

# How Parents and Schools Can Work Together to Raise Moral Children

Values that are cooperatively generated and defined in concrete terms—*compassion*, for example, defined as not putting others down—can help a school build strong parental support for its efforts in moral education.

In today's moral environment, teaching the young high moral standards would be hard enough even *with* strong backing from parents. But without parents' support, educators know their influence will be limited. Even if the schools can improve students' conduct during school hours, the likelihood of lasting impact on the character of a child is less when school values are not reinforced at home.

For that reason, schools and families must come together in common cause. Working together, these two formative social institutions can do much more to raise moral human beings than either can do working alone. I would like to illustrate four ways schools have successfully recruited parents as partners in moral education: (1) developing a school-community consensus about values;

(2) forming parent support groups; (3) creating various opportunities for parents to participate in moral education programs; and (4) writing parallel curriculums for classroom and home.

1. A *school-community consensus about values*. Coleman (1985) recently noted that schools can no longer assume, as they once could, families that support and teach the value norms of the school. For example, an assistant principal of an elite high school explained: "When you catch kids cheating on a test or plagiarizing a paper and their parents come in to defend them, you feel undermined. How can you hope to get students to take standards of integrity seriously? We have suffered from not having an explicit compact with our parents." One crucial task facing schools, therefore, is to reconstruct a moral consensus.

This task can take the form of developing a list of values that the school and community agree on. The articulation of such values will encourage parents to teach them in the home and will give schools and families a common understanding of the values the school intends to uphold.

Despite today's pluralism, communities are finding that it is possible to come up with a list of agreed-upon values. In Baltimore County, Maryland, for example, with broad community input, a Values Education Task Force (1984) has identified and operationally defined a "common core of values" to guide its new K-12 values education curriculum. (See Saterlie, this issue, p. 44.)

Needless to say, not all parents will feel an equal commitment to the values that are identified. But, especially if such cooperatively generated values

are defined in terms of concrete behaviors—"compassion," for example, in terms of not putting others down and helping children who are new to the school—a school has a good chance of building a critical substantive level of parental support for its value norms. Similarly, at the classroom level many teachers report that if they send a letter home to parents at the start of the year, explaining classroom rules and discipline policy and the point at which they will seek a parent's help, they receive a surprising degree of cooperation.

2. *Parent support groups.* Schools, Coleman (1985) also observed, can no longer assume cohesive communities. Today's mobile parents often do not know who their neighbors are or who the parents of their children's friends are. Isolated from each other, parents are often unsure about what rules are appropriate for their children and are consequently insecure about exercising their authority.

Faced with this situation, as Coleman argues, schools must bring parents together for face-to-face commu-

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nication that will allow them to discover their shared values. Schools can do this by forming small parent support groups, which meet periodically at school or in a parent's home. Parents get support from other parents to set curfews, curtail teen drinking, and regulate the television and movies their children watch. By bringing parents together in this way, schools are recreating what has for two decades been breaking down: a moral community around the school—the support system needed to hold in place the kind of character traits the school is trying to develop.

3. *Multifaceted parent participation in moral education programs.* Another successful strategy is to create a variety of opportunities for parents to join a schoolwide values education effort. A case in point, the Child Development Project in San Ramon, California (Schaps et al. 1985), is the most comprehensive, well-researched character development program in the country. This project seeks to "enhance prosocial motives and behavior" through five interlocking components, which are promoted in both the school and home: (1) cooperative activities; (2) helping relationships; (3) positive examples; (4) social understanding; and (5) developmental discipline, aimed at using adult authority in ways that foster children's self-control.

Parents participate in a number of different ways. At each of the three elementary schools in the program, parents share the leadership for how the school will implement project goals for the coming year. Families turn out in large numbers for events like Family Fun Festivals and Family Film Nights. At the latter, parents and children watch a movie with a prosocial theme and talk about it afterward. Some parents participate in school-sponsored workshops on parenting techniques, such as how to hold a family meeting, designed to foster positive family communication and responsibility in children. A project newsletter goes into every home to report classroom values activities and promote similar activities families can do in the home.

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A project evaluation found that nearly half of all families in the three program schools say they have made positive changes in family life as a result of their participation in project activities. (The project's research design does not, however, separate home effects and classroom effects. After three years, overall assessment found program children superior to students in matched comparison schools on a number of measures of social-moral cognition and behavior. For a report of research results, see the project newsletter, *Working Together*, Spring 1987).<sup>1</sup>

4. *Parallel curriculums in home and classroom.* An even more deliberate and structured partnership between parents and schools is illustrated by the Scotia-Glenville school system in upstate New York. This program, called simply "The Scotia-Glenville Experience," has two main goals: (1) to educate students to be the kind of people anyone would like to have as neighbors; and (2) to develop students' ability and willingness to be participating citizens in a democracy.

The school district states flatly that its role is to support families, since families are viewed as the child's pri-

many moral teachers. The character development curriculum was written by a team of parents, teachers, and administrators. At each grade level, parents receive a "Family Guide" with all the classroom lessons for their child's grade level. For every classroom lesson, there is a suggestion for how to follow through on the lesson at home.

For example, the 1st grade curriculum focuses on membership in groups—being a family member, a peer group member, a member of the classroom and school—and the responsibilities that go with membership in these groups. The first lesson deals with family responsibilities. The teacher asks, "What job can you do that will help your family?" Children respond with their ideas.

Then the teacher gives each child a "PLA" (Personal Learning Activity Worksheet), which is part of every lesson and which the child takes home at the end of the day. The teacher says, "At the top of your worksheet, draw a picture of something you can do each

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day to help your family." Beneath the picture are the days of the week with spaces children can check to show that they carried out their responsibility for a given day. Finally, at the end of the classroom lesson, the teacher reads the "Family Note" (directed to parents) printed at the bottom of the PLA. For this lesson, the note reads: "Please help your child to remember this responsibility. The same responsibility, or a new one, may be chosen each day" (*Family Guide for First-Grade Students* 1981).

At Back-to-School Night in September, each teacher gives the Family Guide to parents and explains the objectives of that grade level's curriculum. Fully 90 percent of the parents, the assistant superintendent says, turn out for this meeting. In November, in parent-teacher conferences, teachers talk individually with parents about the values program and the family's role. About 90 percent of parents come for these conferences.

At the end of each year, the district sends a questionnaire to all parents asking them to indicate how often they used the home materials. In 1985, slightly more than half the parents returned the questionnaire; of those who did, most said they used the at-home materials "on a regular basis." Parents are also asked to evaluate the effect of that year's character curriculum on their child (by indicating on a 5-point scale agreement or disagreement with statements like, "My child has learned to handle teasing in a constructive way"). In addition, parents are asked to suggest ways of improving the curriculum for that level, and their ideas are in fact often incorporated by the curriculum-writing team.

#### **A Critical Mass of Support**

These are brief glimpses of how schools and their communities have collaborated to support each other as moral educators. Some parents, to be sure, will remain apathetic or hostile toward the school's efforts in the area of values. But it doesn't take everybody to make an idea work; it takes only a critical mass. The examples I've de-

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scribed show that many parents are willing to join forces with schools to help their children grow into good and decent people. That alliance offers the hope of a new and promising era in moral education. □

1. For a free copy of the newsletter, write to The Child Development Project, 111 Deerwood Pl., Suite 165, San Ramon, CA 94583.

#### *References*

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