



Tips on Getting Involved in School *by Judy Molland*

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Once a week, Raquel Orozco visits her son's elementary classroom in Rockville, Maryland, and reads a story to a small group of students. Although she is self-conscious about her limited English skills, she spends other days chaperoning school field trips to the Washington National Zoo, volunteering at PTA gatherings, serving on the district's parent advisory committee, or driving her youngest to soccer practice. "We came here from Mexico City to find a better life for our children," she explains, "and we're doing well."

For Orozco and her family, her hard work is paying off. All five of her children are getting good grades and doing well in school. Her oldest son, Daniel, will graduate from high school next year and go to the local community college—a first for her family.

The research is in, and the results are conclusive: students whose parents are actively involved in their education do better at school, regardless of their family income and background. Specifically, students with involved parents have greater academic success, better attitudes about school, and fewer behavioral problems. This makes sense, since parents are the central figures in the lives of their children.

It's also true that all parents want the best for their children. So why aren't there more parents like Raquel Orozco? Why are some parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds reluctant to come to school? It turns out there are some very good reasons, including cultural differences, lack of understanding about their role, time constraints, and language difficulties.

Cultural differences

Barrier. Parents may come from a culture that teaches them not to question authority. In these cultures, education is perceived as the responsibility of the schools, and family participation is viewed as interference with what trained professionals are supposed to do. For these parents, it is important to understand that teachers in the United States really do want parents to be involved in their children's education. In fact, good teachers understand that only by working with parents can they do a first-class job; after all, parents know their children best.

Solutions. Approach your child's teacher the right way, and you'll forge a great partnership. But how should you do that? First, avoid meeting with teachers during the first few days of school.

Overwhelmed with back-to-school paperwork, new rules, and new faces, teachers need time to get settled and to get to know their new charges. If your child is starting kindergarten, you may be invited to come with her or him on the first day to take part in orientation activities. However, this is not the time for a long, personal introduction; save that for a bit later.

Many teachers welcome the idea of meeting with parents briefly within a couple of weeks of the start of the school year. Try stopping by 10 minutes after school to introduce yourself and chat briefly. Virtually all schools have some sort of open house early in the year, and this is another ideal time and place to meet your child's new teacher. At this point, the teacher typically will provide a plan for communicating with parents; for example, a monthly calendar or weekly letter. Read or listen to the plan carefully, and if something is not clear, ask questions. Find out how you can get in touch with the teacher at school and exactly when is the best time to call or e-mail.

As the year progresses, plan on maintaining your communication with the teacher. Conferences usually

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are scheduled around grading periods, but don't wait for conference time to let the teacher know when important events are happening for your child or to check in about a troublesome issue. Keeping in touch with the teacher builds a relationship that can be important when concerns arise.

Lack of understanding about their role

Barrier. Parents not educated in this country may value education highly, yet have little knowledge of what their children do at school and lack information on how to support them. The more parents know about their child's school, the better an education that child is likely to receive. But how should you go about gaining information?

Solutions. One of the best ways to find out what is going on at school is to volunteer time and help in the classroom. Offering this kind of support gives a positive, encouraging message, and as a side benefit, you will get the answers to any questions you may have about your child's classroom. By spending time in their child's classroom, parents get to appreciate what teachers do, and children see an ongoing partnership between school and home.

Another way to find out what's going on with your child's

education is to check out the school's Web site. These sites convey a range of information: school address and phone numbers, links to school staff profiles, calendar of events, updates about school closings, curriculum information, and homework assignments in individual classrooms. Indeed, the primary purpose of a school Web site is to communicate with families. So take advantage of it!

You also can gain information about how the school system works by attending meetings of the school board. There are over 14,000 public school districts in this country, and a school board whose members can be elected or appointed by other government officials governs each of these districts. Board meetings generally take place once a month, and most are open to the public. By attending these meetings, you can find out what's going on in your district. And if you want to participate further, you can speak out on issues that concern you, or run for election to the board.

Time constraints

Barrier. Parents may work long or irregular hours. They may feel that they just don't have the time to visit school or to make a regular commitment of time to their children's education.

Solutions. One approach to this problem is to ask your employer for time off. Many

businesses encourage civic responsibility and will give their employees time to volunteer at a child's school. If you cannot take time off of work, there are still plenty of ways that you can be involved outside of the classroom. Teachers may need to have handouts assembled or records organized, and these can be prepared at home.

At home, you can support your child's education by showing genuine interest in their work and progress. Structure a home life that is both educationally stimulating and supportive of your child's schoolwork, and thus demonstrate how important education is to you. Remember that homework gives your child an opportunity to develop responsibility and self-discipline. Remembering assignments, organizing materials, gathering information, and budgeting time are important skills to learn for life. With this in mind, plan a routine that works for you and your child and keep it consistent.

Of course, joining a parent organization provides an excellent way to get involved, as well as an invaluable source of information and support. There's nothing like getting advice on navigating your child's school from parents who have already learned the ropes. Your local PTA provides a key opportunity for you to influence your children's school and education directly.

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Language difficulties

Barrier. Recent immigrants can be insecure about their English-language skills and reluctant to try out these skills among authority figures. They may be embarrassed to have their child translate for them and avoid situations in which this must happen.

Solutions. Not only does the federal law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) require schools to give parents the tools they need to support their child’s learning in the home and to communicate regularly with families about their child’s academic progress, but it also mandates that schools communicate with parents in the languages they speak “to the extent practicable.” Indeed, schools and school districts around the country are taking steps to involve all parents.

For example, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland publishes a comprehensive guide to navigating the school system and makes it available to all families in English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District in Alaska, where 60 languages are spoken, provides non-English-speaking families with a mentor who speaks their language and orients them to the school building and staff.

But what if this is not happening in your district? Cindy Choy, an immigrant parent from China, provides a powerful example of the way forward: “I immigrated to San Francisco more than four years ago. When I first immigrated, I didn’t understand English and did not understand my rights. I did not know how to help my daughter in her education. Fortunately, I met a teacher who spoke Chinese, and she was very important to me and my daughter’s education.” Choy goes on to describe how she volunteered to help on a field trip and in her daughter’s classroom, and began to understand the U.S. education system. She also started learning English simultaneously with her child. Since then, Choy has become a member of various parent groups, the English Learners Advisory Council, and the School Site Council.

Making progress

Schools are taking the responsibility to serve their multicultural, multilingual communities seriously, and helping families get involved—some for the first time—in their children’s education.

At Bonita Springs Elementary School in Bonita Springs, Florida, where the student body is 51 percent Hispanic, parent workshop/dinners on school-related topics have provided excellent starting points for communication.

For Cora B. Darling Elementary School in Postville, Iowa, the celebration of cultural traditions has become a key feature in the school year. American, Mexican, Filipino, and Russian students and parents work together and teach one another about their holidays.

Oakland Terrace Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, where 30 percent of the students speak a language other than English after school, has developed an extremely successful annual Sports Field Day, largely organized by parents. The students each choose a country to represent and compete for that country.

Parents like Raquel Orozco and Cindy Choy are responding to this encouragement and are leading the way for all families. The gradual shift in U.S. education policy and practice demonstrates that parents finally are being valued not simply as important players in the formal education of their children, but also as full partners.

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