

Helping Parents Help Their Children Learn

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The National Commission on Excellence in Education addressed parents in a postscript: “As surely as you are your children’s most important teachers, your children’s ideas about education and its significance begin with you. . . . Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your children’s education.”¹ Good words. But what does that responsibility include? And what is expected of schools in working with parents?

After 20 years of experience, the Home and School Institute has developed four rules for successful parent involvement programs.

1. *Link parents’ involvement directly to the learning of their own children.* An important reward for parents is their children’s school success.

2. *Provide ways for families to teach academic skills at home.* The Home and School Institute has initiated a number of successful home-teaching projects with school systems in California, Michigan, South Carolina, and the District of Columbia. These projects, which do not duplicate school work, involve sending home learning activities as “recipes” for parents and children to do together. As a result, student test scores have improved, as have attitudes about schools. This experience indicates that all parents, even those with limited formal education, can help teach children.

Easy techniques are used to foster learning: young children use the TV schedule to keep to time limits and dial and read telephone numbers; older students make “best buy” purchases at the grocery store and use maps to plan family trips.

The hurried parent, in just a few minutes a day, can teach science, reading, math, or writing in a relaxed, informal manner. The material is presented in such a way that parents know exactly what to do. This approach has the added advantage of being non-threatening because the assignments are not traditional school work.

3. *Link the school’s work to the community.* Schools must share the responsibility of teaching. Distribute home learning activities at workplaces, churches, gas stations, and grocery stores. Set up family learning centers in schools and storefronts. These demonstration rooms show how real home items and household furniture are used for home learning. And use senior citizens or teenagers to staff these rooms and share the teaching materials.

4. *Provide for parent involvement at all levels of schooling.* Research and parent programs have primarily centered on early childhood, but continuing support is needed as children move through school. Teens need help from home to get the best from the secondary years.

A successful home involvement program can begin with one parent, one teacher, one administrator. But it will not continue unless there is support from groups of parents, teachers, and administrators. To ensure its acceptance, parent involvement must be viewed as a legitimate activity of the school, and reaching the family must be considered as important as reaching the child. □

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¹National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983.

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