

Investing in Parents During the First Six Weeks of School

An adapted excerpt from [Parents & Teachers Working Together](#)

by Carol Davis and Alice Yang



Teachers work hard during the first six weeks of school to get to know their students and to establish a safe and welcoming classroom environment. This early investment makes the whole school year go better. The same idea applies to working with the most influential adults in the children's lives: their parents.

Although in many schools the first parent conference doesn't take place until November, teachers can begin early—right as, or even before, the school year starts—to build a positive relationship with parents.

Investing in parents as well as children during those critical first six weeks yields better school-home

interactions all year, enriches classroom life, and enhances children's learning.

Goals for the first six weeks

Teachers are experts on curriculum and pedagogy, but parents are experts on their own children—how the children absorb information, what delights them, how they show that they're upset, what comforts them. During the first six weeks, we can create a climate of respect, trust, and collaboration with these valuable educational partners. Here are the three main goals in this early work with parents:

Help parents feel welcomed and valued. Show that you're excited to work with their child. Reassure them that their opinions, interests, and family culture matter to you. As one parent of a second grader said, "It's so important to me that the teacher has a welcoming demeanor and shows that she wants you to be part of your child's education."

Welcome parents to play an active role. Begin sending the message that you want parents to visit the classroom, send notes, call you, and voice opinions.

Build community among families. Help parents get to know each other. When parents share positive relationships, they're more likely to get their children together outside of school, take part in school life, and seek help if their children need it.

^^^Back to Top^^^

Strategies for meeting these goals

Start early with a special parent conference.

To demonstrate powerfully that parents matter, hold your first parent conference before school starts or

during the early weeks. You'll gather crucial information about the child and family, which can mean more effective teaching from the very start.

One way to structure this first conference is to invite parents to share their goals, hopes, and dreams for their child. You could ask, "What do you think is the most important thing for Helen to learn this year?" or "What's your biggest hope for Jeff this year?" Such questions immediately and meaningfully engage parents and set a collaborative tone. The answers give teachers important insights into their new students.

Susan Smith, who teaches third grade at Rolling Hills Elementary in Holland,

Hopes and Dreams

Child's name: Nicholas

Parent's name: Paula

My hopes and dreams for my child's academic learning this year are:

I would like Nicholas to learn to write neater, to take his time with directions and not try to rush his way through school. I would also like for Nicholas to enjoy learning and being in school.

My hopes and dreams for my child's social development this year are:

I want Nicholas to build strong friendships. I want him to learn that he can resist peer pressure and still be liked. I would like him to be more assertive in approaching

Pennsylvania, sends a letter home beforehand to give parents time to think about their hopes and dreams for their child. Like many teachers, she invites parents to choose both a social and an academic goal. By doing so, Susan eases the pressure of choosing just one goal while also demonstrating the equal importance of the social and academic curricula.

Send out a family interest inventory.

Another way to gather information early is to send out a form that asks parents to list special talents, skills, interests, or family traditions that they would like to share with the class. This establishes a connection with the family and welcomes parents into an active role in classroom life.

As you plan units of study, incorporate parents whenever possible. Rafael's mom can show the class her coin collection; Marlene's dad can teach hand drumming; Anna's grandfather is willing to tell stories. Such sharing lets the children learn about each other's families, helps children and parents feel welcome, and enriches the curriculum, all at the same time.

Hold a Morning Meeting for parents.

To encourage connections among families during the first six weeks, many teachers hold a Morning Meeting for parents, perhaps at back-to-school night. Although the content is geared toward parents and the meeting takes place in the evening, you can follow the usual Morning Meeting format—a Greeting, a Sharing, a Group Activity, and News and Announcements. Just as this format sets a positive tone for learning in the classroom, it does so for this evening of adult communication. It helps build a sense of community among adults and lets parents experience something their children do every day at school. (For a brief description of Morning Meeting, see the box below.)

To emphasize a feeling of collaboration and openness, have parents sit in a circle, just as the children do in their Morning Meeting. Sit in the circle with the parents just as you do with students.

A typical Morning Meeting lasts around thirty minutes, so you'll have plenty of time to discuss curriculum, approaches to homework, and the other items on your agenda.

For more on Morning Meeting, see [The Morning Meeting Book](#) by Roxann Kriete. For details on holding Morning Meeting with parents, see "Morning Meeting begins at 7:15 pm!" in the Summer 2003 issue of this newsletter. The article is available at

www.responsiveclassroom.org/pdf_files/15_3nl_2.pdf.

Communicate about homework.

You can increase the chances that all students will have success with homework by communicating your homework philosophy and expectations to both parents and students early in the year and factoring in their homework concerns.

Third-fourth grade teacher April Bates believes that homework should let children practice what they learned at school and develop their ability to work independently. But not all children are at the same place in their learning and their readiness for independent work, so April adapts homework as necessary to suit their needs. "I have four reading groups and two math groups," says April. "If homework is an extension of schoolwork, then we need to individualize their homework, too." Believing that homework should not be a burden for students or their families, April also adjusts her assignments so that a third grader working diligently can finish in thirty minutes and a fourth grader, in forty-five.

In the first six weeks of school, April talks with her students about homework. Together, they brainstorm how to do homework successfully and create a "Possible Homework Problems and Solutions" chart. Then, at a conference in early October, she asks parents about their children's homework history, shares her philosophy and expectations, and shows how to help children with assignments. Only after building this foundation does April begin assigning homework.

April sees significant rewards from early homework discussions. "I feel better about homework because everyone's more comfortable—students, parents, and myself." Many families agree. "It's proactive rather than reactive," says parent Karen Rockwell. "It feels like a group effort."

^^^ [Back to Top](#) ^^

Remember the small daily interactions.

Learning about families, fostering community, sharing homework ideas. These are big things we must handle with care and skill when building bridges with

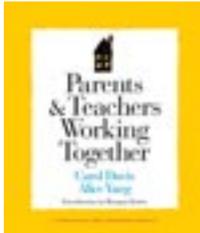


parents as the school year starts. But in these early weeks, it's important to remember that small daily interactions also matter.

Whenever parents pick up or drop off a child, call to get homework for a sick child, or help in the classroom, we have an opportunity to connect. We can share something positive about the child: "Jacob did a great job sharing markers today." We can follow up on a previous discussion: "Have you thought about sharing your weaving with the class?" Or we can simply ask how the parent is doing: "How are things going with the new baby?" Day by day, we can let parents know that we recognize and value them.

Reaching out as early as possible

If we engage parents early in the school year, the school-home partnership can be one of our most powerful unions. We can reach out in many ways; the methods described here are only suggestions. Decide what works best for your students and their parents. The important things are that you be informative, respectful, and welcoming—and that you begin early.



To learn more about working with parents, see [Parents and Teachers Working Together](#), by Carol Davis and Alice Yang.

Carol Davis is a consulting teacher for Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC), leading workshops and coaching teachers in their classrooms. She has taught, counseled, and consulted with children and parents in many settings. In addition to her NEFC work, Carol currently serves as a school counselor in the Centerville Public Schools in Dayton, Ohio.

Alice Yang has spent much of her career working for organizations devoted to children's well-being. She was a writer for the Children's Defense Fund before joining NEFC's editorial staff. Alice is currently publications manager for NEFC. alice@responsiveclassroom.org

^^^ [Back to Top](#) ^^

What Research Says About Parent Involvement

Regardless of family income or background, students whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.

Henderson, A.T., and K.L. Mapp. 2002. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

The most accurate predictors of student achievement in school are not family income or social status, but the extent to which the family creates a home environment that encourages learning, communicates high yet reasonable expectations for the child's achievement, and becomes involved in the child's education at school.

National PTA. 2000. *Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide for Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs*. Bloomington, Indiana: National Education Service, 11–12.

When parents are involved at school, the performance of all the children at school, not just their own, tends to improve. The more comprehensive and well planned the partnership between school and home, the higher the student achievement.

Henderson, A.T., and Nancy Berla. 1995. *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 14–16.

**Begin each day as a community of
caring and respectful learners**

Morning meeting is a key element of the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching. It is a daily routine that builds community, creates a positive climate for learning, and gives children practice in a wide range of academic and social skills.

At a typical Morning Meeting, children and their teacher (and sometimes other adults, such as special area teachers and other staff members) gather for around thirty minutes at the beginning of the school day. Sitting together in a circle, they greet each other, share news, do a group activity, and look forward to the day ahead. In the process, the children practice the academic skills on which they are currently working and learn social skills such as listening, speaking, problem solving, and group participation. They also get to know each other and build group cohesiveness. The positive tone set in the meeting creates the context not just for that single day in the classroom but for the children's broader understanding of school and of learning.