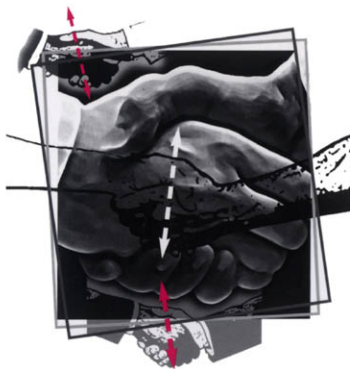


# Improving Parental Involvement

GARRY HORNBY

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## IMPROVING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

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[www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com)

15 East 26th Street

New York

NY 10010

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First published 2000

Reprinted 2003, 2004, 2005

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 0-304-70551-9 (hardback)

0-8246-7025-4 (paperback)

Typeset by Kenneth Burnley, Wirral, Cheshire.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

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*For*  
*Richard and Adam,*  
*who have enabled me to add a parent's perspective*  
*to that of a teacher*

## *Introduction*

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After working with parents as a mainstream and special class teacher, educational psychologist, researcher and teacher educator, as well as being a parent of two young children, I have come to believe that a collaborative working relationship between teachers and parents is a key factor in providing the optimum education for children. I now consider that developing the interpersonal skills, attitudes and knowledge needed for working effectively with parents is essential for all teachers.

My first experience of the benefits of teachers working closely with parents happened when I was 10 years of age. Around the age of 7 I had developed a stammer which had got progressively worse. My parents had consulted the family doctor who made a referral to a speech therapist. I went to speech therapy for about half a dozen sessions but it didn't seem to help. By the time I was in my final year at primary school my parents were very concerned about the problem but were at a loss about what else to try. Then, at a parents' evening, my teacher suggested that elocution lessons would help and gave my parents the name of someone she recommended. As you can appreciate, as we lived in a working-class area of Rochdale, elocution lessons were not something which parents automatically considered for their children! Nevertheless, I started attending once a week and almost immediately the fluency of my speech improved. After a year my stammer was hardly noticeable and, in fact, I passed the grade one elocution examination with distinction! Though I stopped attending elocution after this, my stammer has remained under reasonable control ever since. I can still find certain words difficult to start sentences with and sometimes feel uncomfortable using the telephone, but I am now only aware of working hard to control my stammer when I get nervous in situations such as lecturing to very large groups of people.

The help my teacher gave to my parents has had a significant impact on my life. I would never have been able to work as a teacher, educational psychologist or university lecturer if I had not learned to control my stammer



when I did: not to mention the potentially devastating effect on my personal life which this difficulty with oral communication could have led to. So I am acutely aware of the debt I owe to this teacher, who had the interests of her pupils at heart and who used her knowledge of how my special need could be met and her interpersonal skills to persuade my parents to try something they would not have thought of themselves.

My professional interest in the benefits of teachers working closely with parents emerged when I was teaching adolescents with moderate learning difficulties in a secondary school special class in New Zealand 25 years ago. Several incidents which occurred at that time highlighted the importance of having good working relationships with parents and stimulated my interest in learning more about this aspect of the teacher's role. Some of the experiences I had with parents are documented in Chapter 6. These experiences gave me the incentive to learn more about working with parents.

Over the past 25 years I have developed this interest and have conducted numerous workshops with parents. In recent years I have specialized in providing in-service training for teachers on working with parents. In this book I have drawn on these experiences in order to provide information which will help teachers develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills considered essential for working effectively with parents.

This book is intended to provide teachers with guidelines for improving parental involvement in their schools in order to facilitate the healthy development of all children, including those who have special needs of any kind.

The first chapter provides a rationale for establishing effective working relationships with parents and outlines the attitudes, skills and knowledge which teachers need to develop. Factors which influence levels of parental involvement and typical ways in which parents are involved with schools are also discussed. Chapter 2 discusses various approaches to working with parents and presents a model to guide the practice of parental involvement which addresses parents' needs and also their strengths. A checklist of aspects of parent involvement which need to be addressed in designing policy and procedures for working with parents is considered. Chapter 3 discusses various methods for improving communication with parents, such as making home visits, improving parent-teacher meetings and using different forms of written communication. Chapter 4 considers the various forms of parental involvement in children's education. This includes parental involvement in assessments and reviews of progress, home-school reading programmes and home-school behaviour programmes. Chapter 5 outlines the interpersonal skills needed by teachers in order to work effectively with parents. These include listening skills, counselling skills and assertion skills. Chapter 6 focuses on working with parents in groups such as in parent education programmes or workshops. The organizational and group leadership skills needed by teachers in order to work with groups of parents are also discussed. Chapter 7 addresses the needs of parents of children with disabilities and those with health problems. It considers the process which parents and other family

members go through in adapting to a child's disability or medical condition. Also discussed is how parents and their children are affected by the environment in which they live. Chapter 8 addresses the needs of parents of children who have experienced a loss through bereavement or divorce. Chapter 9 addresses the challenge of working with parents who present special difficulties to teachers. Finally, Chapter 10 discusses overall strategies for improving parental involvement in schools.

## *Acknowledgements*

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I would like to thank all the parents, teachers and other colleagues, too numerous to mention, with whom I have worked over the years, many of whom have contributed to the ideas presented in this book.

## Chapter 1

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# Rationale for Improving Parental Involvement

Parents are critical to children's successes during the school years. (Ballantine, 1999, p. 170)

A frequent complaint of teachers is that the parents they most want to see seldom come into schools (Karther and Lowden, 1997). This view is borne out by the typically low levels of parental involvement in schools in deprived areas and those which take in a large proportion of children with special needs. In fact, minimal parental involvement in schools is an international phenomenon, with the majority of parents worldwide having little contact with the schools which their children attend (Epstein, 1990).

The aim of this book is to provide some guidelines for changing this situation; that is, for increasing the participation of a greater proportion of parents in the education of their children. Increased parental involvement is important because of the benefits that parental involvement brings. Sussell *et al.* (1996) suggest that these include:

- more positive parental attitudes toward teachers and schools;
- more positive student attitudes and behaviours;
- improved student performance;
- improved teacher morale;
- improved school climate.

The list of potential benefits is extended by Karther and Lowden (1997) who consider that the major benefits of parental involvement include:

- student gains in various areas;
- increased parental satisfaction with schools;
- increased self-confidence of parents involved;
- overall school improvement.

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In addition, Ballantine (1999) suggests that the positive outcomes of parental involvement also include:

- improved communication between parents and children;
- higher academic performance of the children whose parents are involved;
- high school attendance and less disruptive behaviour;
- increased likelihood of completing high school and attending college;
- a sense of accomplishment for parents;
- higher parental expectations of children;
- improved study habits among children;
- increased likelihood of parents deciding to continue their own education.

The importance of parental involvement is reinforced by the considerable amount of research evidence which is now available to support the contention that improving parental involvement increases the effectiveness of the education that children receive. Reviews of the literature consistently provide support for the effectiveness of parental involvement in facilitating children's development. Reviews of numerous studies of the links between parent involvement and children's achievement have concluded that the evidence that parent involvement improves student achievement is beyond dispute (Henderson, 1987; Henderson and Berla, 1994).

Swap (1993) reports that these gains are made when parents are simply involved as supporters of their children's learning or are just kept informed about their progress at school. However, she states that the greatest gains are made when parents are more directly involved, such as when they act as tutors with their children. She gives examples of successful projects at pre-school, primary and secondary levels for which parent involvement was a major component. These are outlined below.

At the pre-school level Swap cites the Perry Preschool Project in the USA (Berrueta-Clement *et al.*, 1984) which included 1½-hour weekly home visits for all children in the project and their mothers. Children who participated in the programme had significantly higher IQs than control group children throughout their first two years at school. Although IQ differences disappeared after this, a follow-up study revealed that the programme produced important long-term benefits. These included increased academic achievement, decreased need for special education placement, less unemployment and fewer contacts with the criminal justice system. It has been suggested that involving parents was the key to maintaining the benefits of the programme.

At the primary school level Swap cites a British study (Tizard *et al.*, 1982) which compared the effects of parental involvement in their children's reading with the provision of additional specialist tutorial assistance with reading at school. The results showed that primary school children who read aloud to their parents two to four times a week from books sent home from school made significantly greater gains in reading achievement than children receiving additional assistance at school!

Studies of parental involvement at the secondary school level are scarcer than those of primary or pre-school programmes. Swap cites a study of parent involvement in mathematics in which she was one of the researchers (Moses *et al.*, 1989). This project relied heavily on parent involvement in order to improve the achievement of secondary school pupils in mathematics. Parents were involved in several ways: as project leader; through informational meetings; through participation in workshops; and by acting as voluntary classroom helpers. The project produced a substantial improvement in mathematics performance for the students involved compared with the achievement of previous years of students. This result was attributed mainly to the high level of parental involvement in the project.

It is clear from the above examples that involving parents promotes children's achievement from pre-school through secondary education. Therefore, establishing and maintaining high levels of parental involvement in schools is an essential element in ensuring their effectiveness in providing the best possible education for the children they serve. However, the extent to which this can be achieved is influenced by the presence of certain barriers to parental involvement.

## **BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

I have lived and worked for a number of years in three very different countries: England, New Zealand, and Barbados. Analysing the strengths and weaknesses of parental involvement in each of these countries has led me to conclude that there is a set of factors which influence the levels and types of parental involvement in schools which exist in each of the countries. These influential factors are discussed below.

### **Demographic changes**

There have been two major changes in families in the last few decades which have made parental involvement in schools more difficult. First, a majority of mothers of school-aged children are now in the workforce. Second, since in many countries almost half of all marriages end in divorce, a substantial proportion of children live in single-parent families. In fact, in Barbados, single-parent families headed by mothers are so prevalent they are considered the norm! When both parents are working or there is only one parent in the home it is much more difficult for these parents to have high levels of involvement in their children's education.

### **Historical/societal factors**

In some societies, such as in Barbados, there is no history or societal expectation of parental involvement in schools or even in the education of their children. Schools are seen as places where children are sent to be educated. Parents are not expected to be involved in schools or even in educating their

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children at home. Educating children is seen as the job of teachers and this is to occur in schools! While these views are gradually changing in modern-day Barbados, they remain much more ingrained than in other countries such as New Zealand, which makes it very difficult to establish satisfactory levels of parent involvement there.

##### **Policy/legislation on parental involvement**

In countries where there is legislation and agreed policy on parental involvement such as in the USA and England, it is much easier to maintain high levels of parent involvement than in countries where these are not in place, such as in Barbados.

##### **Parent attitudes**

Epstein (1990) from her numerous studies of parental involvement concludes that almost all parents from all backgrounds care about the education of their children. So it is not a lack of interest on behalf of parents which leads to low levels of parental involvement. Epstein suggests that it is the fact that so few of them know what schools expect from them or how they might contribute to their child's schooling which is at the core of the problem. It is this lack of knowledge which acts as a barrier to the establishment of high levels of parental involvement.

##### **Organization of school system**

It is much easier to establish high levels of parental involvement in countries like New Zealand where nearly all children walk to their local schools than in places like Barbados where many children are transported to schools outside the area in which they live. Where children attend their local schools it is easier to get parents involved with the schools which they see as a part of their communities; whereas, because an 11-plus exam system is still in place in Barbados to determine secondary school placement, parents transport their children to what they consider are the best primary schools, wherever they are on the island. Also, secondary school students criss-cross the island in order to get to the schools for which they won entry. This system leads to a situation in which schools are not identified with their local communities, and this makes it difficult to ensure satisfactory levels of parental involvement.

##### **School culture**

The more autocratic the management structure of schools, the less likely they are to be able to sustain parental involvement which is based on partnerships between parents and teachers. Where collaboration is not the norm among staff at the school it is unlikely that the collaboration between parents and teachers which is necessary for effective parental involvement will be possible.

Since autocratic styles of management are the norm in many countries, this is another factor which contributes to low levels of parental involvement.

### **School policy and procedures**

In order for schools to effectively involve parents, they must have clear policies and well-established procedures for working with parents. School policies are influenced by national and regional policies but also vary from school to school depending on the views of teachers and in particular head-teachers and boards of governors. Some schools do not have an overt or even a consistent covert policy on parental involvement, and this is then another barrier.

### **Resources**

Increasing levels of parental involvement involve increasing amounts of teachers' time. Where teachers are already stretched because of poor working conditions or lack of resources, or because a disproportionate amount of their time is spent on paperwork, it is difficult to convince them that they need to contribute more time if they are to set up effective schemes of parental involvement. Additional financial and human resources need to be provided in order to facilitate high levels of parental involvement, but these are very hard to come by these days. A few years ago some English schools, particularly in deprived areas, were provided with home-school liaison teachers who taught half-time and used their remaining time for parental involvement. This worked extremely well but has now just about died out due to lack of funding.

### **Teacher training**

As Epstein (1985) points out, the majority of teachers have had little or no training on working with parents on either initial training courses or as a part of in-service training. Most teachers, therefore, lack the skills and knowledge needed for effectively working with parents, and this is another barrier to setting up high levels of parent involvement.

### **Teacher attitudes**

Positive teacher attitudes to working with parents are clearly essential if parental involvement is to be successful. However, many teachers have negative attitudes towards collaborating with parents, as is elaborated below.

## **ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS TOWARDS PARENTS**

Research conducted with teachers indicates that they find interactions with parents to be a major source of stress in their jobs (Turnbull and Turnbull, 1986). Parents too are reported to find communications with teachers to be



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equally stressful. In fact, Sonnenschien (1984) has suggested that certain common attitudes which many teachers hold towards parents can contribute substantially towards this stress. These include the fact that parents are often viewed as being either problems or adversaries. Alternatively, they are seen as vulnerable, less able or in need of treatment themselves. In addition, parents are sometimes considered to be the cause of their children's problems. Finally, for various reasons, perhaps related to the above views, many professionals adopt an attitude of 'professional distance'. These common attitudes towards parents are discussed below, followed by discussion of attitudes which are more conducive to the development of effective working partnerships with parents.

### **Parents as problems**

Some teachers see parents mainly as problems. When parents are convinced there is something wrong with their child despite reassurance from professionals, they are considered to be 'over-anxious'. When parents disagree with a diagnosis or the results of an assessment and ask for a second opinion they are said to be 'denying the reality' of the situation. When parents refuse to accept the educational programmes or placements suggested for their child, and are adamant about what they want, they are regarded as being 'aggressive'. Labelling parents in these ways makes it more difficult to develop productive working relationships with them.

### **Parents as adversaries**

There is a tendency for teachers to view parents as adversaries. Teachers may have different goals and priorities to parents concerning the educational programmes of the children that they teach. This can create conflict and sometimes competition between parents and teachers. Competition can also be focused on children's achievements. Typically, children will behave more appropriately for their teachers than they will for their parents. In contrast, parents often report that children do things at home which are not observed at school. In these situations it is easy for either teachers or parents to feel doubtful or resentful about the others' success in getting the child to perform well. Avoiding the tendency to view parents as adversaries is essential for good relationships.

### **Parents as vulnerable**

Teachers may regard parents as being too vulnerable to be treated as equal partners. This occurs most often when teachers are reluctant to tell parents the whole truth about their child's difficulties in case they become upset. So some of the child's weaknesses may be glossed over or parents may be given an overly optimistic view of their child's likely future progress. This does not promote the development of good relationships, since parents are widely

reported to appreciate teachers telling them all that they know about the child's difficulties as honestly as possible (see Chapter 7).

Alternatively, teachers who come across as 'superior' will actually contribute to feelings of vulnerability in parents, which may lead to them becoming defensive and resistant to suggestions. Feeling vulnerable is an understandable reaction in parents who are seeking help for their child. Therefore, teachers should strive to allay this feeling, not add to it, as they sometimes unintentionally do, by developing the skills necessary for communicating sensitively and effectively with parents (as described in Chapter 5).

### **Parents as less able**

There is a tendency for parents to be viewed as less observant, less perceptive and less intelligent than teachers. Therefore, parents' ideas and opinions are not given the credence which they deserve. This is a pity since most parents have an abundance of information about their children which can be invaluable to their teachers. A more helpful view is to consider that, while teachers are the experts on education, parents are the experts on their own children.

### **Parents as needing treatment**

Some teachers believe that many parents who have children with problems find this difficult to accept and therefore are in need of counselling. This assumed weakness in parents then becomes the focus of attention rather than the child. Such views are experienced as patronizing and extremely frustrating by parents. It is therefore unwise to make assumptions about possible difficulties which parents may have. It is generally more helpful for the development of productive relationships when teachers focus on parents' strengths rather than their weaknesses.

### **Parents as causal**

Another possible attitudinal barrier to developing effective working relationships with parents occurs when teachers consider that parents have caused or contributed to children's problems. This tends to happen more with children who have emotional or behavioural difficulties. These are often considered by teachers to be caused by parents who have deprived their children of love or discipline. But even with children who have learning difficulties, there is a tendency to assume that these have been made worse by poor parenting.

Many parents who have children with difficulties experience guilt for one reason or another. Some wonder whether they are in any way responsible for causing the problems, while others feel guilty about not being able to spend more time working with their children in order to overcome their difficulties. Therefore, it is of no benefit for teachers to add to these guilt feelings by communicating to parents either indirectly or directly their views about the parents' role in causing their children's problems.