

FAMILY-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Parents and Professionals as Partners

Parent involvement and parent-professional partnerships will look different for each family. Successful parent-professional partnerships often depend on the professional's ability to:

- Identify individual family-involvement strategies, building on what is already in place
- Understand social, cultural, and economic issues that affect families and influence how parents become involved

Importance of Developing and Maintaining Partnerships with Parents

Parents who feel valued and respected by youth development professionals are more likely to:

- Feel more confident in assisting and supporting employment in the community and work skills at home
- Encourage cooperative attitudes and behaviors by students
- Support youth development professionals by enforcing rules and expectations
- Turn to professionals as a resource for solving problems
- Develop positive attitudes about post-secondary education

Professionals who establish and maintain positive relationships with parents are more likely to:

- Experience higher morale
- Be perceived more positively by parents
- Develop a positive presence in the community
- Gain access to valuable community resources

Communication

Good communication with parents focuses on these messages:

- Mutual respect between your agency and the family
- Shared responsibility for student's success
- Mutual goals for students
- Academic progress
- Positive self image
- Development of appropriate social and work skills
- Preparation for transition to adolescence and adulthood

Developing a foundation for effective communication with parents is crucial. Communication should focus on the positives rather than the problems. Here are some strategies to reduce the likelihood of miscommunication:

- Ask parents how they prefer to communicate (written, e-mail, telephone, in person)
- Know if parents require a translator or translated materials
- Make follow up calls to be sure parents receive information
- Encourage parents to ask questions to clarify your meaning
- Don't assume they understand. Summarize statements and wait for clarification
- Remember, understanding information does not mean everyone agrees
- Be willing to discuss different points of view
- Avoid hasty judgments, decisions, and actions

Communication Styles

The communication style of the professional strongly influences how parents respond.

- *Inclusive* – encourages dialogue, shares information, allows for compromise
- *Instructional* – provides specific information and guidance, allows for dialogue
- *Directive* – one-sided communication, commanding

Barriers to Effective Communication

- *Unequal relationships* – The professional maintains an authoritarian role, attempts to exert power, does not use parents as a resource
- *Miscommunication* – Unclear information, language barriers, jargon or technical/administrative technology
- *Differing styles to responding to conflict*
 - Assertive and verbal responses are often interpreted as threatening and aggressive
 - Passive responses are viewed as agreement or compliance
 - Parents who choose to include an advocate or administrator when a conflict arises are seen as manipulative and not trustworthy.
 - Focus of interaction often moves away from student well-being
- *Differing agendas* – Purpose of the communication is unclear, issues may be approached from a “right” or “wrong” perspective, attempts to place blame may occur, power and control becomes more important than cooperation
- *Cultural influences* – Language barriers may exist, and professional concerns or priorities may vary, faulty assumptions may exist about low-income or minority families, appropriate resources are not made available (translations, interpreters, cultural and community support)

Cultural Aspects of Communication

Communication differences are expected in culturally diverse environments. Parents, professionals, administrators, support staff, and students will have differing styles of communication. It is critical that educators develop competency in cross-cultural communication if they are to improve their relationships with diverse groups of students, their families, and communities. Failure to do so will eventually lead to miscommunication, inadequate services, and conflicts. This can have a negative impact on student progress, create a climate of discomfort within the agency and cause students and families to feel unwelcome.

Creating Respectful Environments for Families

The following tips can help you remove cross-cultural communication barriers. The intent is to create a respectful, non-threatening environment for all persons:

- Be aware of words, images, and situations that suggest that all or most members of a racial group are the same
- Avoid using qualifiers that reinforce racial and ethnic stereotypes
- Avoid using racial identification except when it is essential to communication
- Be aware of rules for attentiveness during conversation
- Be aware of rules regarding the distance between speakers during conversation
- Be aware of different rules for taking turns during conversation
- Be aware of different cultural rules for entering conversations in progress
- Cultures may use different standards for loudness, speed of delivery, silence, attentiveness, and time to respond to another's point
- Be aware that cultures may vary in what they consider humorous or taboo

A Plan for Parent-Professional Problem Solving

Communicating concerns about student progress is most effective when you approach it from a problem-solving perspective. It is important to state your concern in a clear and respectful manner:

- *Describe the problem clearly* – Cite specific behaviors and avoid using labels
- *Encourage parent input* – Summarize, reflect, question, and share information
- *Brainstorm* - Identify possible causes and/or solutions
- *Choose a solution* – Come to consensus, be sure all agree
- *Develop a plan* – Let parents know that you need their help; define who does what and when
- *Follow up* – Create a time-line for follow-up and criteria for evaluation
- *Be available* – Schedule specific time each week where you are available for parents

This resource adapted from PACER Minnesota Parent Center handout #45.