



## **School-based Prevention Programs: Effective Strategies for Schools to Engage Parents**

Parent engagement is a relatively new term that refers to a continuum of involvement from knowledge of to actual physical participation in the school. Knowledge can include what the child is studying in school to how the day is structured in the classroom. Physical participation usually involves having a presence in the school and can include volunteering or coming to the school for events, meetings, or to obtain resources. Both kinds of engagement involve ongoing relationship building between parents and school personnel.

Parent engagement is a key factor in the academic success of children on a number of levels. Parents who are engaged are more likely to reinforce not only the academic curriculum at home, but are also more likely to support the school's efforts at developing disciplined children who are meeting social and emotional developmental milestones for their age. The added value of parent engagement holds true for school-based prevention programs as well. Those programs that engage parents find that their efforts are reinforced in the home environment, and the outcomes reflect this through increased success.

Parent engagement is also one of the roles schools find most challenging. There are a number of factors that limit a parent or caregiver's level of school involvement, and a variety of barriers to a school's ability to establish relationships with parents. From the school perspective, parent engagement can be a time consuming activity. Schools may have limited staff capacity to meet parents' language and other needs.

Specifically for the Speak Up Be Safe program, while the school-based curriculum can stand alone as an effective prevention effort, participation in the parent/caregiver component further enhances the program in the following ways:

- Reinforces the message that adults have the primary responsibility for keeping children safe from child abuse.
- Reinforces the lessons by using the same language and concepts in the home environment.
- Increases a child's ability to apply the lessons and concepts to real life situations through such activities as developing family safety rules or practices, learning to name the private body parts, and developing the kinds of family relationships that encourage effective responses to unsafe situations.

The value of an engaged parent (for the student, the school, and the community) outweighs the challenges in developing such engagement. The following strategies have been compiled from existing research and educator experiences to support the rejuvenation of energy and commitment of schools in developing strong alliances with parents.

### **What do parents look for in a relationship with schools?**

- As most educators know, parents are very busy and usually juggling multiple roles. Incorporating contact and relationship building into already existing requirements of parents honors their limited time and capacity. For example, let parents know during registration and/or orientation to a new school year about the Speak Up Be Safe program and consider even including consent forms at that time.
- When you are asking parents for additional tasks or roles, sometimes just an acknowledgement of the request and an understanding of the many roles that parents and caregivers play can go a long way.

- Language is an incredibly important aspect of communication. Most groups or organizations use a standard of a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level when preparing materials for community-based distribution. Understanding the parent community can help you to gauge if this should be higher or lower for your families. There is a fine line between meeting parents at their level and being patronizing.
- In addition, avoid the use of jargon. It is easy to forget that our work environment has a culture and language of its own that we need to spell out when we communicate with those outside of it.
- From the beginning, frame the relationship as mutual. Parents want to view their engagement as entering into a partnership that is in the best interest of their child.
  - This means offering a willingness to listen, an understanding of and respect for the family's values, norms, and culture, and a commitment to follow through with tasks that have been taken on.
- Consider how parent engagement can meet other needs the parent may have. Sometimes parents will get involved if they see an opportunity to meet and network with other families/parents, or if they know you will have information or resources on other issues that are of concern to them.
- Don't assume that a lack of parent participation or response means that the parent does not care. Consider what barriers the parent may be facing to participation, and easy strategies you can employ to minimize those barriers. For example:
  - If a family does not speak or read English, be sure that contact is made in their first language or with an offer of translation/interpretation. Parents can feel disempowered when schools rely on the children to translate.
  - Without a pre-established, trusting relationship, a parent may feel too vulnerable to ask questions and admit to not knowing something. Consider any potential questions that may be raised, and include the answers in the materials you send out to minimize this feeling.
  - Anticipate that parents who have questions may not know how or where to get them answered, and might not respond at all. Include several avenues for contact in materials that go to parents. Better yet, follow up with parents by phone or with a note home to ask what questions you can answer about the program or the materials they received.
  - Anticipate logistical barriers to parent engagement, such as transportation, work schedules, child care, and plan to address them as part of any engagement strategies.
  - Understanding a parent's, family's or even a community's history with formal educational institutions can serve as a guide for both understanding any hesitancy that may exist around engagement, or how best to reach out to a parent. For example, parents who have experienced racial or class-based discrimination in the past may have a fear or trepidation about interacting with schools. Cultural factors may also play a role. Some cultures have a reverence for educators that may be perceived as distance or a lack of interest in involvement. Assumptions such as this can create missed opportunities for relationship building.
  - Many families require ongoing or multiple invitations to respond or get involved. They may interpret one contact with no follow-up as a message that they are no longer needed or wanted.

### **Strategies Specific to Child Abuse**

- Parents who have participated in child abuse prevention programs in the past have identified that they prefer to be approached about the program by someone they are familiar with, such as a child's teacher.
- Although it is difficult to do, schools should consider first discussing any concerns about child maltreatment with the parent or caregiver. This does not mean that a report will not be made, or that other actions will be taken. It honors the parent, is the ethical thing to do, and often can help to clarify a situation as well as provide an opportunity to help the family, both with resources for assistance and

with support through an investigation, if one takes place. When talking to the parent the schools focus should be related to concern about the child and family's safety and the child's success in school. In extreme cases of abuse, serious physical injuries to a child, or sexual abuse by a parent or guardian, discussing the maltreatment with the family could interfere with a CPS or criminal investigation. In these cases it would be best to delay talking to the family until after investigators from CPS and/or law enforcement have been able to interview the child and family.

- Schools that want to engage parents around child abuse prevention must make a commitment to conveying a clear message that there will not be judgment associated with asking for help. Schools need to help parents see their role as a resource and support.
- Schools should educate all staff about who is a point of contact in the school if situations or questions arise that they are unable, or unsure about how, to answer or address. Some states and districts have guides for school personnel on handling issues related to child abuse. These should be made readily accessible to school staff.
- When discussing issues related to child abuse, parents prefer to get information from professionals. However, parents do talk within their informal support networks to learn about and share resources or get advice about how to handle a situation.
- Mothers are most likely to engage in child abuse prevention programs, but with individualized outreach techniques such as male-only information sessions or targeted invitations with specific information about the importance of a father's role, fathers can be engaged as well.