

# Strategies for building social support for families

by Lisa Ann Haeseler

Today's schools are fraught with fragmented and partial services being given to our most precious resource, our community's children. Families with small children need to have both educator and social service support, especially those families at risk, by providing them with deserved ecological care. There are three kinds of professionals who can enhance this home-school-community connection: education professionals, children's parents or caregivers, and community agency providers or social service practitioners. Educators must be sensitive to the life space barriers in the home that negatively affect academic progress. Based on their outreach needs, diverse families dictate for the neighborhood the types of referrals and services. The caregivers lead in the kinds of designated community resources to be implemented, as families at risk are the ones utilizing these resources. School professionals

must be keen to familial issues, offering appropriate, high-quality care.

## Educator biases of families at risk

Research indicates that many educators are not sensitive to the home and neighborhood struggles experienced by families in need and do not empathize with families at risk who reside in low-income, high-crime, inner-city communities. In these communities, parent/caregiver involvement is understandably low due to their life circumstances. However, educators often interpret nonparticipation as indicating that education is not valued, and perceive parents as confrontational and impolite. And yet educators recognize that caregivers seemed overworked and overwhelmed with economic, household, daily living, and out-of-school (home and community) issues.

## Enhancing communication with family members

It is vital for educators to be aware of the warning signs warranting investigation and the proper community outreach referrals appropriate to benefit families. Teacher and social service support is absolutely crucial, showing parents you really care. Families today are very diverse. They require early childhood teachers to go the

extra mile to better advocate for children. In order for educators to gain cooperation from parents, they must strive to build an open-channel partnership. In this way, families begin to feel more comfortable talking with teachers and describing their needs for community resources. When teachers are more informed of the types of neighborhood services available, more appropriate and timely referrals can be made.

Today's families require early childhood educators to embrace a broad-ranging model that unifies the home-school-community connection. In the following case vignette we see a typical situation that teachers encounter.

Jen is a young, single mother who just recently separated from her abusive boyfriend, the father of Jen's child Joe. When you meet Jen you see that Joe is overtly agitated on the school playground. You first want to find out about Jen and Joe and the life they lead. When Jen tells you that she is struggling financially and feeling overwhelmed with Joe's behavioral issues at home, you express empathy and demonstrate your willingness to do something to help. You tell Jen you care and engage with her through calming messages that you will try to help her as she copes with her family's transition. At



Dr. Lisa Ann Haeseler is a professor at Canisius College for the School of Education and Human Services, and is a faculty team member in the undergraduate childhood education program where every course semester she engages with her students

in community contribution service learning initiatives. She is a licensed social worker, and received her doctorate in educational leadership from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her dissertation explored the experience of coping for women of domestic violence abuse, as interpreted by the female service professionals, who daily aid them, and how attitudes, perspectives and leadership styles of professionals influence the women's service care.

your desk you have handy a rolodex of reputable, low-cost, community outreach phone numbers. You make the calls with Jen to ensure the appropriateness of the service agency referrals. A single, young mother in this situation who is coping with man, money, and child troubles usually won't make these calls alone. And she may not have the coping skills to address the situation herself and be her own advocate.

Another typical scenario involves caregivers who are English Language Learners, multilingual, or learning English as their second language. In this vignette, Juan is meeting with you regarding his daughter who is very quiet, appears aloof, and does not make eye contact.

In your first meeting you engage Juan in conversation, probing for more information using polite, respectful questions. You discover he lives in a large household where many have minimal English skills. You set him up with a community translator, cultural social clubs, and immigration and work programs to help him and his family better transition into the community. In taking the time to talk with Juan, you find out that in his culture it is taboo (disrespectful) for children to look into an adult's eyes. Also, because his daughter is used to hearing non-English speakers, she is uncomfortable around English-speaking children.

## Strategies for building social support networks for today's families

From an administrative perspective, classroom teachers and program directors can collaborate in helping families and modeling ecological sensitivity. In eliciting input from families, teachers help families feel more included and valued, leading to greater interest in their children's education and increased cooperation. The following strategies can broaden a program's understanding of families' needs and make strides in meet-

ing these within the context of early childhood services. In adopting a more broad social service/family support model, early childhood programs ensure that families are better cared for.

### ■ Write a strategic plan for social support services.

At the beginning of the school year, ask families to complete a confidential, open-ended Needs Based Assessment (NBA) regarding home and neighborhood needs. Use the responses to determine referrals and resources to make available to families. Administrators, teachers, and other school personnel need to collaborate regarding questions to pose in the assessment. Categories could include: food, clothing, housing, tutoring/study habits, home literacy, family counseling for child emotional/behavioral problems, child custody, parenting skills, nutrition workshops, adult/partner abuse, school bullying, neighborhood violence, community outreach service listings, and child care services offered free or at low cost/sliding scale. After results are gathered, schools should consider hiring an on-call, multi-care, community outreach consultant. Once a family or child's needs are determined, the prospective referral is forwarded to the consultant who navigates the family's connection with the appropriate agency. In this way, families are afforded the service delivery they need.

### ■ Train staff in working with at-risk families.

Provide ecological sensitivity training to help staff understand the needs of enrolled families. In addition to being mandatory for all teaching staff, these workshops could be open to the community as well. Training topics could include: home literacy, transportation, income, medical/mental health, prescription coverage, domestic/child abuse, community violence/crime, and limited English proficiency. The needs of currently enrolled families should help shape the training. As the neighborhood needs

of the families dictate the types of services offered in the local community, school professionals should first engage in these ecologically sensitive workshops conducted by local outreach workers from neighborhood social service agencies since they are the ones who already assist these families (domestic violence, child abuse, poverty). These providers are suitable facilitators for the training that will build educators' understanding of the nature and severity of the issues families face.

### ■ Partner with local colleges in offering placements for students.

Early childhood programs can offer student teaching placements for pre-service teachers who are entering the early childhood profession. This allows students to make a contribution while receiving on-the-job training and earning college credit. School professionals should arrange a meeting with local college administrators to develop a plan to offer college students volunteer or internship hours working with children from low-income families who cannot afford child care.

### ■ Conduct home visits to build relationships with families.

Once or twice a year, families should receive a home visit from program staff. A social service provider may also accompany an educator, as she may already have established a relationship through providing community outreach services. Families with small children need to view teachers as community helpers, showing compassion and empathy to home life needs.

### ■ Advocate for the needs of young children by planning benefit events.

Advocacy for children begins with exemplifying neighborhood action. Any educational professional can stir up community activism by taking the following steps: family nights with child care provided, fundraisers such as bake sales and car washes, more flexible

scheduling of parent-teacher conferences, family-centered PTA functions, and events including speakers on popular parenting topics. For example, after the start of the year, the school district should hold community-centered events with the intention of informing families what kinds of neighborhood services are available free or at low cost. Community service and school personnel should come together in these events and work together to serve families. Libraries can share free literacy offerings (books, videos, volunteers). Restaurants can offer healthy foods and beverages while describing their menu of free and/or low-cost meals and specials such as “Kids eat free on Tuesdays from 4-6.”

■ **Conduct community outreach to engage families.**

Increase opportunities for caregivers to meet at convenient times and locations for parent and teacher support teams/groups, parenting and vocational training classes, mentoring programs, and socials. Families show up at events when they feel valued. Understanding that many family members work long hours, caregivers can offer compassion as well as the child care the children need. Teachers should be flexible in scheduling meetings with families as many do not have reliable transportation or a phone, so communication can be difficult.

■ **Build professional collaborations to serve families better.**

Educators and social service providers must work cooperatively on a regular basis to ensure that families’ vital needs are met. Topics could include: Medicaid, food and clothing pantries, native culture and language referrals, limited English at home, and GED programs. These multi-disciplinary meetings should serve as a forum for bouncing ideas off each other, enhancing professional relationships, and deepening professionals’ commitment to serving children and families in need.

■ **Work with local businesses to offer Community Safety Days.**

These should include discussions of anti-violence and abuse prevention efforts. Schools can implement pro-social classroom simulations and safety awareness role-play scenarios. Teachers can collaborate with other professionals in offering biblio-therapy, art and music therapy, and self-esteem and self-growth/expression activities to promote school and community safety and anti-bullying. Through free expression (drawing, free writing, musical interpretation, role-plays) young children can feel comfortable revealing home life situations. These community-centric days should include various helping professionals such as firefighters, police, and medical professionals. In addition, to promote a more gender-free perspective these professionals presenting to children discussing their job roles in the community, should make an effort to have the presenters be in non-traditional gendered roles: a male nurse and a female firefighter.

■ **Serve as emergency contacts for families in need.**

By providing families with resources for emergencies, caregivers demonstrate their sensitivity. Programs can provide pre-paid, emergency cell phones. Administrators can collaborate with local phone companies on this project. For example, if a parent is unable to meet with a teacher due to an unexpected event or work issue, the parent can call the teacher. Furthermore, as many low-income families reside in high-crime, violent neighborhoods, a cell phone could save their lives by being able to call 911/police when faced with a dangerous situation.

■ **Assist families with their transportation needs.**

Schools can assist families by providing taxi vouchers, bus tokens, and car pool options. In addition, teachers and administrators should be flexible if fam-

ilies are late for pick-up or scheduled meetings, and communicate an attitude that exudes understanding and compassion. As many families have no vehicle of their own and must rely on others to attend school events, educational administration should work with local governments and departments of transportation to create partnerships in offering families low-cost or free transportation.

In adopting a more holistic home-school-community model like the one proposed here, early childhood professionals match the complex and diverse service needs of enrolled families with the community resources they require. When ECE programs adopt this type of model, it becomes a win-win-win (educators, families, community providers) as they are all able to be equal and active participants. These initiatives and program strategies show families they are valued and educators are dedicated and involved. This promotes buy-in and encourages ownership. All three sectors feel they are contributing as a unified team. Teaching professionals and family members create a partnership to help collectively care for a community’s children.

## Summary

At-risk families cope with many issues simultaneously and are often overwhelmed. To assist families, early childhood professionals must offer community- and family-centered support through collaborations with social service providers and outreach professionals. Educational professionals working in high-needs schools must re-examine their funding policies, fiscal frameworks, protocols, and communication processes to better include community service providers. The school must serve as a resource and social network of care for families. Educators at all leadership levels can enhance the home, school, and community connection. When

teachers are afforded the time necessary to partner with other professionals in their community, they arrive at solutions, and real change happens for deserving families!