

Parent Involvement Insights from Family Counselors

The Parent Institute staff got some powerful insights into parent involvement during a recent visit to the New Horizons Family Counseling Center at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. The center offers free services to hundreds of families in six school districts each year, and the counselors have a unique third-party perspective on the problems of parent involvement. Here is what they told us:

What Complaints Do Family Counselors Hear from Schools?

- Too many parents are self-centered, work multiple jobs, and have so many problems they can barely get themselves out the door in the morning, much less provide their child with a good breakfast and on-time arrival at school.

- Parents just don't spend much time with their children. They offer money and "stuff," but not the attention children need so badly.

- Many parents make unrealistic demands of schools to accommodate their individual needs, interests, and preferences.

- Parents expect the school to fix their child's problems, saying, "Don't tell me about it; that's your job!"

- Parents do not accept responsibility for their children and frequently lie to cover up their child's misbehavior, absences, and irresponsibility.

- Too many parents adopt a "Not my kid!" attitude even when faced with hard evidence of their child's behavior.

- A discouraging number of parents don't know how to help their children do better in school, or don't have the basic skills needed to help.

- Parents frequently don't follow through on steps they agreed to at school conferences.

- Children who need increased parent involvement often have parents who are nearly impossible to reach.

What Complaints Do Family Counselors Hear from Parents?

- Schools communicate with parents too little and too late. Parents need to learn about problems while there is still time to solve them.

- Parents treasure positive feedback about their children, yet rarely receive it.

- Parents often feel unwelcome when they go to the school for any reason.



- Schools frequently treat parents as adversaries rather than partners.

- Schools are often defensive when working with parents.

- Schools often jump to conclusions about parents without knowing all the facts, assuming, for example, that missing school events is a sign of disinterest rather than legitimate schedule conflicts.

- Schools frequently misread parents as uncaring, overly pushy, or even incompetent, but most parents want to help and just need clear details about the involvement schools expect of them.

- Parents want simple information about how to work with the school. (If this is the problem, talk to _____. If the problem is _____, contact _____, etc.)

What Surprises Family Counselors?

- Lack of good communication between parents and children is usually the biggest cause of poor student performance.

- Even the most troubled families faithfully attend week after week of counseling sessions, show tremendous love for their children, and desperately want them to succeed.

- Families know they should spend more time together (and genuinely want to do this), but often simply cannot do so.

- Kids—even adolescents—want to spend much more time with their parents.

- Children with drug problems often have parents with drug problems.

- School zero-tolerance programs prevent children from learning from their mistakes.

Although schools often see children's problems as rooted in their dysfunctional families, the New Horizons counselors say that helping children succeed in school aids families as well. Their experience has shown that when a family can pull itself together to help a child do well in school, everything else seems to fall into place.

Could it be that if we focus more on parent involvement in education, we'll produce more successful students *and* families? With that kind of double payoff potential, how can we not try? ■

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