

taining information, providing information, and planning strategies for follow-up (Stephens and Wolf 1980).

Building rapport. Teachers need to establish a comfortable relationship with parents. Without rapport, both teachers and parents may become defensive. Teachers should make parents feel welcome and at ease; offering a beverage might help. Starting with small talk encourages informality. A few friendly comments about the weather or some other neutral topic will help put the parent at ease. Teachers should avoid emotionally laden topics (for example, religion or politics).

Parents who are anxious may want to plunge in: "Jenny's doing terrible work in school, isn't she?" If she is not, a quick "no" will alleviate concern. But if she is, the teacher must make a quick decision. Is the parent too upset to deal with the information that needs to be shared? Is some background information needed first? The teacher may then choose to develop rapport further with a reflective statement, that lets the parent know that the question was received: "You're concerned about Jenny's performance." A reflective statement usually results in the parent's providing more helpful information. The question about Jenny's work will be addressed later in the conference.

Some parents may persist in small talk as a way of avoiding the topic at hand. In these circumstances, the

teacher must eventually initiate the topic: "What has Jeff shared with you about what we are doing in class?" With the parent's response, the next phase of the conference begins.

Obtaining information. A key factor in the success of the conference is the teacher's ability to elicit information from the parents. Teachers should function as sensitive, active listeners. They should start with general, open-

The Home Visit—An Irreplaceable Tool

Mary Joyce Love

The countdown was on. School would begin in 21 days, but my teaching had already begun with visits to the 24 new 1st graders assigned to me.

For Alice, too shy to talk, my presence in her home became a bridge to the classroom. Just before I left, she ventured, "But I can't read." Jessica eagerly fired questions, "reading" a page of pictures she had drawn to remind her of each. Jammi wanted to know me: "Do you have a little girl? Where do you live?" Adam earnestly asked, "Will it be hard?" David was concerned: "Will we go to the principal?"

Gerald Stouffer, principal of Fairview Elementary School, Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, had encouraged home visits, providing a list of the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of children in my class. He had also helped refine the purpose of the visits, to communicate a single message: I care about you. The focus would be the child, not the parent or me. My only agenda would be to listen, and relate to, each child.

Curriculum encompasses all that a child experiences in relation to school: it begins with, and is enriched by, a home visit. The child, meeting her teacher on her own territory, knows that she matters. A sense of security ensues, increasing the likelihood that she will work to achieve her potential. She expects more of herself, of her teacher, and of her school experience.

Insights gained in home visits also influence the arrangement of classroom space to reinforce, within the child, a sense of ownership, so crucial to success. A child refers to "my room," "my desk," and "my teacher." It is inevitable that he will look for the photo of himself, taken during the home visit and mounted in an area where he may display his own work. Further, a child with partial sight or hearing, who needs special seating, or a child who is mainstreamed—both enter the room with a bond of belonging; they know their teacher.

First-day-of-school "surprises," ranging from the perplexing (the battery in Jim's artificial arm was dead) to the catastrophic (Bonnie had a seizure, and the other children were alarmed) were easier. I was prepared. Family crises, during the school year, involving a latchkey child or a child of poverty, divorce, separation, or abuse also can be dealt with more effectively when the teacher has made a home visit prior to school.

Principals who encourage and even require the making of home visits find that parents are more likely to become allies with the teacher and the administrative staff on behalf of the child's learning experience. Parents who welcome a teacher into the home gain a more positive attitude and are more supportive of the school. In our case, a greater percentage also become volunteer aides and participate in parent-teacher organizations and school functions.

A brief, informal visit in a child's home once before the start of school and later during the year has a positive ripple effect on everyone concerned. For the child, for the parent, for the teacher, and for the principal—home visits are an irreplaceable tool!

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Teachers and administrators can and should commit time and energy to working with parents of "target children."

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