

# Parents and Schools as Partners in Preschool Education

In Mascoutah, Illinois, parents spend 90 minutes each week observing their at-risk preschoolers engaged in learning activities. The rest of the week, the parents take the teacher's role at home.

**H**ow can I help my child be ready for kindergarten?" is a question administrators and teachers in Mascoutah, Illinois—a district with approximately 3,200 K-12 students—set out to answer nine years ago. What evolved is a much-lauded program that has been recognized for its cost effectiveness and success in improving test scores and social habits of four-year-olds as well as educating parents in the art of parenting.

The Mascoutah program works with children who are at risk in terms of kindergarten entry in the succeeding school year. They are given the Comprehensive Identification Process Test, the Caldwell Preschool Inventory, and

the Harris Goodenough Revision Draw-A-Person. Children who score 60 percent or lower on the Caldwell Inventory are invited into the program.

Parents receive detailed information about the program and how it differs from more traditional preschool programs, which typically involve children in an ongoing program of half-day sessions five days a week. In the Mascoutah program, teachers meet with the children and a parent or parent substitute for only one and a half hours per week for 30 weeks. Although most school people inquiring about or visiting the program consider the requirement for parent attendance a major roadblock, attendance

has ranged between 85 and 89 percent for the past four years. At the sessions parents are given six daily activities that they and the children work on during the following week.

## Parents Observing Children

Arriving at school, the parents and children are greeted by the preschool teacher and a parent instructor. The teacher takes the children to a carpeted area for large-group instruction, while the parents gather in an adjacent room. Here, with the aid of microphones and a one-way mirror, parents can hear and watch their children. They spend up to 20 minutes observing the classroom scene and receiving guidance from the parent instructor.

During this part of the morning, the preschoolers and their teacher are involved in group language activities. Any new concepts that the parents will be applying at home during the week are introduced while the parents are observing so they can see how the teacher works with the children. The parent instructor answers questions about the teacher's methods and suggests ways to make the activities at home easier or more difficult to suit the child's ability.

The observation room gives parents an excellent opportunity to see the wide range of individual differences among children. When conflicts arise, they see how the teacher deals with them and, ideally, will begin to model their own actions after the teacher's behavior. The parents and the parent instructor discuss any behavior or activity they feel needs clarification or explanation. The observation segment



Working with parent educator Kathy Morio, right, parents Cleo Hoercher and Laura Mayberry try out a counting board they will use at home with their children.

is followed by a discussion of the home activities of the previous week.

### Home Activities

"What happens at home does make a difference" is the basic philosophy of the staff as they work with parents. Staff members believe that positive interaction between parent and child enhances the youngster's self-concept, which is crucial for success in school.

The parents and teacher review the comment sheets that parents write each week about the home activities. These sheets describe how the child liked the activity, whether it was successful, ways to improve the activity, and variations that work best with that particular child. The comment sheets also serve as a subtle reminder for parents to complete each week's activities. When the home activities include games or special materials, the parents prepare them during the morning discussion.

Home activities are the most important aspect of the Mascoutah program. If a difference is going to be made in the educational life of a young child, the hour-and-a-half weekly class is a good start, but the home end of the partnership is crucial to cognitive gains. If the parents incorporate what they have learned in their group sessions within their everyday activities, the child should advance in prekindergarten readiness skills. Throughout the year, the teachers help the parents understand why specific activities have been planned and which skills are needed as a foundation for kindergarten readiness. The parents sometimes "role play" a teaching situation to prepare themselves for what to expect at home.

### Parents and Children Together

The staff is primarily concerned about two aspects of the parents' relationship with their children: (1) the amount of time spent with children participating in the games and activities that are taken home from school, and (2) the parents' attitudes about raising their children as part of a family unit.

This information emerges during the weekly meetings. Through group interaction and problem solving, each parent becomes more aware of the attitudes of other parents and is able to



*Guided by their teacher, Janice Bond, Holly Hoercher and Kerin Wilhelm discover math concepts using number blocks and a balance. Their parents observe activities through a one-way mirror.*

assess the degree to which personal values and beliefs are shared by the others. In this way the group actually reinforces ideas that the parent instructor wishes to transmit. The group interaction opens the door to new ways of thinking for many parents. Hearing how others are handling similar problems can give parents new insights into ways of relating to their children's needs.

### Student Helpers

The teacher/student ratio is high in the Mascoutah program and is facilitated by the participation of local high school students. Students may work with only two children at a time, making it easier to individualize the activities and to relate them appropriately to the children's needs. The preschool teachers and high school students use a large range of activities to cover six basic skill areas—knowledge of numbers and colors, recognition of shapes, fine motor skills, word concepts, expressive language, and listening skills.

The high school students take turns using checklists and evaluation charts as well as games to determine the children's knowledge and progress in the skill areas. These observations are regularly shared with parents, who report back to the parent educator and preschool teacher about carryover and retention shown in the home activities used during the week.

### Factors and Indicators of Success

Averaging pretest and post-test scores and expressing the difference of the averages as a percent when compared

to the possible correct responses on the Caldwell Preschool Inventory reveals an average increase of 26 points per child each year over the life of the Mascoutah program.

Other indicators of program success include the high attendance rate of parents and children, parent feedback on the weekly evaluation sheets, and parent involvement (92 percent of parents use a minimum of 85 percent of the home activities).

Thus, parents and staff are partners in the Mascoutah program's efforts to prepare the youngsters for school. With training and guidance provided by the teacher, parents are encouraged to assume an active role in the education of their children and to enter into a real partnership with the school. This partnership brings about changes in the home environment that benefit not only the child in the program, but younger and older siblings as well. The children experience a more cognitively stimulating home environment.

Through this partnership, the school is able to influence five times as many children as would a teacher in a traditional preschool program in the same period of time. The cost ratio is less than one-fifth of a regular program.

Mascoutah's program is a prime example of what can be accomplished with at-risk students in a very cost-effective manner when schools and parents become partners. □

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