My Dad Knows the Principal!

When I was in the middle of third grade, my family moved across town in Kansas City, Missouri, requiring me to transfer from Graceland Elementary School, which I had attended since kindergarten, to Gladstone Elementary School. That was more than 55 years ago, but I still remember it clearly.

Moving was exciting, yet I was worried about the new school. Who would be my teacher? Would I make new friends? Would I be able to walk to school and back? Would I be using familiar books?

Then my dad mentioned that he knew the principal, Mr. Gardner. I don’t remember how they knew each other. They could have just met. But all of a sudden, I knew everything would be all right because my dad knows the principal!

I shared this news with the neighborhood kids—Jerry Gregory next door, Ellen Chartrand three doors away, and Charlie Bennett on the corner. They were impressed, too. Now I was really excited about going to the new school.

On my first day at the school, I met Mr. Gardner right away. He came up to me and said, “You must be the Wherry boy. Welcome to Gladstone!” Then he took me to my classroom. It was a small school and there weren’t many midyear transfers, and I realize now that I was easy to spot. But I felt really special at the time. The principal himself had greeted me and escorted me to class! It was a great start to what turned out to be a successful year.

Dad Power

My mother was always active at school—supportive, interested in my schoolwork, staying in touch with my teachers. But my dad traveled a lot and couldn’t attend many PTA meetings. So when he asked about school, visited it, or told me he actually knew the principal, that was a big deal!

It’s not the same world today, but I tell this simple story because some fundamental things haven’t changed. Surveys show that the school principal continues to be highly respected in the community, and that fathers remain an often-neglected but critical part of parent involvement.

Based on this knowledge, I have two thoughts for principals:

1. As a principal, you have more influence than you may be aware of. While you may not be able to keep everyone—

   teachers, parents, students, and the central office—happy, you can make a big difference with small, everyday actions, just like Mr. Gardner did for me. Look for these opportunities and enjoy them. They probably reflect why you became a principal in the first place.

2. Don’t overlook fathers in your parent involvement outreach. In most of today’s families, both mom and dad work.

   Neither one is home full-time. Certainly, continue to welcome mothers and explain how they can help their children do well in school. But make efforts to meet fathers and get them involved, too.

Just for Dads

Father-specific events are powerful draws. Some proven ways to attract dads include:

- Asking for help on projects;
- Scheduling male speakers;
- Offering incentives (such as raffles);
- Scheduling informal early-morning events, like “Donuts for Dads”;
- Organizing a Dad’s Club for fathers, stepfathers, prospective fathers, and grandfathers;
- Hosting dads-only discussion groups on topics such as: “What does it take to have a quality family?” “How can men keep their families from falling apart?” and “How can dads get and stay involved with their children’s school success?”

Being a principal is a tough job, but it has its compensations. Maybe 55 years from now one of your former students will reminisce about something you did today, something small that had a lasting effect. Such is the influence of the principalship as perceived by children. When you can get both moms and dads involved, that perception becomes even stronger.

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