Today’s Definition of Family

Few of today’s families comprise a married couple in which the father works and the mother stays home with the children. In fact, only about 12 percent of families met that definition in 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Today’s parents might be married, single, or cohabitating. There are step-parents, foster parents, multiracial and multicultural parents, same-sex parents, undocumented parents, and commuter parents, as well as grandparent-led families, community or “group” families, homeless families, and even child-led families. And “blended” families can include complex combinations of any of these.

Problems at School

Although student diversity can enrich the classroom learning environment, non-traditional families often face challenges beyond normal school relationship issues:

- Children of multiracial, multicultural, and other ethnic minority families might be victims of teachers’ low expectations, which can become self-fulfilling prophecies.
- School staff might discourage some minority families from aspirations of higher education for their children, with statements like “Your people don’t go to college.”
- Immigrant families frequently avoid all school contact for fear that they might be questioned, detained, or deported as illegal immigrants—even if they have legal status.
- Children of single parents, same-sex parents, cohabitating couples, homeless parents, and group families are often taunted and ostracized by students and sometimes scorned by staff as well.
- Children of parents who need to work multiple jobs, at all hours of the day and night, might be written off by staff because their parents “obviously don’t care enough” to attend school conferences and events.
- Some children who get bad grades are seen as lazy, irresponsible, or mentally deficient when they are actually just ashamed to explain that they must frequently miss school to care for ailing parents or for younger siblings because no one else is available to do it.

How Principals Can Help

Happily, there are some specific and effective things principals can do to avoid alienating nontraditional families.

“Human nature nudges us all to fear what we don’t understand.”

Recognize that discrimination can occur in any school. In The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other, Harvard sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot notes that parents and teachers often “feel estranged from and suspicious of each other. Their relationship tends to be competitive and adversarial rather than collaborative and empathetic.” What she characterizes as the natural “clash of cultures” between home and school can be further complicated by the added differences of a nontraditional family. Human nature nudges us all to fear what we don’t understand. School staff need to consciously recognize this tendency and avoid setting up barriers against the unfamiliar.

Become a model for how to treat all families and parents, whatever their family status. Making an obvious effort to personally meet all parents, welcoming them to school activities, showing respect for them, and communicating with them regularly throughout the school year, using every means available, will set the tone for how things are done at your school.

Make a personal visit to the homes of some students in the opening days of the school year—and take a teacher or two along. Including some nontraditional families among those you visit demonstrates that you recognize and respect their family arrangement and that you are willing to make a special effort to involve them in the school community. Always call to make an appointment to see families well in advance, explaining that you are hoping to visit as many homes as you can just to get acquainted as the school year begins. Give each family the option to meet at a location other than their home—and make it easy to gracefully decline your visit if they wish.

Make clear your belief that all parents love their children and are doing their best to make sure their children get a good education. Once your staff accepts that fundamental truth, they can look beyond unusual family situations to see parents or other guardians as individuals, and find imaginative ways to work with them to help their children succeed.

Every family, parent, student, and school staff member gets a chance to make a new beginning with the start of every school year. In the coming year, it is possible to encourage record numbers of families of all kinds to support the important work of your school! [1]

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