



Valuing Parents and Making Them Allies

Educators can help parents become valued participants in the education of their adolescents by providing them with opportunities to stay involved and with information about their children.

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When I ask parents to share their feelings about their children attending middle school, it is not uncommon for them to say, “I feel like we’re entering the ‘black hole.’” Upon further discussion, it generally becomes apparent that their fears include the possibility of dealing with troublesome adolescent behaviors and losing a connection with their kids. Unlike their experience with elementary school, parents do not expect to feel welcome in the middle school. That’s where things need to change!

The Invitation

Parents need to recognize from the beginning that their perspective is needed to help educators serve their children well. Because parents often receive the concurrent message from their adolescents that their presence at school is no longer needed, educators should explicitly invite parents to be involved. The truth is, as Rick McCoy (2007) states, parents “have longitudinal information; ours is latitudinal.” Educators see kids in the context of other middle school students, while parents know only the history of their specific child.

The invitation to parents should clearly indicate your enthusiasm for middle-level education and for middle school kids. Imagine how such an invitation will affect parents as they struggle with the inevitable conflicts of early adolescence. Knowing that their kids’ teachers want to be there is critical to helping parents feel at ease with the school. It also helps them see us as being credible sources of information about their kids and their learning.

Creating Meaningful Involvement

Room parents in elementary school are relatively common—and what a treat it is for parents to see their children’s faces light up when they arrive! At the middle school level, however, it is common for parents to feel that their presence is neither wanted nor needed. Many parents believe that at this age, part of their kid’s “job description” is to not act excited if mom or dad shows up.

What is less known is that parent presence *is* appreciated by their children and can be a real asset to teachers. Creating meaningful tasks for parents and asking for their help takes away some of the mystery of middle school. Involving parents in team meetings as well as school improvement committees is also a proven way of removing barriers and increasing communication. Another simple way to encourage involvement is to have parents help in the hallways during the first few days of school and during those last few days when things can get a little chaotic. Some extra adult presence can make a huge difference at those times.

Taking communication a step further than keeping parents abreast of activities also can help to cement the relationship with the school. For example, regular newsletters or e-mail loops with information about current school issues, adolescent development topics, parenting suggestions, and rumor control can go a long way toward making parents feel like they are being included and respected.

My former school, Saline Middle School, hosted a weekly breakfast for parents and their kids, during which the students were given positive comments prepared by their team teachers. Parents and students also were given an opportunity to share their concerns and ideas with the administration. Whether it’s a program like this one or a simple feedback form asking for input, inviting parents to share their ideas is invaluable in clearing up misunderstandings and in opening up some new avenues that may not have been considered.

Sharing Critical Information

Watching the changes that occur during adolescence is amazing when it is someone else's child, but it can be terrifying when it is your own child. Middle school staff members have critical information that can make this time less frightening for parents, which in turn will help to guard against overreactions and assure appropriate support when problems arise.

The most important information for parents to hear and understand is that their children will be trying on new identities and asserting their independence during the middle school years. For parents, this can be scary and painful; but they will be comforted to know that it is a natural part of their child's development. On the other hand, when parents see their child experimenting with an identity that is destructive (through alcohol slogans, sexually suggestive clothing, and gang clothing, for example), they need to assert their parental authority. Ultimately, parents need to be reassured that they are still the parents and that their role is not to become their child's friend.

An important concept to share with parents is that they are not raising children—they are raising adults. This means they need to prepare them to assume responsibilities, challenge them to think and apply their knowledge, and help them understand the consequences of their behaviors. Guiding them by establishing limits is an essential part of this process.

When a child is making the right decisions, however, it is also appropriate to affirm those decisions and provide more freedom. Consistency doesn't mean treating all kids the same, but it means doing what it takes to consistently move them toward becoming successful adults.

Understanding the Parenting Manual

It is essential to equip parents with the tools they need to be successful by having them reflect on their own childhood and how they were parented. *How to Keep Being a Parent When Your Child Stops Being a Child* (Cooper & McCoy, 1999) refers to this act of reflection as understanding the "parenting manual." Reflection can help parents avoid repeating destructive patterns from their childhood with their kids.

Cooper and McCoy also suggest some tools that are essential for parents to successfully negotiate the adolescent years. Although these tools may not seem particularly brilliant, they have a deeper meaning.

- **Listen.** Work to see things through the eyes of your child, ask open-ended questions, and actively seek their perspective without lecturing.
- **Value.** Identify and state your child's positive qualities that are not related to performance. Compare the following two statements, for example: "You are a very hard worker," and "I'm proud of you for getting an A on that test." The first statement is a value comment that will lead the adolescent to identify him or herself in that way.
- **Model.** Pattern positive behaviors and describe the reasoning behind them. For example, say to your child, "Jim is a good friend of mine not just because I enjoy being around him but because he doesn't hesitate to be honest with me even when it is difficult."
- **Express Feelings.** Use "I-messages" by telling your child specifically how you feel about specific behaviors and what you expect in the future. Such a statement is most powerful if preceded by affirmations like "my relationship with you is very important to me" or "I love you."
- **Let Go.** Adolescents will have to handle the consequences of their actions, and those actions are not a reflection on parents. The parents' role is to help their children understand consequences and decide the next course of action.

By providing these opportunities and information to parents, you will help them become valued participants in their children's education and allies in your efforts to help them learn and grow.

References

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