ADVERSITIES, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
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Abstract
Parental involvement is often noted as a key requisite for successful educational programs for students. There is little question about the benefits of parental involvement on academic achievement. While there is a strong endorsement among teachers and administrators for parental involvement, there is also a strong justification for caution. The presumption that all parents provide quality parental involvement while helping their children with school-related assignments may be an ill-advised leap in faith—a leap that might even result in negative or harmful situations for some students. This presumption ignores literature addressing the adversities facing parents and students that may affect healthy parental involvement. Administrative sanctions for teachers to blindly encourage parental involvement may be irresponsible, if not dangerous, for some students. A primary purpose of this article is to share reasons parental involvement may be potentially hazardous. Recommendations for implementing appropriate parental involvement strategies are also presented.

Parental involvement is often noted as a key requisite for successful educational programs for children. The U.S. Department of Education has provided funding for a parent/family/community initiative with the Educate America Act (National Education Goals Panel, 1994). The participation of parents in education is deemed so important that Chapter One legislation in the U.S. now requires schools to foster parental involvement activities (Piper, 1998). In a recent publication, The State of America’s Children Yearbook (1997), parents were exhorted to be vigilant in their home environments by becoming their children’s teacher. Kelley-Laine (1998) referred to the parents and other family members as children’s first educators.

Little question exists regarding the strong correlation among parental involvement in the school and academic achievement (Gavidia-Payne & Stoneman, 1997). Gulatt (1997) stated that both parents and teachers benefit when parents take an active interest in the schools. Although these positive statements are current and valid, however, some additional considerations are warranted. Caution should be taken as schools initiate parental involvement
activities. Without this care, there could be hazardous results of well-intentioned yet poorly planned involvement of parents.

School-Related Parental Involvement at Home

The involvement of parents described by Finn (1998) is the type of parental involvement potentially most hazardous. Finn identifies three types of home-based parental involvement: (a) actively organizing and monitoring children’s time, (b) helping with homework, and (c) discussing school matters with the children. Although current literature advocating this involvement asserts that parental participation has significant positive consequences for children (Epstein, 1990; Ho & Willms, 1996), this does not guarantee that all types of parental involvement will be beneficial for all children. While it is important to know how and to what extent parental involvement behaviors bolster student learning, it is equally critical to know how and to what extent parental involvement behaviors may impede student learning. Lareau and Shumar (1996) asserted:

Not only have the benefits of parental involvement not yet been adequately demonstrated, but also the range of possible options has been truncated in the literature. There has been a near-complete failure to study the negative consequences of active family involvement in schooling. This failure to find negative consequences is by no means due to a lack of negative effects. (p. 31)

Lareau and Shumar (1996) and Thompson (1993) reported that the emphasis on homework sometimes strains parent-child relations and introduces severe conflicts and tension in the home. In fact, battles over homework have become so intense that some school districts have decided to formally prescribe the amount of homework children at each grade level should receive. This is designed to reduce the frequency of leaving children in tears and parents with migraines because of school-related assignments performed at home. This type of parental involvement is of greatest concern since the involvement requires such patience and often more knowledge and skill. This also is the type of parental involvement being suggested by increasing numbers of educators (International Reading Association Family Literacy Commission, 1994).

Potentially Hazardous Parent Involvement

The presumption that all parents may be depended upon to provide quality support while helping their children with school-related assignments may be an ill-advised leap in faith—a leap that might even result in negative or harmful situations for some children. Too much evidence exists that indicates the possibility that parents are not always the best candidates to participate in school-related activities, such as homework assignments. A closer look must be taken before parents are blindly steered to supervise, monitor, and teach children at home. Professional and ethical boundaries must be considered before educators send children home to collaborate with parents without careful regard to quality. Educators’ lack of close scrutiny of parents assuming school-related teaching roles at home may be irresponsible, if not even dangerous, for some children. Parental involvement cannot be considered equally effective and appropriate for all children, presuming the current evidence about family characteristics is valid.
Adversity Within the Family

While many environments are conducive to healthy relationships among parents and their children, evidence suggests the existence of adversity within many homes. Garbarine (1997) described today’s environment as “socially toxic.” Garbarine stated further that the social equivalents of toxic substances in the air, the water, and the soil include violence, alienation, and disruption of family relationships—all contaminate that may interfere with a healthy exchange among parents and children engaged in classroom activities. It is no wonder that school-related assignments required for homework on occasion may transform the placid refuge of home life into an intensely frustrating experience for parents and children. Many adversities are identifiable within households that may leave children vulnerable to their parents’ involvement in school activities at home.

1. One adversity involves divorce. Research has documented the negative effects that divorce has on children (Davis, Hops, Alpert, & Sheeber, 1998; Rotenberg, Kim, & Herman-Stahl, 1998). “Children whose parents divorce are more likely to display aggression, anxiety, psychological maladjustment, and poor academic performance” (Rotenberg et al., 1998, p. 44). This evidence is alarming since close to one-third of the children in the United States can expect that before their 18th birthday, their parents will be divorced, according to Friedman (1993, p. 58). Further, Clarke-Stewart, (1989) warned, “The effects of divorce begin long before the divorce itself, for both parents and children. Observations of children for as long as 11 years before their parents separated showed the effects of pre-divorce family stress” (p. 72). Gordis, Margolin, and John (1997) reported that marital conflict has been identified as an important factor that puts children at risk for a variety of emotional and behavior problems. Consequently, it may be concluded that a high degree of tension exists within many families that are experiencing divorce or are on the brink of divorce. The timing of parental involvement requirements during such periods may be more counterproductive than productive.

2. The abuse and neglect of children by parents is a second adversity. The existence of child abuse and neglect is well documented in homes throughout the country. In The State of America’s Children Yearbook (1997), it is reported that 3.1 million children are neglected or abused every year. While this may be a small percentage of children affected by abuse and neglect, the numbers are too great to ignore. Children from potentially or suspected abusive or neglectful environments must be protected.

3. A third adversity involves coercive family interactions. While physical abuse may not be symptomatic of these parents, coercive parents play a key role in the etiology of childhood conduct disorders. The coercive interaction style is typified by family members attempts to control each other’s behavior primarily through aversive means. Debaryshe and Fryxell (1998) claimed that children with conduct disorders live in coercive families where interactions are characterized by rapid escalations of high levels of intensity and longer bouts of negative interactions. Children cannot “just say no” to coercive parents without major conflict. Consequently, parents prone to demonstrate coercive behaviors must not be given free rein by educators to participate in school-related activities, such as homework. Left unbridled, it becomes more likely that the interactions among coercive family members result in aggressive behaviors and deficits in cognitive processing (Carlo, Roesch, & Melby, 1998).

4. A fourth adversity is the increase in parents with personal problems. Bouette, Keepler, Tyler, and Terry (1992) reported that although information is available for working with difficult children, literature on working with difficult parents is scarce. There is a gross oversight when so much literature addresses parental involvement, yet very little literature provides information on working with difficult
parents. There are increasing numbers of adults treated for depression, anxiety, and various other mental health disorders. The sadness, indecisiveness, psychomotor agitation, and markedly diminished interest in everyday activities of those experiencing depression cannot help but increase the probability of trouble when parents assist with homework or just hold their children accountable to working ahead or studying for the next exam. The same can be said for parents with generalized anxiety problems whereby the children face parents manifesting restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, and irritability. Obviously, parents suffering from fatigue and irritability can affect a mild disagreement into a full-blown argument.

5. *The increase in problems displayed by children is a fifth adversity.* There are increasing numbers of children showing signs of developing antisocial behavior patterns (Walker, Severson, Feil, Stiller, & Golly, 1998). Educators are required to cope with children manifesting the symptoms of depression, dysthymia, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity, learning problems, and oppositional-defiance. A most compelling study in support of this position can be found in Achenbach and Howell’s (1993) research on emotional and behavioral problems among American children. In Achenbach and Howell’s analyses of parent descriptions of their children, parents indicated the presence and intensity of 118 specific behaviors and feelings in words such as, “hyperactive, high strung, cheats, bullies, and demonstrates mean-ness to others.” These data indicate increasing numbers of children today are in trouble and/or are troubled. Garnier and Stein’s (1998) analyses of data supported such concerns. The authors claim that a national trend of increasing adolescent problems and conduct disorders, including drug use, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, high school drop-out, and crimes against people clearly exists.

**Recommendations for Appropriate Parental Involvement**

The fact that numerous adversities are pervasive within many households does not mean we alleviate parental involvement or initiatives for family literacy, parent centers, and programs and efforts to establish a partnership among students, parents, and teachers. We must consider carefully, however, the nature and situations of the adults and homes to which we are sending requests for help. We must plan programs and initiatives that will be effective in improving parental involvement while reducing the chances of negative results. The following guidelines will help improve parental involvement:

1. **Recognize the existence and influence of adversities.** Educators must understand that parental involvement is not equally appropriate for all children. Educators and administrators who ignore this recommendation use a one-size-fits-all mentality, suggesting that all parents interact and communicate consistently and effectively with their children regardless of family dynamics and adversities.

2. **Provide more training among educators to work with parents as adult learners.** The treatment of parents must have a qualitative difference compared to the treatment of children (Knowles, 1989). Adult learners have a need for effective performance in their various roles. Effective parental involvement programs should enable parents to do their jobs well. Consequently, effective parental involvement must mean that parents achieve success or feel good about their role when working with their children. Otherwise, the school-related activity at home will likely be frustrating rather than reinforcing. The latter state of mind is critical.

3. **Develop a peer-mediation team comprised of administrators, educators, and parents.** Peer mediation among children has long been an acceptable practice for conflict resolution. The increase in family adversities and conflict leave little doubt
the same opportunities must be afforded parents. This is especially true since school officials solicit parental involvement. Administrative personnel must create and make aware that a peer mediation process is available to assist parents in working more successfully with teachers and their children on school-related matters.

4. **Teach parents the difference between engagement and disengagement behaviors.** Parents need to understand how to create situations in which children feel good about themselves as learners. Consequently, parent centers should be created to help parents develop behaviors necessary for successful interactions and communication at home. Parents must learn that home assistance is productive only if the assistance remains positive and pleasant.

5. **Teach parents that success breeds success.** E-mails, newsletters, phone calls, conferences, parent forums, and open houses can all be used to teach parents this important principle. Further, educators must know how to send activities home that are almost guaranteed to produce successful results for students and parents, especially where family adversity is anticipated.

6. **Provide parents with homework tips designed to reduce the frequency of family tension.** One homework tip is to give parents permission and encouragement to vocalize when their children are spending excessive time on school assignments at home. Second, encourage parents to talk with their children about the school assignments. Parents can help make sure their children understand the assignments. Third, parents can be encouraged to be role models by leaving the television off for much of the evening and by replacing that activity with reading and conversation. Fourth, parents are encouraged to help children plan realistic schedules for short and long-term projects. Finally, parents are encouraged to solicit a “homework coach” to help their children when homework becomes a constant source of tension in the home.

### Conclusion

The intent of this article is not to suggest that parental involvement is unimportant or ineffective. Also there is no intention to vilify or cast aspersions upon parents. The intention is to open the minds of those responsible for advocating parental involvement. In so doing, the possibility of negative consequences of parental involvement may be minimized or eliminated.

### A Final Caution

While it is impossible to determine precisely the percentage of parents who may be poor candidates for providing quality parental involvement, even a small percentage of parents who impede the welfare of children by their involvement is reason for concern. We must pay attention to the fact that parents experiencing duress cannot adhere successfully to a high enough standard of parental involvement. We must pay attention to children whose behaviors may severely interfere with parents’ good intentions and possibly even spark the rage of the parents. Building proper alliances among parents, educators, and children is a cornerstone of education. This cornerstone cannot be compromised by blind allegiance or continuance of past practices. The challenge for administrators is first to answer carefully the question, “Is the classroom help children receive from parents at home likely to be beneficial, regardless of the home adversities and stressors?” If not, the hazards may be too great to randomly solicit parental involvement. The broad aim is for families and schools to work together in partnerships that are better understood and more effectively planned (Kelley-Laine, 1998). In this way, the involvement of parents with their children on school-related assignments will more certainly achieve desired results.
References


