

Parent Keys to Success In the Parent-School Partnership

Parents As School Partners

When individuals or groups join together to work toward a common goal, a partnership is formed. Successfully reaching the goal requires mutual cooperation and a sharing of responsibilities. While carried out in different ways, the principles used to satisfy personal and business partnerships are much the same.

As a parent, you are your child's first and most important teacher. When your child enters school, you and the school become partners in what you both hope will be a profitable, long-term enterprise.

In this important venture, the common goal is the successful development and education of your child. Years of research show that the more families are actively involved in the education of their children, the more successful the child will be in school and in life.

In the parent-school partnership, there is little opportunity for choice in the selection of partners. Partners can, however, choose to think and act in ways that will promote a positive partnership. A productive parent-school partnership will pay big dividends for its primary beneficiary—your child.

Partnership Essentials

- **Good Communication**

- Introduce yourself to your child's teachers, principal, and other school staff. An open house or other "back-to-school" event is a great time to make a brief, personal contact. Simply shaking hands and saying, "Hi, I'm Jamie's mom, I'm looking forward to working in partnership with you this year," can set a positive tone for future communication.
- Since miscommunication often occurs as a result of poor timing, it's important to know when it's an appropriate time to talk with staff. As a general rule, whenever students are present, school staff should not divert their attention to parents for more than a minute or two. If a personal meeting is desired, schedule a time to meet. If you are communicating by phone, keep in mind that teachers usually must limit their time to check their voice mail. Teachers usually return or accept calls during their assigned "prep time." If you have an urgent need, ask the school secretary to write down your message and have it delivered directly to the teacher.
- Find out the best method for communicating with school staff. Some individuals will prefer phone calls, others will respond best to e-mail or written notes.
- The purpose of the communication should determine the method. For example, although e-mail can be an effective and efficient method of communication, it can also be easily misinterpreted. Try to keep your e-mail communications very brief and factual. Feelings are best communicated verbally, in person or by phone.
- Provide the school with the best times and methods to communicate with you. Update contact information whenever there is a change. Respond as quickly and completely as possible to school contacts.
- Check your child's backpack daily for notes, newsletters, or other communications from the school.

Find out how to access the school and school district websites, and check regularly for current information.

- If English is a second language for you, ask for information to be provided in your native language.
- Share information about any circumstances at home that may affect your child's performance or behavior in school. For example, the birth of a new sibling, a parent's illness, or the death of a close relative may temporarily affect your child's ability to concentrate. If the teacher has been made aware of the situation, they may be able to postpone an important test, adjust homework assignments, or provide additional support at school.
- Important information should be communicated in writing.
- When upset or confused, rather than making statements of accusations, ask questions. Resist making snap judgments based on what is possibly limited information. Ask school staff to explain things using words you understand.
- Remember that our tone of voice, facial expression, and body language often speak louder than our words.
- Be a good listener. Give your full and complete attention. Try not to interrupt. Don't begin formulating your response while the other person is still talking.
- Label opinions as opinions. If someone states an opinion as fact, rather than arguing, ask for the data (factual information) to support it.
- Use "we" language as much as possible. The education of your child is a team effort. "You" language can cause the person being addressed to feel defensive, rather than cooperative.

- **Honesty, Accountability and Trust**

- Give and expect complete and accurate information.
- Keep your commitments. Put school conference and meeting dates on your calendar and check it frequently. If you can't make a meeting, call ahead of time to reschedule.
- Keep confidential information confidential. When school staff trusts you with information, honor that trust by using the information appropriately.
- Complete trust is developed over time. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Act as if they are on your team unless they prove otherwise.

- **Respect**

- Treat others with the same level of consideration and respect you desire and expect from them.
- Keep in mind that your child will adopt your view of their school and teachers. How your child feels about their school and teachers will directly affect their educational progress.
- As a member and partner in the school community, respect the variety of needs and concerns of other students and staff members, even while advocating for your own child's individual needs.

- **Mutual Participation**

- As a parent, your most important contribution to the parent-school partnership is what you do outside of school to help prepare your child for school and to reinforce their learning.
- Find a way to contribute to your child's classroom or the school community based on what you like to do, what you do well, and the time you have available. For example, if you have a camera and enjoy taking photographs, volunteer to take photos at a school event. If you are a born organizer, serve on a committee to plan a classroom party.

- Take advantage of opportunities to help with school-wide events. Volunteering gives you the chance to meet other parents, students and staff members, and to feel included in the school community. You will be sending a strong message about the value you place on school, while setting a good example for your child.
 - Communicate your desire to make a contribution, even when you are not able to physically participate. If your work schedule makes it difficult to volunteer during school hours, offer to make reminder calls from home, cut out nametags, or work on other projects that can be done at home and sent back into school with your child.
 - Consider serving on a school site council, parent involvement committee, or other school or district advisory committee. Parent input is essential at a decision-making and policy level. Parent members are needed to express the needs, interests and concerns of families. The perspective of families who have a child with a disability is often underrepresented and particularly needed. Ask your principal how members apply for positions. Since most meetings are open to the public, you can attend as a visitor before deciding if it's an opportunity you wish to pursue.
- **Acknowledgement of Each Partner's Contributions**
 - Let people know when they are doing a good job. A child's homemade card with a short note from you can be a great encourager and motivator for a teacher, nurse, or other staff person. It takes only a minute or two to leave a short e-mail or voicemail message expressing appreciation. It can be especially effective to send a positive message to the staff person's supervisor.
- **Second Chances and Fresh Starts**
 - When mistakes are made, try to resolve them quickly and completely. Then wipe the slate clean and move forward. The goal is to direct the energy and effort in this partnership toward the successful education of your child.
 - Try to approach each new school year as an opportunity for a fresh start for all involved, regardless of past issues or conflicts.

Partnership Challenges

- **Different Expectations, Perspectives, and Opinions**
 - It's been said of the marriage partnership, that if both people are the same, then one of them isn't necessary! The very differences that make a partnership so challenging, may also be the strength of the relationship. Children and their needs are complex and benefit from being looked at and addressed in more than one way.
 - Partnerships are established based upon what each person brings to the table. In the parent-school partnership, you as the parent are the expert on your child. Each school staff partner has his or her own particular area of educational expertise and experience. Each can learn from the other how to better meet the developmental and educational needs of the child.

- **Unequal Knowledge or Power**
 - While parents have more knowledge about their child, they are often at a disadvantage when it comes to knowledge about the educational system in general, and special education in particular. It's important for parents to understand their rights and responsibilities, and how the system works. Ask for and read the school district and/or local school parent handbook. A free handbook on rights and responsibilities for parents of children with disabilities, *Parents Can Be the Key*, is available from PACER Center, as well as many other parent-friendly materials and resources.

- **Misunderstanding of Roles and Responsibilities**
 - Difficulties in partnerships can often be traced to a misunderstanding about what each partner's role is, and who is responsible for various tasks. Ask questions to learn which staff persons have the authority to make decisions about various issues. Find out what the "chain of command" is, and try to address your questions or concerns to the most appropriate person.
 - In the case of special education, no one person has the authority to make decisions about the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Decisions must be agreed upon by the IEP team, which includes the parent.

- **Conflict**
 - Make it your aim to disagree without being disagreeable. Separate the person from the problem. In most cases, you and your child will have an ongoing relationship with the school long after the conflict is past. It is in your child's best interest to preserve the relationship, even when there is sharp disagreement.
 - Keep adult issues between adults. Children never benefit from being included in the conflict, and may feel its negative effects long after the conflict has passed.
 - If you have persistent and ongoing conflict with a particular staff person and you are unable to successfully resolve the issue with them directly, ask to speak with their immediate supervisor.
 - Rather than focusing all the energy and discussion on defining and dissecting the problem, focus on possible remedies or solutions.
 - When there is a disagreement on how to approach an area of concern, be willing to try something new on a trial basis. Make sure there's a plan in place to collect information during the trial period to determine whether or not the new plan should be continued. When handled well and resolved correctly, conflict may ultimately lead to positive outcomes for your child.

While working in partnership may be challenging, it can also be rewarding. Partners gain new perspectives and may learn new skills. Through mutual cooperation and the sharing of responsibilities, the parent-school partnership can accomplish its ultimate goal of enabling your child to succeed in learning and in life.