The family partnership

by Molly Greenman

So glad you asked

As one woman after another described small victories as parents — "I took my son to the playground", "My daughter won the class spelling bee" — Cheryl seemed to disappear into her chair. The group got more and more animated with successive rounds, but Cheryl 'passed' every time. Finally, the other moms insisted there must be something Cheryl did with her kids that she felt good about. "Well, I made a promise to myself I would read to my kids every night, just like my mom did, and I have kept that promise to this day." After a moment of stunned silence, the room exploded: "Every single night?" "Where do you get the books?" "How do you know what books to read?" Cheryl, like many of the other moms present that night, was living in a transitional housing apartment and had been homeless many times over the years. And, like the other moms, she was used to being told what she needed to do to take care of her kids, but not used to being asked what she knew how to do that might benefit others.

In 2000, The Family Partnership was asked by a large local family foundation to come up with a fresh approach to teaching parenting to low-income parents. The result was The Family Project. Its innovation within the field of parent engagement has been to offer alternatives to parenting classes and institutionally driven parent engagement activities, rethinking parent involvement in terms of community-building and parent connectedness. It has been particularly successful with low-income families, families of color, and new immigrants, helping to reduce the information and connection gap between parents and the institutions that families interface with — especially schools. Since 2001, more than 15,000 parents and children have been engaged through this work; 84% identified as people of color and 59% as new immigrants. The Family Project has grown into a nationally recognized program, receiving the Annie E. Casey "Family Strengthening Award" from the United Neighborhood Centers of America.

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The Family Project model is founded on several assumptions:

- We see parents as the bearers of assets; our job is to help bring those assets to light.
- Change takes place in the context of relationships, and positive change requires mutual trust and respect.
- As people experience being seen, heard, and valued, they begin to believe they have something to offer.

The typical parent we seek to engage is living on a marginal income, uses public transportation, and has limited English language proficiency. Native-born parents usually have their own history of negative school experiences, while immigrants often have very different expectations of their role in their children's education. Finally, isolation is a common thread. These are families who are disconnected from the school community and often their neighborhoods, as well. Particularly, when children are being bused to elementary and pre-schools, the parents are unlikely to know each other.

Most of these parents have heard from the school (and many other professionals in their lives) plenty about what they are not doing, but should do for their children. This is not surprising; we are a nation of problem-solvers, which of course means we have to have problems to solve. And we love experts (think Dear Abby, Judge Judy, Ask This Old House). As educators and social workers, people expect us to have answers, and besides, we put a lot of time, energy, and money into developing our expertise.

We often encounter school personnel, and parent volunteers, who have given up trying to engage the other parents. One principal told me, "I think those parents just don't care!" Class sizes, classroom expectations, and diversity are increasing, while resources, support services, and public confidence are on the wane. It must be really challenging for teachers and school staff to maintain a spirit of equanimity, much less enthusiasm toward parents who don't meet our expectations for involvement.

So, if schools and programs want parents to help their kids to succeed and parents want their children to succeed

in school, why do we keep missing the mark? What we have found in The Family Project is that school staff and parents have a hard time listening to each other. School staff experience enormous pressure to share information with parents because of the urgency of educating parents about school choice, meeting *No Child Left Behind* goals, etc. School staff often think they are listening, when in fact they are doing most of the talking, information sharing, and problem-solving. Parents, for their part, are pretty tired of being talked at, frequently have had negative experiences of their own with school (as both a student AND a parent), and are tired of coming to school-parent meetings where the entire agenda has been set in advance by the schools.

That's why The Family Project begins by asking questions. When we help parents and schools come together in Family Gatherings, we ask both parties some fundamental questions — usually ones that they have never been asked before. Our first Family Gathering icebreaker question goes quite deep: "What beliefs and values guide you as a parent, or as someone who cares about kids." This question creates an atmosphere of both intimacy AND equality. Practically every time we do this, both parents and school staff say: "We have never been asked this question before."

This conversation sets the stage for other questions:

"What do you think is going on with your child? What do you need to help your kids succeed in school? How can we help?" Sadly again, most of these parents tell us, no one has ever asked them what they thought.

For example, Alejandro's teacher and the school social worker had worked for months to get help for him after he was screened for ADHD. They could not understand why a parent would not follow through on treatment that they had bent over backward to make accessible. They asked our Spanish-speaking school-family liaison to help. She visited the mother and, by asking questions, found out the mom had completely misinterpreted the school's communication. The mom thought ADHD meant she was deficient in paying attention to her son. She was so ashamed, she avoided contact with school officials as much as possible.

We have also learned in our work with parent engagement in schools that immigrant parents are often coming with completely different expectations of schools and themselves. In México, for example, the schools are the authority on a child's education and have the responsibility for the child while in school. Parents are neither expected nor encouraged to get involved and may be seen as meddling if they do.

At the beginning of my comments, I shared Cheryl's story. She persuaded low-income, homeless parents that it is possible to read to their children every night. She answered their questions, which helped them see how they could do this, too. Now if our staff said the same things, those same parents probably would have said: "Get out of here! Stop talking down to us. You have no idea what being homeless is like or how unrealistic you are being about our lives. You're not helping." Even worse, they may not have said but only thought the words, and disengaged from further involvement. But Cheryl showed that everyone can help. Parents can teach each other. Parents have many — perhaps even most — of the answers that other parents need. We just need to create spaces in which they can share what they value, believe, and know with each other. To do that, we have to ask them.

I'm not going to tell you we have all the answers about how to do this. I will offer some questions that you can ask parents, your co-workers, and yourself to begin the conversation:

- Share a time you felt successful as a parent.
- What do you think would help your child (get to/behave better in/do better in) school/child care?
- What's getting in the way of you helping your child succeed?
- What was your experience with school/pre-school like? How would you like your child's experience to be the same? Different?
- What beliefs or values help guide you as a parent? How can we support those in our center?
- What are some of your family's cultural traditions?
- What has been your experience with your child's school/center/program?
- What are your dreams for your child? What are your hopes for your child in this class/program/center?
- What's the best way for you to get information about what's going on in this school/class/program?
- What does your child like best about you?
- What support could you use to make sure your child has a good experience in our school/program?
- And last, but not least, how can we help your child, your family, and you succeed?!

You may be surprised that staff and parents frequently come up with different answers to the same key questions. For example, when asked what parent engagement means, school staff and child care providers often say:

Beginnings Workshop

- Attending conferences
- Going to PTO meetings
- Doing what is asked by staff (e.g., filling out forms)

Parents, on the other hand, may say engagement means:

- "I get my child to the bus every day."
- "I let the teacher do their job."
- School staff will greet me when I come into the building, believe what I say about my child, and see my child and me as a source of solutions, rather than problems.

To get you started, it may help to think about what a positive, engaged parent interactioon looks like to you:

- Think of a time when you made a strong, positive connection with a parent.
- What about that interaction was different than others?
- What are your strengths as a relationship builder? What might others in your center bring to a parent engagement process?
- How do you know whether parents think you (and your center) are listening to them and being responsive?

Today, there is a general consensus that early childhood development and learning is essential for children's success in school and life. Most experts agree that parent involvement is key to children's success in school. Early childhood educators can not only jump start young children's learning, you can jump start parent involvement, too.

One more question: What are you waiting for?

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