daily work of teaching a culturally diverse classroom of learners.

When parents and teachers become partners, student achievement can increase and parents can learn about you and your school. Research studies confirm that coordination and collaboration between home and school improve learner achievement, attitude toward school, classroom conduct, and parent and teacher morale (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992; Cochran & Dean, 1991). Establishing genuine partnerships with the parents and guardians of your learners is as essential to expert teacher practice as building a cohesive classroom climate, establishing a well-managed work environment, developing goals and objectives, conducting effective instruction, and using authentic assessments of student performance.

The expert practice of parent involvement requires that you develop and strengthen, throughout the school year, linking mechanisms for parent participation and collaboration. **Linking mechanisms** are opportunities for school and family involvement that may involve parent-teacher conferences, home visits, participation of teachers in community events, newsletters, phone calls, personal notes, volunteering as classroom aides, and the use of home-based curriculum
materials. These efforts require more than just a handout sent home to parents at the beginning of the school year, an obligatory presentation during back-to-school night, or an occasional note home. In this chapter we will examine how you can establish more enduring linking mechanisms in your classroom.

The opportunities to develop and nurture linking mechanisms will be the culmination of your efforts to build a successful classroom workplace. The challenge of the twenty-first century will be to establish such linking mechanisms in your classroom as a routine pattern of effective teaching practice. The goal of this chapter is to prepare you to meet this challenge by:

- presenting a practical rationale for the use of linking mechanisms
- reviewing research on the effects of such mechanisms on learner achievement, attitudes, and classroom behavior
- describing attitudes, beliefs, and skills essential for building and nurturing teacher-parent partnerships
- providing examples of linking mechanisms that successful schools and teachers have developed.

As the cartoon in Figure 16.1 illustrates, tension, fear, indifference, hostility, and even condescension and disrespect can sometimes characterize the relationships between teachers and parents. These frustrations can occur for beginning as well as experienced teachers in both multicultural and culturally homogeneous classrooms (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Such conflict may be surprising. Teachers and parents share similar goals and expectations for learners. Both groups genuinely value the other and respect the roles each plays in the development of the child (Cochran & Dean, 1991). Teachers and parents also share the same responsibilities—the child is simultaneously a responsibility of both and a link between them. Why, then, do
some teachers view parent-teacher involvement as a burden rather than an advantage, a duty instead of a choice? Why do some parents, as Delgado-Gaitan (1991) indicates, feel estranged and intimidated by the school and its staff? To help you better understand the roots of parent-teacher conflict and see more clearly how you can develop an effective family-school partnership, we will study the school, community, and classroom from a systems—or ecological—perspective.

A Systems-Ecological Perspective

You were probably first acquainted with a systems-ecological perspective when you were taught how plants and animal species depend on each other in natural environments. This perspective suggests that we view nature as an ecosystem made up of numerous systems and subsystems. These systems and subsystems coexist in dynamic, mutually dependent relationships. Events affecting one subsystem (the extermination of a predator) affect other subsystems (an explosion in the population of the predator’s prey), which in turn affect different systems and their subsystems (a decrease in certain types of vegetation, which affects the growth of other plant and animal species dependent on this vegetation).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) urges us to view child development from a systems-ecological perspective. Bronfenbrenner looks at the child’s world as a naturalist looks at nature—as an ecosystem. Like ecosystems, children develop in the context of a process of mutual accommodation. In the child’s ecosystem the major systems include the family, school, and peer group.

The child’s ecosystem may be visualized as a series of layers or concentric circles, as shown in Figure 16.2. Each of these layers or circles and their connections has a special term. The most central layer is called the microsystem. It includes all those settings where the child lives or spends significant portions of
his or her time: home, the school, classroom, day care setting, playground, even a job setting if the child is old enough. Bronfenbrenner refers to these settings as *subsystems*.

Each subsystem can be viewed within itself as a system. The school system is made up of subsystems that include teachers, administrators, support personnel, school board members, and learners. The family system includes a marital, parental, sibling, and often a grandparent subsystem. The peer system includes social friendships, academic friendships, and sports or hobby friendships.

The next layer of the system includes subsystems that the child does not directly experience but that affect the child because of the influence they exert on the microsystem. This layer is called the *exosystem*. It may include the parents’ workplace, their friends, the PTA, the school board, and other groups.

Finally, both microsystems and exosystems exist in a larger setting, the macrosystem. By *macrosystem*, Bronfenbrenner refers to the larger culture or society in which the microsystem and exosystems function. Figure 16.3 shows some of the functional relationships between the three levels of systems.

Bronfenbrenner urges us to look at child development in the context of the relationships between and among these systems. When the relationships or linkages between systems are characterized by mutual trust, a positive orientation, and goal consensus, as we discussed in Chapter 8, healthy development results. Conflict among these systems adversely affects child growth and development.

In this perspective, the actions of individual parents, teachers, and learners (i.e., the subsystems) are viewed as products of the interrelationships among them. For example, the parent who never signs and returns graded assignments may not be an uninterested and uninvolved parent, as might be assumed. Dynamics within the family system (for example, other siblings who demand extensive attention,
loss of a job, or marital conflict) may explain the parent’s apparent lack of involvement in his or her child’s education.

Similarly, the teacher who refuses to provide an opportunity for a student who is at risk of dropping out to earn extra credit may not be uncaring. His or her refusal may be motivated by a recent memo to teachers from the principal (responding, in turn, to pressure from the school board) demanding that all students be treated equally and given the same opportunities.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner urges us to view a learner’s behavior, whether in school or at home, as a product not only of that child’s individual psychological development but also of the demands and forces operating within the systems of which the child is a member. Family experiences, and the culture of the family system, influence school behavior and performance, which in turn affect the family system. For example, school adjustment problems, which may be influenced by problems within the family, may in turn exacerbate conditions within the family system itself.

Thus, when you are trying to understand the behavior of parents, teachers, and learners, the systems-ecological perspective recommends that you first ask yourself, “What forces within the system (subsystem relationships) or outside the system (exosystems) impel the person to act this way?” When your goal is to promote the development of members of the ecosystem (for example, your learners), the systems-ecological perspective focuses concern on the relationships or linkages between the systems.

Bronfenbrenner refers to relationships between systems as mesosystems (represented by the arrows in Figure 16.3) and considers them to be as influential in the child’s development as events occurring within the specific systems themselves. Thus for Bronfenbrenner the quality of the linkage between family
and school is as significant for the healthy development of learners as the quality of instruction within the classroom or nurturing within the family.

Extent of Family-School Linkages
Although professional opinion over the past two decades supports Bronfenbrenner’s views about the importance of effective family-school linkages (Fine & Carlson, 1992), parent involvement in American schools remains low (Christenson et al., 1992). Chaukin and Williams (1985) conducted a survey of over 3,000 parents in schools in the southern United States. They found that parents were interested in assuming a variety of roles, such as paid school staff member, school program supporter, decision maker, co-learner, or home tutor. Despite their professed interest, however, actual participation was minimal. For example, 75 percent of parents indicated an interest in decision making, but only 21 percent actually participated in such an activity. A similar discrepancy was evident between parents’ interest in being an advocate (meeting with school officials to recommend changes in instructional and other educational practices) and their actual participation in this role.

Surveys indicate that teachers and administrators feel little interest in having parents assume the roles of decision makers and advocates (W. Snider, 1990). This is not the case, however, for the roles of home tutor and supporter of school programs. Teachers encourage these roles, and parents actually participate in them more than in roles involving in-school activities. In general, surveys indicate that only about 4 percent of parents are active at school—approximately one or two parents per classroom (Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Epstein, 1985, 1986). The parents who are involved at school tend to be parents of elementary school
children. Their involvement, however, takes a dramatic decline once children enter the fourth grade. Not surprisingly, involvement by parents in school activities is lowest in secondary school.

Effects of Family-School Linkages

When answering the question “How effective is parent involvement in schools?” it is important to carefully define the types of involvement we mean and what types of effects we are looking for. “Family-school linkages” and “parent involvement” are terms that encompass a host of activities and roles on the part of parents. Table 16.1 displays these roles or linking mechanisms on a continuum extending from most passive to most active involvement. Research on the effects of parent involvement has examined primarily effects resulting from Roles II and III. There is relatively little research on the beneficial effects for learners of Roles I and IV.

The beneficial effects of parent involvement principally involve academic achievement. Relatively few studies have examined attitudes and behavior. Finally, some studies have looked at the beneficial effects of parent involvement on parents and teachers. Here are some of the findings of this research.

Academic Effects on Learners. Leler (1983) reviewed 18 studies designed to examine the effects of parenting skills classes and home tutoring programs on the academic achievement of learners. Thirteen of these programs showed positive gains in reading vocabulary and reading comprehension as a result of parents’ establishing homework routines, reading to their children, reading in the presence of their children, asking questions about their children’s work, and setting up a quiet place to study. Five programs showed no differences between experimental and control groups as a result of these activities.
Grave, Weinstein, and Walberg (1983) analyzed 29 experimental programs designed to improve the achievement of elementary school learners by making the home a more educationally stimulating environment. They concluded that home instruction programs have positive effects on children’s academic learning.

Other Positive Effects. Epstein (1982) found that the fifth-grade classrooms of teachers who emphasized parent involvement (Types I, II, and III in Table 16.1) had learners with better attitudes toward school and homework including higher homework completion rates. S. L. Kagan (1984) reports improved attendance, a reduction in suspension rates, and improved attitudes toward homework on the part of learners whose parents involved themselves in activities of Types I, II, and III. Similar positive results arising out of parent involvement have been found for school attendance (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989), student sense of well-being (Cochran, 1987), positive attitudes toward school and behavior (Becher, 1984; Henderson, 1989), student readiness to do homework (Rich, 1988), increased student time spent with parents (Rich, 1988), and higher educational aspirations among students and parents (McHill, Rigsby, & Meyers, 1969).

Effects on Parents and Teachers. Kagan and Schraft (1982) found that the more active a parent’s role, the higher the parent’s own personal aspirations and perceptions of power. This was true for low-income but not middle-income parents. Kagan (1984) and Becher (1984) report more favorable attitudes toward school as a result of parent involvement activities as well as a greater understanding and support for various school goals and activities.

The few studies that have examined the effect of parent involvement on teachers report that teachers who more frequently use activities such as those described in Table 16.1 allocate more time to instructional activities and to
improving group cohesiveness and relationships than teachers who rarely use family-school linking mechanisms (Becher, 1983; Epstein, 1986).

Barriers to Family-School Linkages

When we first went into the New Haven schools we observed the difficult interactions between home and school. Parents had no faith in the school. They had this hope in September that the school would make a difference for their kids. But, by October, they knew that it wouldn’t. All of the potential animosity between home and school came out as the kids didn’t do well in school. Parents were angry that the school only wanted to see them when their kids were in trouble. Racial issues, class issues, low expectations—all became manifest in a variety of ways because of the disappointment that developed on the part of parents and staff.

Eventually, we viewed the problem this way: On the one side you have parents whose attitudes, values, and experiences are consistent with their social network. On the other, you have a school with expectations the kids can’t necessarily meet, given their experiences. Now you get a clash as a result of that, a clash that staff is not prepared to deal with. (Comer, 1991, p. 3)

Educators and psychologists have little doubt about the beneficial effects of parent involvement for learners, parents, and teachers themselves. The question, then, is not whether family-school linking mechanisms help learners, but rather how to promote them. But as we saw above, relatively few parents make use of these linkages. Before discussing how to actively encourage and develop family-school partnerships, let’s look at some of the barriers that inhibit effective collaboration between these two components of the child’s ecosystem. Four barriers to family-school partnerships have been identified: (1) different priorities,
(2) a tradition of separation, (3) a tradition of blame, and (4) changing demographics.

Different Priorities. At first glance, one would expect that friendly partnerships between families and schools could be easily and naturally achieved. Both systems share overlapping goals: educating children and teaching them appropriate social behavior. Many teachers are themselves parents and can identify with the concerns of parents and the day-to-day frustrations and pressures that are played out within the family system. Likewise, parents experience the complexities of managing several children and can appreciate the enormous skill and energy a teacher requires to manage 25 to 35 children.

But clashes between families and schools almost inevitably arise. When you probe deeper into the structure of the systems themselves, you can readily discern the sources of these clashes. While the systems have overlapping goals—the socialization and education of children—the priority they assign to these goals is different. The family as a primary socialization group has the interests of the individual child at heart. Parents want the school to do what’s best for their child. The school, however, has primary responsibility for groups of children. Sometimes it may not be possible to reconcile the needs of the school to provide group instruction with the demands of a family that something different be done for a particular child (Comer, 1988).

Lightfoot (1978) views family-school relations as inherently conflict-ridden because of the family system’s paramount concern for the individual child and the school system’s overall responsibility for large numbers of children. For example, from the family’s perspective, the best thing for a child who has severe test anxiety during final exam week would be for tests to be given orally without time limits. The school, however, has developed certain rules and routines for giving
final exams that it perceives to be in the best interests of all children. The school would find it impossible to accommodate the individual needs of each child for fair testing.

Another example would be parents’ demands for more homework for their child. Some parents would like their children to have an hour or more of homework each school night. From the family’s perspective, more homework may be just what a child needs to raise his level of achievement. But from the teacher’s perspective (particularly for the junior or senior high teacher who may have as many as 150 papers to grade), extra homework may place impractical demands on his or her time.

A Tradition of Separation. Surveys of parent-school communication conducted over the past 20 years show a persistent finding that parents desire more communication with the school but in fact experience very little communication (Gallup, 1978; Gallup & Elam, 1988; Swap, 1987). In these surveys, parents frequently complain that teachers show poor attitudes in communicating with parents and report a sense of meaningless dialogue and covert ostracism when approaching their children’s schools. When they do hear from teachers, parents charge that the content of the communication is largely negative and centers on complaints about student achievement or behavior.

Williams and Stallworth (1984) report that teachers and school administrators historically have been more comfortable with passive than with active involvement roles for parents—although parents seek the latter type of involvement. Clark’s research (1983) reveals that educators are most comfortable with parent involvement activities that focus on school-to-home transmission of information from professionals to parents rather than on approaches that involve genuine collaboration and partnerships.
A Tradition of Blame. Heath and McLaughlin (1987) assert that since the 1980s surveys of teachers’ attitudes toward parents have indicated an increasing tendency to blame parents for the lack of achievement and the inappropriate behavior of their children. Research by Davies (1991) reports a similar orientation on the part of teachers. They tend to view the homes of low-achieving learners—particularly minority group learners—as deficient in values, stimulation, and socialization practices. Not surprisingly, many parents blame the school for the academic and behavior problems of their children. This readiness of teachers and parents to blame one another for the failures of learners is a significant barrier to the development of home-school linkages (Huang & Gibbs, 1992).

Changing Demographics. As we have emphasized throughout this book, American society is becoming increasingly diverse and is experiencing rapid social and economic change. Periodic economic, racial, and social crises produce many conflicting ideas about the role of the school. As a result, parents often place conflicting demands on the school, and the school has expectations for the family that it may not be able to meet. As more and more families have two working parents or are headed by a single working parent, the demands of the school for certain types of parental involvement may become increasingly unrealistic.

Delgado-Gaitan (1992) explains how poorly equipped and prepared some schools are for dealing with the family systems of culturally diverse learners. She reports that parents of ethnically and linguistically diverse learners fail to participate in school to the same extent as their Anglo counterparts, a finding shared by others (Clark, 1983; Comer, 1984). The reason for this lack of participation, according to Delgado-Gaitan, has less to do with lack of interest or skill on the part of the parents (which she refers to as a “deficit model” of parent
participation) than with the barriers that inevitably arise between a school system founded on one culture and a family system from another.

Delgado-Gaitan explains that ethnically diverse families living in poor socioeconomic conditions often face sustained isolation from the school culture, not only as a result of language and value differences but also because they have not learned how the school system works. Some schools may unintentionally facilitate this exclusion by establishing activities that require knowledge and behaviors specific to the cultural majority that are assumed but not made explicit. The absence of knowledge about how the school system works can limit participation in formal school activities, resulting in isolation for some parents, especially those who may not have been schooled in the United States and/or are limited in English proficiency.

Thus, the increasing numbers of culturally diverse family systems that schools must serve, together with the conflicting priorities of schools and families, as well as traditions of separation and blame, can limit the participation of parents in schools, and can eventually create frustration, apathy, and discord. According to Seligman and Darling (1989) the factors contributing to the complexity of parent-teacher, or school-family, encounters are these:

- the varied social, economic, educational, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds of families and school personnel
- past experiences of parents in interacting with schools and professionals
- past experiences of school personnel in interacting with parents
- differences in the level of interpersonal communication skill possessed by parents and school personnel
- their respective beliefs about schooling and parenting
- their expectations and stereotypes
• their personal value systems.

These differences can be bridged, discord can be minimized, and proactive partnerships between families and schools can be developed by the establishment of mechanisms for family-school coordination and communication. We have referred to these mechanisms as linking mechanisms, or, as Bronfenbrenner calls them, mesosystems. Delgado-Gaitan refers to these linkages as mechanisms for parent empowerment (1990, 1991, 1992). In the remainder of this chapter, we offer specific suggestions you can use for maximizing them.

Building Home-School Linkages

Developing partnerships with the parents of your learners should be as much a focus of your planning for the new school year as your classroom rules, routines, instructional goals, and objectives. As educators like Delgado-Gaitan and Bronfenbrenner advocate, and as the research suggests, your learners’ achievement of academic goals, their adherence to rules and routines, and their attitudes and expectations about school can be enhanced by having parents as partners. But working toward these common goals demands mutual effort and interpersonal and communication skills on your part.

Principles of Family-School Partnership

Following are principles for creating genuine family-school partnerships, based on the writings and research of Delgado-Gaitan, Bronfenbrenner, Comer, and other experts.

View the Family from a Systems-Ecological Perspective. As Bronfenbrenner suggests, avoid viewing the behavior of your learners or their parents as simply products of individual psychological forces. Instead, recognize that the family
system is made up of several subsystems including the marital subsystem, the parental subsystem, the sibling subsystem, and extrafamily or exosystems such as grandparents and employers. Changes in one subsystem inevitably bring about changes in another.

Problems in school can affect a child’s other systems. For example, phone calls to parents during working hours about their child’s school behavior can result in an employer reprimanding the employee, an argument at home between husband and wife, punishment of the child, teasing by siblings, and concern and criticism by in-laws. Likewise, demands by school staff that parents make the child complete homework inevitably reverberate throughout the entire family system. These effects may be so great as to preclude any change in parental behavior.

Thus, when you ask a parent to take greater responsibility for getting her child to bed earlier at night, or to supervise her child’s homework more closely, or to take away privileges for school misbehavior, these demands may affect more than that one parent. Indeed, it very likely will affect a variety of family subsystems.

Taking a systems perspective with respect to family intervention will help you anticipate and avoid the sources of conflict and resistance within the family system. For example, if you recognize that the father is part of both a marital subsystem and a parental subsystem, you will make special efforts to involve him in any communication or conferences about the child. Similarly, if you know that a child’s older brother (sibling subsystem) has primary responsibility for supervision while the single parent is at work, you will be more likely to communicate with both him and the parent when you have concerns and recommendations.

Considering the family situation from a systems perspective will help you remember that parents experience periodic emotional, familial, and economic problems that you may be unaware of. Make a special effort to give the benefit of
the doubt, particularly when parents fail to respond in a timely manner to your requests. Carlson (1992) documents the overwhelming economic, divorce, custody, and career problems of single parents. A parent’s failure to monitor her child’s homework, attendance, or tardiness to class may result less from lack of interest than from her need to cope with day-to-day personal, social, and economic problems. When parents do not live up to your expectations, try to avoid assigning personal blame.

Acknowledge the Changes in the American Family. Most families include two working parents. Research shows that teachers believe that working parents are less involved with their children’s education (Linney & Vernberg, 1983). However, a study conducted by Medrich, Roizen, Rubin, and Burkley (1982) concludes that working and nonworking mothers spend the same amount of time in child-related activities. Furthermore, their data show that children of working mothers are just as involved in extracurricular activities as are the children of nonworking mothers.

Single-parent families make up about 25 percent of the families of children in school. Yet many teachers view this family pattern as an abnormality (Carlson, 1992). Teachers often have lower expectations for the achievement of children from single-parent families, despite the fact that no data support this opinion (Epstein, 1987).

Some researchers suggest that the requirements single-parent families have for organization, schedules, routines, and division of responsibilities better prepare children to accept such structures in schools (Linney & Vernberg, 1983). Carlson (1992) concludes that it is family income, not single or dual parenting alone, that affects children’s achievement in school.
View Parent Participation from an “Empowerment Model.” Delgado-Gaitan (1991) proposes that we view parent participation from an empowerment model that involves giving parents both the power and the knowledge to deal with the school system. Typically, the deficit model has been used to explain why minority parents have not become involved with schools. These perspectives sometimes have portrayed parents as passive, lazy, incompetent, or unskilled at helping their children. They propose that parents are unable to become involved in their children’s education because they work long hours away from the home or are simply not interested. But as Delgado-Gaitan points out, when conditions are examined closely, research has shown that Hispanic families who speak a different language and have a different culture from that of the school do indeed care about their children and possess the capacity to advocate for them. This holds true for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and other cultural and linguistic groups. The question is not whether they can become genuine partners with the school, but how to empower them to do so.

Recognize the Unique Needs of Mothers and Fathers. Turnbull and Turnbull (1986) urge teachers to promote nonsexist views of parenting and parent involvement. They recommend that teachers recognize the importance of both mothers and fathers when designing home-school linkages. Encourage visiting opportunities for both parents, develop flexible schedules to accommodate both parents, send information about children and schooling to both parents, and seek to promote teaching skills in fathers as well as mothers. Finally, give consideration to the father’s interests and needs when suggesting ways for parents to work with their children at home.

Understand the Variety of Possible School-Family Linkages. As you plan for parent involvement early in the school year, consider and evaluate the full range
of ways in which parents can participate. These activities can be placed on a continuum anchored on one end by activities involving parents as receivers of information and on the other end by involving parents as active educational decision makers, as shown in Table 16.1. The accompanying box, *Planning Family-School Linkages*, offers some suggestions. In the remainder of this chapter, we’ll take a closer look at some of the ways teachers can involve parents in classroom learning: parent conferences, group conferences, written communications with parents, telephone calls, skills classes, homework, and language classes.

The Parent Conference

Parent conferences will be one of your most important linking mechanisms in Category I linkages. There are many reasons for holding conferences with parents or guardians. Teachers typically have a parent conference when they want to discuss their concerns about a learner’s academic progress or classroom behavior (Shalaway, 1989). Sometimes conferences can be threatening to both parents and teachers. While their purpose is reactive—to correct a specific problem that has arisen at school—they can become emotionally charged confrontations between parent and teacher.

*Proactive* parent conferences have a different agenda. You request such a conference because you want to understand a learner better, establish a relationship with the parents, elicit a commitment from parents to serve as partners in their child’s education, or inform parents about your goals and aspirations for their child. While such conferences are the exception rather than the norm, many schools, such as those participating in the Accelerated Schools Program developed at Stanford University (Hopfenberg, Levin, Meister, &
Rogers, 1990), have successfully used such a proactive approach to increase parent participation.

Several general guidelines, based on professional practice and research, can promote family-school partnerships through a proactive perspective and effective communication skills. Let’s see how they work to help you plan, conduct, and evaluate a parent conference.

Planning
Planning the conference involves determining goals, an agenda, materials, and the setting.

Goals. Give careful consideration to your purpose or goal for meeting with parents and the outcome you expect to achieve. Typical purposes for holding a proactive conference can be to help you:

- get to know parents and child better
- discuss the child’s learning and behavior problems
- inform the parents about the child’s success
- persuade the parents to seek professional help for the child
- persuade the parents to supervise the child’s homework and study time more closely
- teach the parents a particular skill that can be used at home to help the child
- find out the parents’ expectations for their child and for you
- explain the results and implications of the child’s grades or scores
- determine the parents’ preferences for family-school involvement.
Once you have decided on the goals of the conference, identify a concrete outcome you expect as proof you have met your goal. This could be a written home-school intervention plan to improve the learner’s behavior, a commitment to attend parenting classes held at school, an agreed-upon time for a home visit, or a contract spelling out mutual obligations and commitments. The Stanford Accelerated School Program requires both parents and school personnel to sign an agreement delineating the responsibilities of parents, learners, and school staff (Hopfenberg et al., 1990).

Agenda. Prepare and send home an agenda that states the purpose of the conference, describes the topic you would like to discuss, and invites the parents to meet with you. Provide a sufficient number and variety of times to accommodate the schedules of working parents and guardians. When you have received a commitment from the parent to meet, record your perceptions of the student’s strengths and needs on Part 1 of the form shown in the accompanying box, Planning a Parent Conference. This will set the stage for Part 2, in which you can record at the start of the conference the parents’ perceptions of their child’s strengths and needs. These perceptions may reveal contradictions that, if left unaddressed during the conference, can present a stumbling block to effective parent-teacher communication. This information can provide an agenda for action, which can be recorded on Part 3 of the form at the close of the conference.

Materials. Before the conference, write down questions you wish to ask, points you want to make, and suggestions you will offer. Collect the learner’s work samples, grades, test scores, and other information you plan to share ahead of time, to avoid fumbling through stacks of papers during the conference.
Setting. Many parents are understandably nervous when they first meet with teachers. Take pains to put them at ease by providing a quiet place to talk, comfortable chairs, and, if possible, some refreshment, such as a soft drink, coffee, or a snack.

Conducting the Parent Conference

In addition to these general guidelines, during the parent conference you will be expected to use several communication skills (Swap, 1987).

Plain Talk. Practice speaking plainly. Here are just some of the terms that educators use naturally but that mean little to most parents:

- norms
- behavioral objectives
- negative reinforcement
- homogeneous grouping
- discovery learning
- linguistic approach
- prosocial behavior
- higher-order thinking
- portfolios
- fine-motor skills
- learning set
- developmental needs
- cognitive skills
- percentiles
- knowledge acquisition
- standardized test
- basic skills
- prerequisite skills

New teachers—particularly when they first meet parents or address them at group meetings—rely on professional jargon that may be incomprehensible to parents. Remember that jargon, however familiar to you, will diminish rather than increase your credibility with most parents.
Listening. Listening is your most important communication skill. Parents, particularly when they are upset, want to be heard. One of the most frequent complaints leveled by parents against teachers is that they don’t listen (Gordon, 1974). The Appalachian Educational Laboratory (Shalaway, 1989) offers the following list of hints for you to become a good listener:

- maintain eye contact
- face the speaker and lean slightly forward
- nod or give other noninterrupting acknowledgments
- when the speaker pauses, allow him or her to continue without interrupting
- ignore distractions
- wait to add your comments until the speaker is finished
- ask for clarification when necessary
- check your understanding by summarizing the essential aspects of what the speaker tried to say or the feeling he or she tried to convey.

Gordon (1974) refers to this last skill as **active listening**. It is particularly valuable during reactive parent conferences or conferences requested by parents who are upset over something they perceive you said or did, as such conferences can be emotionally charged. Teachers typically take a defensive or aggressive posture when confronted by an angry parent. Rather than listen to what the parent has to say, the teacher follows the parents’ statement with a denial, a defensive statement, or a refusal to talk further.

Gordon believes that active listening, in which the listener provides feedback to the speaker on the message that was heard and the emotion that was conveyed, opens doors to further communication by letting the speaker know that he or she
was understood and respected. Active listening is an essential communication skill to be used with the parents of learners and the learners themselves—but it is difficult to learn. It requires an ability to concentrate on what someone is saying even when you strongly object to what is being said. As with any skill, you must practice it before you can use it naturally and automatically.

Use “I” Messages. We discussed Ginott’s model of congruent communication (Ginott, 1972) in Chapter 9 in reference to conduct management of learners. The use of congruent messages is just as important when you speak with parents. Particularly when you are upset about the actions of a learner or the words or actions of a parent, it is important that you clearly communicate your feelings. However, the way to do this is not by criticizing or blaming (with a “you” message) but rather by (1) describing what was offensive (“When you...” or “When your...”); (2) describing the feeling or emotion you experience when the offensive condition occurs (“I feel...”); and (3) offering a statement of the reason for the feeling (because...”).

For example, you might say, “When Amanda talks back to me, her behavior disrupts the entire class, and that makes me angry because I have to take time away from all the other students in the class to deal with her.” This message focuses on your reaction to the problem rather than on what the child said or did. It opens up avenues to further communication rather than setting up barriers, which might be the case if you used the following “you” message: “What gives Amanda the right to talk back to me in my own classroom?”

Evaluating the Parent Conference

At the end of the conference, summarize what was said and agreed on, and make a list of any actions to be taken by you or the parent, using Part 3 of the form
shown in the box *Planning a Parent Conference*. Make follow-up calls, send notes, and follow through on the tasks you committed yourself to. Finally, take a moment to reflect on how well you communicated with the parents and achieved your goals, and what you might do differently the next time you have a parent conference. This moment of reflection will be one of the most important aids to sharpening your parent conferencing skills.

Other Parent Involvement Techniques

The Group Conference

Bringing parents together in one group can save you the time of having to repeat information about your goals, objectives, teaching methods, and evaluation activities to all interested parents. Group conferences also give parents the opportunity to meet one another and develop a rapport.

Some elementary school teachers conduct group conferences by allowing parents to follow their children throughout a regular school day. When the learners are at art, music, or physical education, the teacher talks to all the parents. Teachers who have tried this technique report that it makes the individual conference more meaningful and interesting to the parent (Shalaway, 1989).

Other forms of group conferences that have been found to contribute to learner achievement and improvement in classroom behavior are monthly parents’ nights, neighborhood meetings with school staff, early morning breakfasts, and monthly Dads’ or Moms’ nights in which parents get together at the school to play basketball, volleyball, or softball (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). Some schools have instituted popular “authors’ nights,” when each child in the class reads his or her best work aloud. When it is feasible, have translators if non–English-speaking parents are present.
Written Communications

Teachers can also inform parents about their children through Happy Grams (see Figure 16.4), activity calendars (see Figure 16.5), and informal notes (see Figure 16.6, p. 556). Shalaway (1989) urges teachers to contact parents when their children are behaving well—not just when problems occur. Glasser (1990), whose ideas we studied in Chapter nine, makes the same recommendation.

Surveys of parents indicate that they read school newsletters and find them helpful if they contain specific content about the classroom and school (Shalaway, 1989). Items to include in newsletters are the following:

- lists of household items that could be saved for class projects
- calendars of upcoming events
- successful home learning activities
- calls for volunteers
- highlights of available community resources
- successful parenting hints
- lists of learning resources to have in the home.

Telephone Calls

Telephone calls allow an exchange of ideas and information that cannot be achieved with written messages. Traditionally, a phone call from the teacher has been a harbinger of bad news. Phone messages should be used more to praise, reward, and inform than to scold. Many teachers keep track of phone contacts using a log similar to that shown in the accompanying box, *Recording Telephone Contacts.*
Teaching Skills Classes

Parent participation activities that have involved educating parents to teach their children have been the most successful in improving learner achievement (Berger, 1991). Such classes can teach parents skills to help them develop their children’s language, reading, and math abilities. Parenting classes are also popular activities for involving parents as learners. For example, Dorothy Rich, president of the Home and School Institute, has developed the MegaSkills Program, which empowers parents to teach children the 10 MegaSkills of confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, initiative, perseverance, caring, teamwork, common sense, and problem solving. Research on the effects of the MegaSkills Program has found that children of parents enrolled in the program spend more time on homework, less time watching TV, and more time with their parents (Rich, 1988).

Homework

Homework is an important linking mechanism between home and school. It is one of the few visible signs parents have of their child’s learning and your teaching. It is also a vehicle for parents to participate in educating their child. However, depending on the community in which you teach, homework can be an emotionally charged issue. Some parent organizations are demanding more homework. Some school boards, responding to parental pressure, have been regulating the types and amounts of homework teachers should and must assign. Teachers are justifiably concerned. The process of developing, assigning, collecting, correcting, grading, recording, and returning homework occupies substantial amounts of teacher time. Are the results and benefits to learners worth the costs?

A number of recent studies have found a complex relationship among homework, school achievement, and parent involvement in school. Epstein (1989)
found that the children who failed to complete their schoolwork and homework were the same students who disliked talking to parents about school and felt tense when working with a parent. Also, the parents of these children tended to have low levels of education, and their homes lacked items necessary for completing assignments, such as reference books.

On the other hand, Chandler and her colleagues (1986) found that low-income parents benefited from the knowledge of their children’s schoolwork they obtained by reviewing homework assignments: homework made the parents aware of what was going on in school and led them to seek out their children’s teachers. This same study found that teachers expected more of students whose parents sought them out, so homework might have indirectly helped improve the children’s school achievement.

The accompanying box, *Involving Parents in Homework*, provides some specific suggestions for enlisting parental interest in homework assignments.

Language Classes

Delgado-Gaitan (1991, 1992) advocates that schools set up English as a second language (ESL) classes for non–English-speaking parents. She reports that the Carpinteria Project in California has been particularly successful in empowering parents through such classes. In examining the results of a research project aimed at promoting the success of Spanish-speaking students in six high schools, Lucas et al. (1990) report that on-campus ESL classes for parents were among the most important factors contributing to academic achievement of their children.

Teachers play an important role in Category II activities by motivating parents to attend these classes, communicating their availability through newsletters and other written materials, diagnosing transportation problems, and informing the school district and principal about them (Greenwood and Hickman, 1991).
Summary

Parents are an underutilized resource for improving learner achievement. Full exploitation of this resource may require a shift in the way the school system views the educational role of the family system. Conventional types of parent participation activities, such as parent conferences, will probably encompass the majority of your efforts to create family-school linkages. They are important and necessary. However, they are only part of an overall parent participation plan.

Serious efforts at family-school linkage should also involve creating opportunities to involve parents as learners, teachers, and decision makers. These types of activities represent our best attempts to have parents participate in the schools and learn how to help their children succeed. Activities such as language classes, having parents serve as tutors, and on site-based management teams and school advisory councils enhance parent involvement as an ongoing process that is crucial to classroom instruction—and to learner achievement. These efforts place parents in an active role in their children’s education.

Summing Up

This chapter introduced you to the family-school partnership. Its main points were these:

- Linking mechanisms are opportunities for school and family involvement that include parent-teacher conferences, home visits, participation by teachers in community events, newsletters, phone calls, personal notes, parent volunteers as classroom aides, and the use of home-based curriculum materials.
• Bronfenbrenner’s systems-ecological perspective urges teachers to view a learner’s behavior at school and at home not simply as a product of the child’s individual psychological development but as a product of the demands and forces operating within all the systems of which the child is a member.

• Research indicates that positive effects on learner achievement were produced by projects that taught parents to teach their children at home and involved parents as teachers in their children’s classrooms. In addition to improved achievement, parent involvement results in better attitudes toward school, higher homework completion rates, better attitudes toward homework, and improved attendance.

• Guidelines for successful parent-teacher conferences include having specific proactive goals, making an agenda that parents know about beforehand, designing a conference plan with preselected questions and documents, and providing a comfortable and relaxed setting.

• Activities that involve parents as information receivers include written communications (notes and newsletters), phone calls, prerecorded messages, home visits, and parent visits.

• Activities that involve parents as learners and home tutors include parenting skill classes, teaching skill classes, and English as a second language classes.

• Activities that involve parents as volunteers and teacher aids include housekeeping and clerical tasks, materials gathering and development, tutoring, grading, and recording.

• Activities that involve parents as decision makers in running the school include PTAs, school advisory councils, parent advisory councils, and site-based management teams.
For Discussion and Practice

*1. If you were Christie, what advice would you give Tamara for (1) how to go about finding parents to volunteer in the classroom and (2) making them effective at their assigned tasks?

*2. What four outcomes has research found from the collaboration between home and school?

*3. Explain what is meant by a “linking mechanism” and give four examples between a school and community.

*4. Identify what you believe is the most significant reason frustrations develop between parents and teachers and what you, personally, would do in your classroom to reduce parent-school conflicts.

*5. With a specific example, explain the meaning of an ecosystem.

*6. Provide an example of an exosystem that influences the behavior of the school-age learners you are likely to teach.

*7. After a parent-teacher conference, the father says that all past homework due will be turned in and personally checked by him for accuracy. The homework never gets turned in. Explain some possible reasons for the parent’s behavior from a systems-ecological perspective.

*8. Using your response to question 7, define and identify the meso-systems that might play a role in accounting for the father’s unresponsiveness.

*9. How would Delgado-Gaitan explain the lack of involvement by minority parents in school?
*10. What might you do on open-school night to encourage the participation of Hispanic parents? What might you do to encourage the participation of African American parents?

*11. Identify six principles for creating family-school partnerships based on the writings of Delgado-Gaitan, Bronfenbrenner, and Comer. Which do you believe should receive the highest priority?

*12. Identify four categories of parent involvement and give an example of an activity in each. Identify one unique activity in each category that has not been mentioned and that you would try in your own school and/or classroom.

*13. What is the difference between proactive and reactive parent conferences?

*14. Express concerns about a student regarding each of the following areas with an “I” message:
   - talking back
   - missing homework
   - tardiness
   - acting out

15. Create an outline of content you would put in a class newsletter to send home to parents. Identify any features that would attract the attention of the parents (for example, pictures, personal stories, classroom achievements) that might make them want to become involved in your classroom.
Suggested Readings


This entire issue is devoted to establishing educational partnerships among home, family, and school. It contains a variety of articles by experienced educators that offer specific suggestions for improving family-school relations.


McAfee, O. (1984). *A resource notebook for improving school-home communications.* Charleston, WV: Appalachia Educational Laboratory. This resource notebook is a compendium of specific techniques used by teachers around the country for building school-family partnerships.

**Linking mechanisms.** Opportunities for interaction between the various systems and subsystems within the family-school environment.

**Systems-ecological perspective.** A view of child development that considers the family, school, and peer group as a type of social ecosystem in which each part is dependent on and affected by the other parts.

**Ecosystem.** Systems and subsystems coexisting in dynamic, mutually dependent relationships.

*Figure 16.1*

The young child’s ecosystem primarily consists of the home environment. There is much that parents can do at home to help children achieve success in school.

**Microsystem.** The most central layer of a child’s ecosystem, including all of the settings and subsystems where the child lives or spends significant amounts of time.

**Exosystem.** A subsystem beyond the immediate environment of the child that can indirectly influence the behavior of the child.

**Macrosystem.** The outermost layer of a child’s ecosystem, consisting of the larger culture or society in which the exosystem and microsystem exist.

**Figure 16.2**
The child from a systems-ecological perspective.

**Figure 16.3**
**Mesosystems.** Relationships between systems or linking mechanisms in a child’s ecosystem, which are often as important as the events that occur within systems.

What are some ways to bring the parents of my learners closer to my school and classroom?
Table 16.1

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Parental involvement in the school can lead to positive outcomes not only for students but also for their parents.

What are some of the reasons parents of my learners might not be involved in school as much as I would like?
Many parents seek an active collaboration with their child’s teacher. Parental involvement increases learner achievement and empowers parents.

Focus on

Concha Delgado-Gaitan, University of California-Davis

Compelled by academic theory and an ardent belief that literacy is a powerful tool for liberation, my research has focused on ethnographic studies in three California communities (Carpinteria, Redwood City, and West Sacramento) and Commerce City, Colorado. Carpinteria has been the community where I have conducted the major part of my work. There, as a researcher, I participated in the growth and development of Latino families, and they in turn have influenced my understanding of literacy, parent involvement, and cultural change and research in the Latino community, which I described in the Harvard Educational Review (December 1993).

My ethnographic inquiry into family-school relationships in Carpinteria, California, began in the homes of Latino children with the question “What literacy practices exist in the family?” I followed children from the classroom who were placed in different levels of reading ability. Teachers suspected that the children who were in more advanced reading groups in the classroom had parents who read to them, and those students who were in less advanced groups had parents who did not read to them or did not pay much attention to their academic work.

The essence of my research emphasizes the notion that educators must communicate effectively with parents and incorporate the culture of the home just as much as they should involve parents and teach them about their children’s learning. My research has shown that Latino parents care a great deal about their children’s education and that the more educators involve parents in the student’s learning, the higher the academic results.
A classic example is the Rosa family. This family is representative of many families with whom I have worked who have found their strength with each other in a variety of ways. I got to know the Rosas extremely well over the years of observations while studying family-school communication and family literacy activities.

The Rosas live in a small apartment with their four children, an adult cousin with two children, and Mrs. Rosa’s parents. Although work consumes the parents’ full day when they are employed, it could be considered fortunate, since there have been times when those same endless hours were spent looking for a job when they have been unemployed. On certain weeknights, Mr. Rosa attends Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings to deal with an ongoing challenge he has had. The family is quite proud of all of their children’s achievement in school, even of their oldest son, who has continuously faced traumatic problems in learning. The Rosas talk with him and try to encourage him to stay in school and deal with the difficulties he has in several classes.

The Rosas have also been active with the Comite de Padres Latinos (COPLA) organization, where they found that their problems with their oldest son were not unique to their family. They have been able to share their concerns with other parents and collectively have found solutions. They are learning to support their son by talking with teachers as well as by getting a tutor for him. The parents have found ways to tap into the power in their family by joining with others through groups like AA, which Mr. Rosa attends, and COPLA, in which both parents participate. There they find support, resources, and directions that strengthen their goals for education. They have also found their loving center through family stories about their experiences, which inspire their goals for success. Nurturing gestures like baking cookies for everyone when they need to talk about conflicts or difficult matters also show how the family has tapped into a
ritual that enables them to create a safe environment to communicate. Whether it’s baking cookies, telling stories, or other joint activities like listening, the bonding that occurs salutes their ability to transcend the strain of adversity and to focus on their power of human potential.

For many children in these families, their ability to learn comfortably in school is often impeded by emotional stress compounded by unresponsive schools until this cycle is interrupted. How can families like this one who face oppressive difficulties find their source of strength and power? I believe that all families, regardless of color, religion, socioeconomic standing, place of residence, ethnicity, or educational attainment, have strengths and power. How to access those strengths has been illustrated by the Rosa family in their ability to confront stressful situations related to their children’s schooling. Their courage comes from their connectedness with others in a supportive situation that redirects their pain outward rather than inward.

Specifically, teachers can be advocates for families like the Rosas by recognizing that.

- When parents participate in children’s schooling, academic performance increases.
- Parents have a great deal of knowledge to share about their children that can assist teachers in the classroom.
- Parents must be involved as an integral part of the curriculum.
- Frequent communication between teachers and parents must be established through written messages, personal meetings, or phone calls to share information that can enhance the students’ learning opportunities.
- Teachers must also utilize the home culture as part of the classroom curriculum by making the students’ language, culture, and history part of the
daily program. Literacy activities (reading and writing) can reflect much of
the children’s native knowledge.
• Children are different (linguistically, culturally, socially, academically), and
these differences do not make them deficient in comparison with others.
• In order to maximize the students’ long-term opportunity for learning, the
family must be involved every step of the way. Teachers must make parents
co-teachers so that when the child goes home, parents stand a better chance
of reinforcing what is learned at school. Learning is a collaborative effort
between home, school, and community.
We can’t always find power on our own when our lives feel out of control. But it
is important to recognize that our experience of isolation is not unique, and that
by sharing with others there is a potential for us to change our lives—be it in
relation to the larger community or on a much closer level, our heart, which is the
real source of our power. Social networks are opportunities for us to become
connected with others around common issues and to learn that we are not alone in
dealing with our problems—as overwhelming as they may seem. By joining
families and teachers, schools can discover alternatives to the many issues
involving them.

The American family is undergoing significant changes. For instance, more
mothers are working than ever before, and schools should be responsive to this
reality when planning parent involvement.

How can I help uninvolved parents become more interested and concerned?
Empowerment model. A view of parent participation that involves giving parents both the power and the knowledge to deal successfully with the school system.

Deficit model. A view of parent participation that assigns the blame for the lack of participation on parents attitudes, temperament, and conditions.

Applying Your Knowledge:

Planning Family-School Linkages

Plan Ahead. At the beginning of the year, try to anticipate your needs for parent involvement. Will you need help implementing a new computer system or writing program? Would you like to have a series of career seminars for students? Do you need “Reading Parents” to read to kindergartners several times a week?

Communicate Your Needs. Once you know what your needs are, let parents know about them. Send home a checklist during the first few weeks of school, indicating what your needs for parent involvement are, exactly what tasks will be involved, and what time commitment will be required.

Delegate Responsibility. Enlist the help of class parents to organize activities, or organize committees for ongoing events. Assign one father to be in charge of scheduling for the “Reading Parent” program; one mother will get in touch with each child’s family to gather information to be used in planning career seminars.

Accommodate Parents’ Scheduling Needs. Perhaps a single mother has a busy schedule but could manage to come in for reading one morning a month. Make your schedule flexible enough to accommodate her desire to be involved.
How can I plan, organize, and execute a parent conference that is cordial and upbeat?

Parent conferences require careful planning on the part of teachers. They also require that teachers demonstrate good communication skills, such as active listening.

Applying Your Knowledge:

Planning a Parent Conference

Name of Child

Parent(s)

Date_____________________ Grade ____________________

Part 1: (To Be Completed Prior to Conference)
Student strengths observed by teacher:

Student needs observed by teacher:

Part 2: (To Be Completed at Start of Conference)
Student strengths observed at home by parent:

Student needs observed at home by parent:

Part 3: (To Be Completed at End of Conference)
Suggestions for action
Home setting:

School setting:
Active listening. A technique whereby the listener summarizes essential aspects of what the speaker has tried to say or the feeling the speaker tried to convey.

Figure 16.4
Example of a Happy Gram.

What are some ways I can let parents know more about my classroom and their child’s progress?

Figure 16.5
A classroom activity calendar for a parent newsletter.

Figure 16.6
Example of informal notes for encouraging parent involvement.

Applying Your Knowledge:

Recording Telephone Contacts

School-Family Telephone Record
Teacher
Student
Parent
Telephone number called:
You may wish to use this same record for calls from the family to you. Simply record “H” in the Response column.
Day/Date __  Time ___  Response* __  Comments__________

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Additional comments/record:

*Response List A. Spoke with parent
   B. Busy signal
   C. No answer
   D. Disconnected telephone
   E. Scheduled call back
   F. No adult home
   G. Declined to speak
   H. Family initiated call
   I. Other:

How can I help parents become more involved with their child’s homework?
Applying Your Knowledge:

Involving Parents in Homework

• Make homework assignments, especially nightly assignments, short enough that they can be completed in a reasonable period of time.

• Make sure that parents review their children’s homework. Either require that parents sign each assignment, or send home all the child’s assignments at the end of each week or each academic unit with a form requesting a parent’s signature.

• Provide an opportunity for parents to comment on their child’s work. For example, staple a brief form letter to the weekly set of homework papers. The form should provide a blank line for a parent’s signature, as well as space for a parent to write a brief, positive comment about the child’s work.

What can I do to encourage greater involvement among parents who are linguistically and culturally different from the majority?

Questions marked with an asterisk are answered in the appendix.