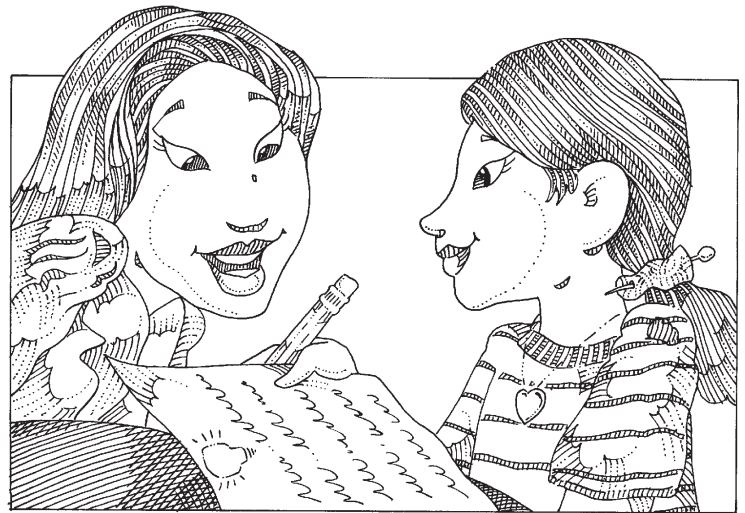


# 25 Best Ways Educators Build Parent Involvement

A special subscriber bonus from the editors of *Helping Children Learn*® & *Helping Students Learn*® newsletters

**F**amily involvement—both at home and at school—is important. There’s a direct correlation between a strong school-family partnership, higher levels of student achievement and improved test scores. And—considering the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—that’s more important than ever before.

This special bonus for *Helping Children Learn*® and *Helping Students Learn*® newsletter subscribers summarizes The Parent Institute’s selection of the 25 best, most consistently effective family involvement ideas that educators are using throughout the country.



## 1 Understand the four A's of family involvement programs.

1. **Acceptance.** Accept parents as the most important people in your students' lives. Also understand that a "one size fits all" approach probably won't work.
2. **Assessment.** Take time to find out who parents are and what they need.
3. **Accommodation.** Know that not all parents care to be involved in the same way.
4. **Alliance-Building.** Understand that parent involvement is contagious: Involved parents are the best ambassadors and the most effective recruiters of other parent volunteers.

## 2 Make parents feel welcome.

Start with the greeting at the front door. Rather than posting a sign that states, "All visitors must report to the office," say, "Welcome to our school. Please sign in at the office."

## 3 Establish early contact before problems arise.

Make friendly contact with parents early in the year. Insist that teachers not wait until it's too late to tell parents about potentially serious problems.

## 4 Let parents know what to expect.

Keep them informed. Provide orientation programs and materials for parents and school volunteers.

## 5 Let parents feel their contributions are meaningful.

Make the most of parent interests and abilities. Don't make assumptions—ask parents what they have to offer.

## 6 Show parents they are appreciated.

Say thank you. Send notes when parents do something helpful. Recognize volunteers in the school newsletter. Host a volunteer appreciation night.

## 7 Begin with the basics.

At the beginning of the year, reach out to parents. Tell them what's available for them at your school:

- A **homework hotline.**
- A **lending library for parents.**
- A **parent lounge** where they can meet informally with teachers or other parents.

## 8 Remember that you don't need a big budget.

Some of the most effective things you can do to make parents feel welcome are simple—and they don't cost much, if anything at all. For example:

- **Promote ownership.** Let parents know it's their school; it exists to serve their children—and them.
- **Have an open door policy.** Tell parents they are always welcome in the school. Ask them to check with you before visiting classrooms to avoid inappropriate interruptions.
- **Find opportunities for informal conversations** with parents—in and out of school.
- **Speak or write to parents** in their native language. Use an interpreter if necessary.
- **Give parents essential roles.** Solicit their involvement in decision making—not just fundraising or baking.

## 9 Know what parents prefer.

Parents say the most important kinds of involvement opportunities are the ones that directly help their children. They prefer:

- **Academic events at school**—family reading nights and “math counts” nights, for example.
- **Ideas for projects** they can do with their child at home.
- **Opportunities to observe** in their child's classroom.
- **Fact sheets** about learning resources they can use.
- **Opportunities to have input** into decisions that directly affect the curriculum.

## 10 Use the right recruiting methods.

When it comes to recruiting parent volunteers, how you ask for help can make a difference:

- **Ask without pressuring.** You want parents who really want to help—not those who feel guilty.
- **Tap into parents' special resources** and skills. Create opportunities for them to share what they know or can do.
- **Publicize the benefits** of volunteering. Let parents know how they can get involved. Write an article for the school newsletter. Post pictures of parent volunteers on your school Web page.
- **Don't hesitate to ask** parents who have turned you down before. You may not have offered them the right opportunity or asked for help at the right time.

## 11 Offer a variety of ways for parents to be involved.

Because parents differ greatly in their willingness, ability and the time they have to spare, offer them a wide range of options like:

- **Change agent.** Some parents can advocate for students' needs and help make decisions. They make good advisory council or task force members.
- **Communicator.** Some parents are born networkers. Ask them to coordinate phone trees, distribute newsletters, etc.
- **Tutor.** Some parents love to help out in the classroom. Use them to provide one-on-one tutoring or special help for small groups.
- **Program coordinator.** Some parents have the skills to coordinate and promote entire events.
- **Front-line assistant.** Some parents enjoy hands-on tasks in the classroom or office.
- **Community liaison.** Some parents have a talent for finding outside resources that meet school and student needs.

## 12 Appeal to a wide range of interests.

In addition to traditional parent groups such as PTA and School Advisory Council, plan events that address a wide range of parent interests. For example:

- **Monthly math and science nights.** Provide students and parents with opportunities to explore different learning styles and strategies.
- **Regular parent days.** Parents can observe in class and participate in special academic or elective programs.
- **Saturday academies.** Parents of children who are not working up to potential can learn how to help at home.

## 13 Break down the barriers to parent participation.

Most parents want to be involved in their child's education. But sometimes barriers stand in the way. The three major barriers are:

1. **Physical distance.** Some parents may live too far from the school to be involved regularly. Consider providing bus transportation for evening activities. Or arrange to hold some meetings in the communities where the parents live.
2. **Cultural or psychological distance.** Parents may have had unpleasant experiences in school themselves. Or they may be reluctant to get involved because of language barriers.

Plan some inviting and nonthreatening activities—a pizza party, for example. Ask the parents you know to invite other parents from their ethnic group or neighborhood to attend.

- 3. Physical safety.** If your school is located in an area where crime is a problem, work with the police to provide extra security for school events.

## 14 Offer special help for non-English-speaking parents.

Parents who do not speak English or who speak very little English often need special help and encouragement to become involved with the school. Consider offering some basic ESL classes for these parents. Hold them before school, after school or in the evening—whenever most parents can attend. Along with language instruction, share ways they can help their child learn.

Consider the fact that your English-speaking parents also might like to learn a new language. Recruit bilingual parents to serve as teachers.

## 17 Send home a monthly calendar.

Each month, send home a calendar that highlights special events. Are there times when parents are free to drop in? Do you need help with a project or event? Are there any special tests being administered?

Here are more ways to make parents from different cultural backgrounds feel welcome:

- **Start a buddy program** for parents who don't speak English. Pair them with a bilingual parent.
- **Recruit bilingual parents** to act as translators for meetings, to tape telephone messages, etc.
- **Plan a culture fair.** Invite families to bring items that represent their cultures. Display the items and let everyone mingle.
- **Create a school cookbook** of recipes from the cultures represented in your school.
- **Set up a multicultural advisory committee** that includes representatives of your school's many cultures.

## 15 Don't overlook grandparents.

Grandparents are a huge untapped source of volunteers in many schools. Reach out to the grandparents of your students—even if they are not the primary caregivers. They can serve as tutors or classroom aides. Or they may have special expertise or life experiences to share.

## 16 Make written materials parent friendly.

Newsletters, reports and memos are the most common ways of communicating with parents. Whatever the format or focus, be sure what you send home is parent friendly:

- **Be brief and clear.** Cut unnecessary words. Rather than, "after a careful examination of," say, "after looking at."
- **Watch your tone and style.** Make your words sound like they come from a real person. Instead of, "We will remain in contact," say, "We'll keep in touch."
- **Keep it simple.** Write at a fourth- to sixth-grade reading level so communications are easy to read.

## 18 Give parents ideas for summer activities.

Summer break doesn't have to mean taking a break from learning. Suggest some learning activities that the family can enjoy together:

- **Visit a museum or art gallery.** Talk or read about what you've seen.
- **Go for a nature hike.** Use field guides to identify the plants and wildlife you encounter.
- **Participate in a sport** or physical activity together. Learn about the muscle groups you use.
- **Learn about the history** of your community or the places you visit on vacation.

## 19 Give parents their own space.

Provide a space in your school that parents can call their own—where they can talk or meet with their child's teacher. It doesn't need to be fancy or large—a quiet corner somewhere will work. Install some comfortable chairs and a coffeepot. Then begin to build a lending library of books, tapes and other resources for parents.

## 20 Give parents reasons to visit your school.

NCLB requires schools to create parent involvement programs. That makes it all the more important to give parents plenty of reasons to come to school. *Make sure they know they're genuinely invited.*

### Activities for older students and parents

A good way to bring parents of older students—parents who may be reluctant to “intrude” in their child’s space—back into the school is to plan activities they can enjoy with their child:

- Ask a **physical education teacher** to plan and lead an aerobic workout program.
- Provide a **workshop** on using different Internet search engines.
- Offer a **CPR certification class**.

### Brown bag lunches

It may be easier for some parents to visit during their lunch breaks. Schedule regular, informal brown-bag lunches where you can meet with groups of parents. You can select the topics yourself or have parents choose them. Just be sure to start and end the discussions promptly so parents can get back to work.

### Parent workshops

Plan workshops on topics of interest to parents. Conduct a survey or ask a core group of parents for ideas. Look to community groups or business partners for organizational assistance and for workshop presenters. Provide refreshments and babysitting. As an extra incentive, hold a drawing for a small door prizes at the end of the evening.

## 21 Offer special invitations to dads.

Too often, dad takes a back seat to mom when it comes to school activities. Offer some special “dads and kids only” programs on Saturday mornings when fathers are more likely to be available—a special project in the media lab or games in the gym, for example. Provide time for fathers to get together separately before the main activity with their child.

Ask fathers to help with special projects around the school like painting the hallways or building a new display case for the main lobby. Or host a regular “Donuts for Dads” breakfast.

- **Read with your child regularly** and be a good reading role model.
- **Provide a healthy diet** and ensure a good night’s sleep.

## 24 Stress two-way communication.

Be sure you *listen*, as well as talk to parents. After all, “one-way” isn’t communication. Reassure parents you’ll keep their suggestions in mind when dealing with specific issues.

## 22 Take photos at school events.

Everyone loves family photos. To increase attendance at your next event, announce that you will take photos of parents and children. Use them in your newsletter and on your Web site.

## 23 Let parents know how they can help at home.

Many parents don’t know what they can do at home to help their child learn. Tell them:

- **Check your child’s homework** each day.
- **Support your child’s teachers.** Parent support at home translates into better student behavior in the classroom.

## 25 Evaluate your efforts.

How successful have you been at creating a parent-friendly climate? The end of the year is a good time to find out. Conduct a survey and ask parents what they think. Here are some questions you might ask:

- **How effective are current communication techniques** (newsletters, conferences, etc.)?
- **What new services** would you like to have?
- **Are there barriers** that prevent you from attending school events?
- **For which activities** would you be willing to volunteer? (Provide a checklist.)

Leave space for parents to add other comments.

*For even more great ideas on ways to get parents involved in the education of their children, check out **The Parent Institute** at [www.parent-institute.com](http://www.parent-institute.com).*