

26 Ways to Build Involvement

Getting more parents to participate is as easy as A, B, C when you follow this list of best practices.

Written by Craig Bystrynski

A is for Ask. If you want people to participate, you must ask. The number one reason people cite for not volunteering: "Nobody asked."

B is for Black Hole. People are afraid that if they volunteer, they'll be sucked into a black hole of time commitment from which they can't escape. Let them know up front that your group is not a black hole. Then, make sure you honor their time constraints.

C is for Communication. Use a variety of communication tools to make sure your message gets through. Flyers and e-mails are good for communicating a date and time. Use your newsletter and Web site to let people know about your accomplishments. Invite local media to activities involving kids.

D is for Diversity. Reach out to all parents in your school, not just the ones who are easy to reach. Sponsor multicultural events. Translate parent group materials, if necessary. Organize transportation for those who need it. Your school, your group, and the kids all will benefit tremendously from broad-based parent involvement.

E is for Examine. Look closely at your activities to decide what's working and what isn't. Don't just do something because "that's what we've always done." New ideas can create new excitement for your group.

F is for Fun—don't forget about it! Some special people will dedicate their time and energy to a group because it's the right thing to do. Many, many more will participate if it's fun. Make sure your group has fun. You'll build involvement and fight burnout, too.

G is for Gradual. Introduce parents to participation in the PTO gradually. Parents who participate in family events are the most likely to become volunteers. Those who volunteer occasionally are the most likely to take on more responsibility, such as organizing an event. And those organizers are the most likely to become interested in serving as board members. Moving people from step to step takes the stress out of finding future leaders.

H is for Hour, the length to which you should limit meetings. People worry about time commitments. You have better ways for them to spend their volunteer time than at meetings, so don't hold meetings that go on all night. Use your committees to do the detail work. Limit general meetings to one hour, and limit business to finalizing the work of the committees.

I is for Invitation. The best way to get parents involved is to extend a personal invitation. People are most likely to take part in any group when they know someone who already does. Don't just send flyers home, then wonder why nobody "signed up." Create situations in which you can communicate with people one on one.

J is for Just. Don't use this word to describe your group. You are doing important work. You should know it, and others should, too. So don't think of your organization as "just a PTO." If you do, you'll have a much harder time getting others involved.

K is for Kudos. Awards, compliments, a simple thank-you. Always let people know that you appreciate their help, whether they just organized a smashing fundraiser or spent an hour selling tickets at the carnival.

L is for Leadership. Being a leader means looking beyond today. Does your group have long-term goals? How will you get there? If you want to get parents excited, share your vision and give them something to work toward.

M is for Marketing. Sing the praises of your parent group. Make sure people know what you do. When you donate an item to the school, put a plaque or sticker on it that gives you credit. When you raise money, make sure people know what it was able to buy for their kids. A little basic marketing goes a long way toward building your reputation with parents—and encouraging parent involvement.

N is for New Parents—make a special effort to reach out to them. Parents new to the school need your help. You can provide them with information about the school, teachers, schedules, and more. Reach out to them early—and individually—to give them a positive feeling about the PTO.

O is for Organization. Make sure you have bylaws. Adopt sound financial practices. Obtain an Employer Identification Number from the IRS. Incorporate. Consider applying for tax-exempt status from the IRS. Take your group seriously and others will, too.

P is for Priorities. Make parent involvement, not fundraising, your priority. Run two or three major fundraisers a year. Then concentrate on activities that get parents connected to the school. The kids, teachers and administrators, and the PTO will all benefit.

Q is for Questionnaire. Don't just ask for your volunteers' time; ask for their talents. Use a questionnaire to discover parent interests. You'll find dedicated volunteers more easily if you match skills and talents to the jobs you need done.

R is for Research—share it with parents. Research shows that students with involved parents perform better in school, score better on standardized tests, have fewer behavioral problems, are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, and go to better colleges. Make sure you get the word out!

S is for School Family Nights. These are events that get parents and kids together for a night of fun and, perhaps, learning. These events are parent involvement. They get parents connected to the school more successfully than anything else you do. Don't think of family nights as extras, and don't make them fundraisers. Schedule at least two per semester. For free kits on a variety of family nights, check out PTO Today's School Family Nights.

T is for Training. Don't give anyone, officers or volunteers, a job they're not ready for. Make sure people know what is expected of them and have the resources and knowledge to do the job. If you don't, volunteers won't return.

U is for Unite. Whenever possible, seek to unite diverse groups. Work together with teachers and administrators, parents of varying ethnic and economic groups, people with a variety of views. Make the parent group a source of strength for the school.

V is for Visibility. Be visible at all events. Set up a table at open house, registration, and school activities. Assign a board member to walk around at parent group functions; she should introduce herself and make sure people are having fun. Put a welcoming face on the PTO.

W is for Welcome, the way you should make people feel. Have a greeter at meetings to welcome newcomers and make sure they feel comfortable. Use name tags so people who don't attend often won't feel left out. Make that first experience a positive one, so people will want to come back.

X is for X-factor. The x-factor in building a successful parent group is balance. You can run a good event or fundraiser without it. But to sustain a group over the long term, you must find balance: work and fun, PTO time and personal time, fundraising and involvement events.

Y is for Year. Plan out your activities for the entire year. Use your checkbook to create a budget, so you'll know how much money you need to raise. Balance your activities throughout the year so you won't burn out your volunteers or yourself. Take the pressure off with good planning.

Z is for Zero In—on building parent involvement!

How can Parents Help Programs?

- Parent know their children and their communities
- Parents can reach out more effectively to other community members
- Parental support increases community support for program expansion
- Parents who are involved in violence prevention build a stronger sense of social control
- Parental support of a program can help improve youth participation in program activities

How Can Program Help Parents?

- Programs can help parents improve their parenting skills, enabling them to have better interactions with their children.
- Programs can increase parents' social support.
- Program can improve special help to those parents faced with the challenge of living outside the mainstream culture in which their children live. This includes immigrant parents and parents who have experienced homelessness or drug abuse.
- Programs can provide a safe setting for parents to met and interact with other parents. Among high poverty communities, violence is lower in those with strong friendship networks among parents.
- Programs can provide parents with a forum in which to work together to advocate for change in schools, government, or community.

Tips for Sustaining Parent Leaders

- Respect parental expertise. Establish a belief system that creates a culture of mutual respect that values parents as partners and resources.
- Programs must give parents compelling reasons for getting involved and demonstrate by their actions that their involvement will be effective and personally rewarding.
- Be clear and honest in your commitments to parents. Make those commitments in writing. Uphold those commitments overtime.
- Ask parents for straight feedback about your agency's performance in parent engagement; listen to the feedback and use it to improve performance together.
- Secure appropriate resources and funding levels. Parent engagement requires staff time and financial support for important activities and services for parents, including: on-site childcare, meals, transportation, skill development opportunities, and provisions for reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses of participating parents.

Practitioner Roles

- Mentor
- Coach
- Leading from “the inside” (with the explicit permission from the parent) and supporting parents as they develop confidence in their leadership abilities.
- Providing appropriate articles and other resources to build the skills and the knowledge of parents.
- Arranging for parents to attend formal and informal training sessions
- Providing positive feedback and constructive criticism to parents that will encourage further participation and will provide concrete ideas for increasing their leadership expertise
- Looking for opportunities to involve parents in traditional and non-traditional ways in agency initiatives
- Helping others in your agency understand and embrace the principles and benefits to implementing parent engagement initiatives

Parent Roles

- Members of task forces
- Board Members
- Co-trainers for staff development
- Paid program staff
- Mentors for other families
- Grant reviewers
- Participants in needs assessment process
- Reviewers of written materials
- Community advocates
- Participants in focus groups
- Members of hiring committees
- Fund raisers
- Participants at conferences and working meetings
- Participants in quality improvement initiatives
- Public Speaker

Parent Leadership Ambassador Training Guide, produced by Circle of Parents for the FRIENDS
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BENEFITS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Benefits for Programs

- Concrete and pragmatic advice what works, what is needed and ways to improve the program
- Parents make better use of what the program offers
- Increase in volunteers in the program
- Promotion of the program to other families and the community
- Additional resources and support from the community as a result of parent efforts
- Advocacy for the program in the community and with local leaders
- Events and programs – organized by parents - complement center activities

Benefits to Families

- Opportunity to have influence and effect meaningful change
- Increased knowledge & skills – as parents, individuals, communities
- Strengthened personal network with other families, providers, leaders
- Employment opportunities
- Better use of services and resources in the community
- Improve conditions for other families
- Model leadership for children and other families
- Satisfaction of contributing – opportunity to 'give back'
- Expand families' social capital

Benefits for Children

- See their parents contribute
- Parents are respected and valued
- Strong role models
- Parents grow and become more self-assured
- Build relationships with other adults
- Learn to speak up & be active

Benefits for Communities

- Improved the quality of programs, schools, and services
- Increased responsiveness of service providers, educators, local officials, etc.
- Reality check
- Shared responsibility
- Stronger advocacy base
- Increases respect and understanding of various cultures
- Fresh perspective & creative solutions
- Increased visibility and respect for program / school in the community
- Improved ability to accomplish mission



Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Definition:

A process through which children and adults develop fundamental emotional and social skills to handle themselves, their relationships, and their tasks, effectively and ethically.

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Goals and Standards

Goal 31: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

Standards for Goal 31:

- A. Identify and manage one's emotions and behaviors.**
- B. Recognize personal qualities and external supports.**
- C. Demonstrate skills related to achieving personal goals.**

Goal 32: Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.

Standards for Goal 32:

- A. Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others.**
- B. Recognize individual and group similarities and differences.**
- C. Use communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.**
- D. Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.**

Goal 33: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

Standards for Goal 33:

- A. Consider ethical, safety and societal factors in making decisions.**
- B. Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.**
- C. Contribute to the well-being of one's school and community.**

The Five Core Competencies of Social and Emotional Learning

Self-Awareness:

Knowing what we are feeling in the moment; having a realistic assessment of our own abilities and a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.

Self-Management:

Handling our emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; being conscientious and delaying gratification to pursue goals; persevering in the face of setbacks and frustrations.

Social Awareness:

Understanding what others are feeling; being able to take their perspective; appreciating and interacting positively with diverse groups.

Relationship Skills:

Handling emotions in relationships effectively; establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation, resistance to inappropriate social pressure, negotiating solutions to conflict, and seeking help when needed.

Responsible Decision Making:

Making decisions based on an accurate consideration of all relevant factors and the likely consequences of alternative course of action, respecting others, and taking responsibility for one's decisions.

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning
(CASEL)

Definition of Family-Driven Care

Family-driven means families have a primary decision making role in the care of their own children as well as the policies and procedures governing care for all children in their community, state, tribe, territory and nation. This includes:

1. Choosing culturally and linguistically competent supports, services, and providers;
2. Setting goals;
3. Designing, implementing and evaluating programs;
4. Monitoring outcomes; and
5. Partnering in funding decisions.

Guiding Principles of Family-Driven Care

- Families and youth, providers and administrators embrace the concept of sharing decision-making and responsibility for outcomes.
- Families and youth are given accurate, understandable, and complete information necessary to set goals and to make informed decisions and choices about the right services and supports for individual children and their families.
- All children, youth, and families have a biological, adoptive, foster, or surrogate family voice advocating on their behalf and may appoint them as substitute decision makers at any time.
- Families and family-run organizations engage in peer support activities to reduce isolation, gather and disseminate accurate information, and strengthen the family voice.
- Families and family-run organizations provide direction for decisions that impact funding for services, treatments, and supports and advocate for families and youth to have choices.
- Providers take the initiative to change policy and practice from provider-driven to family-driven.
- Administrators allocate staff, training, support and resources to make family-driven practice work at the point where services and supports are delivered to children, youth, and families and where family and youth run organizations are funded and sustained.
- Community attitude change efforts focus on removing barriers and discrimination created by stigma.
- Communities and private agencies embrace, value, and celebrate the diverse cultures of their children, youth, and families and work to eliminate mental health disparities.
- Everyone who connects with children, youth, and families continually advances their own cultural and linguistic responsiveness as the population served changes so that the needs of the diverse populations are appropriately addressed.

Community Organizing & Family Issues

Family Focused Organizing uses parents' strengths and commitment to their children and to their neighborhoods to help make positive change in their own lives, their families and their communities. It emphasizes the commonalities (rather than the differences) between family and community leadership, and between private and public issues.

In Family Focused Organizing:

- 1. SELF:** Leadership begins from within. Parents individually assess their needs, wants and values. They create supportive teams with one another, set goals, and establish plans for achieving those goals.
- 2. FAMILY:** Parents become stronger leaders in their families. Parents support one another in gaining skills and confidence as family leaders, and also learn to set goals with their family members.
- 3. COMMUNITY:** Parents work together to create change in community institutions such as schools, day care centers and social service agencies. To make their community more family-friendly, parent leaders meet with neighbors, find common ground, develop new programs, organize community-wide campaigns, and realize the power of a collective voice.
- 4. POLICY AND SYSTEMS:** Parent leaders create a community-based policy agenda that starts with common concerns raised by parents, such as childcare, safety and school quality. Together, parent leaders organize to communicate their ideas and concerns to community decision makers. They may change programs and challenge policies that aren't meeting the needs of families, and they build partnerships with professionals to develop programs and policies that work.

Family Focused Organizing is distinct from, but also can be complementary to, more "traditional" community organizing models. COFI targets its

COFI implements Family Focused Organizing through three inter-connected programs ***COFI works in local communities***

We train and organize parent leaders, build leadership teams, and support their campaigns to make schools, neighborhoods, and institutions more family friendly.

COFI organizes across communities

In 2003, parent leaders from across Chicago launched POWER-PAC, a grassroots, city-wide organization that is a growing, vital voice for low-income, immigrant and working families.

COFI is a resource for parent leaders and community groups

COFI offers a comprehensive training and organizing program to leaders and their organizations, and partners with organizations and advocacy groups to foster policy change that improves the lives of low-income and working families. We are committed to sharing what we learn about Family Focused Organizing, and learning from other community-based efforts.

organizing work toward a population that is often not involved in traditional organizing or the public sphere — very low income families including welfare recipients, recent immigrants (primarily mothers), and grandmothers raising grandchildren.

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