Chapter 6
Partner with Families and the Community
Building Relationships For Learning

CHAPTER GOAL

Grasp theoretical and practical aspects of partnering with families in the education of students with special needs.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

1. Become more sensitive to the challenges facing families and develop strategies for working effectively with families of children with special needs.
2. Utilize strategies for communication, collaborative problem solving, and support of families.
3. Understand system-, child-, and family-centered approaches to services.
4. Identify ways to connect with community resources that support families and promote learning.

Building Relationships for Learning

A few years ago, a teacher made the following comment at the conclusion of a class focusing on partnering with families: "Before I took this class, I thought that I would be teaching math, science, reading, and social studies. Now I know that I will be teaching children, and with children come families." If we are to be effective teachers of all children, understanding parents is critical.

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We arrive at the home of Ramla, the group's facilitator, and find fifteen parents sitting in the living room, some in chairs, some on the floor. We're struck immediately by the diversity represented. Although most participants are women, they come from many different ethnic groups. Some, we are told, have very low incomes; others have moderate to high incomes.

After a welcome from Ramla, Frieda begins. "I am excited about how Melanie's high school drama teacher is reaching out to my daughter," she says with a big smile. Melanie has a severe learning disability and has had trouble with teachers who would not try to help her. "Mr. Kizewski really went out of his way to include Melanie in the school play. With his encouragement she is really blossoming!" she exclaims. "He met with Melanie to make suggestions about how she might practice and how we could help at home. She is having so much fun. It has brought out a side of her we have never seen. Amazingly, this new confidence is spilling over into some of her other courses." Ramla, the group facilitator, draws a lesson. "We need to look for teachers who develop partnerships with parents," she said. "They need our support. However, others have stories that we need to hear tonight.

"Yes," said Dennis, one of the two fathers at the meeting. "We are very frustrated and would appreciate your support." Looking burdened and with a sigh, Dennis describes his efforts to get his son Matt, a fourteen-year-old with Down syndrome, into regular academic and industrial arts courses at high school. Dennis became convinced

that Matt should be in a regular class after attending conferences and obtaining information from other parents about how much their children were learning.

"We just don't know what to do," Dennis says. "We met with the special education director, principal, and special education teacher. We visited some classes. The industrial arts teacher was encouraging, but he seemed nervous. The special education director told us that inclusion is inappropriate for Matt because Matt's abilities are too low. He says that Matt's special needs can be met only in a special education class. He doesn't even consider, it seems, how much Matt can learn by being with other children. The special education director will not even visit schools that are doing this successfully. We really do not want to take them to a hearing. We also do not want to have to sell our house and move to another district like some other families we know. What are we to do?"

Ramla asks for feedback from the group: "What ideas do you have?" They ask Dennis additional questions and share other stories of frustration. Throughout the next two hours, parents discuss concerns and experiences, some of them tearfully. As we leave, we are amazed at the degree of openness, emotional support, and practical advice and help these parents provide to one another. Some stories fill us with hope; others with despair. We ponder how these stories reflect both good and bad practices.

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Towards Inclusive, Family-Centered Education
Build Genuine Partnerships

Research clearly demonstrates that if children are to learn and grow, teachers must reach beyond the classroom to partner with families and community members (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Barnett, 1997; Becher, 1984; Epstein, 1994). This is particularly true of children who have learning, social, and/or physical challenges (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001). In this part of our journey, we explore ways to connect with parents of students with special needs and harness the power of family partnerships.

The U.S. Department of Education (Ballen & Moles, 1994) has championed the strengthening of partnerships between schools and families by providing grant funds for demonstration programs, helping develop publications that promote effective parent–school partnerships, and encouraging research. Despite this national thrust on partnering with parents, however, parents of children with special needs often find their problems compounded by difficult interactions with teachers and school staff. Parents often sense that teachers do not care about their children. They often receive ongoing negative feedback that makes them feel unwelcome and unsupported. Even the most informed, educated, and committed parents often struggle to get help for their child. In virtually every school district, when parents of children with disabilities talk together, they share stories of pain and struggle like Dennis's story (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Parents from low-income or minority backgrounds who have children with special needs are particularly likely to have difficulties (Comer, 1988; Fialka & Mikus, 1999; Moles, 1993; Villa & Thousand, 1996; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992).

Some teachers and schools do not share this mindset, however. In many communities schools serve as potent centers of the community, reaching out to parents in partnership. These same schools are engaged in effective teaching practices and in active reform efforts.

Sights to See
Engaging Parents in the Education of Their Child

Parent Involvement in Schools. This YouTube video is useful in making a presentation to parents about how they can be connected in the education of their children.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEkMidcy960

Family and Community Challenges

What is a family? In the twentieth century we thought mostly about the nuclear family—mother and father with children. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles are the extended family. For most of history (and prehistory), however, "family" meant the full village—mother and father, extended family, neighbors, and friends. Everyone in a local community considered children "theirs" and saw themselves as having personal responsibilities to these children. The focus on the nuclear family is recent.

Today, in response to the need for stable relationships and support systems, people are finding new ways of forming social bonds. This trend is causing the definition of what constitutes a family to broaden and shift. If we understand the family of each child as a network of people who are intimately connected to and responsible for one another, we can then more naturally connect with the whole range of people in the life of a child—grandparents, family friends, and mentors (Dunst, 1987; Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001).

Local communities face many challenges, as do the families who live in them. Some of the problems are reported in the newspaper on a daily basis—teenage pregnancy, violence, crime, poverty, unemployment, divorce, illiteracy, disease, substance abuse, illness, and disability. People are isolated and often have few resources to draw upon. Neighbors may know little if anything about one another and may have infrequent interactions (Rankin & Quane, 2000).

As a result of these dynamics, when families encounter problems—such as the loss of a job, divorce, or serious illness—they often feel overwhelmed and alone. For example, perhaps a child with mental retardation is born. Families with children who have disabilities or other health issues may have few resources to call on for support. Human service agencies are often too understaffed and overburdened to provide the level of assistance needed to those encountering these difficulties (Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Notes About Parents and Students

Student Name	Parent Name/Contact info	Info about the parent (Interests, possible contributions to the class, background, etc.)	Suggestions for Learning (eg. interests, learning style, difficulties, etc.)
Reggie	Reginald/Natasha Williams	Mom is a nurse, father works for GM, willing to read to class	Loves sports, interest in reading a concern
Mya	Tanya Blake	Works long hours, concern about who can help her with school	Math a concern, basic facts, loves to sing, very social
Colin	Daren Troy	Mechanic, recent divorce	Very into working on own. Social concerns. Loves to read, science, and put things together.
Maurice	Lachrise Tyler	Willing to help make props for school	Very active, loves to act, sing, and play football
Jenna	James/ Belinda Byran	Father works with computers, Mom interested in helping w/ class books at	Loves school, loves to help others, loves computers

Typically, too, such stressors do not occur in isolation. Poor families may occupy substandard housing, have trouble getting employment with a living wage, and live in environments that can contribute to children's learning problems or other disabilities. For example, lead poisoning, long known to damage the learning ability of children, is far more prevalent in housing in low-income neighborhoods (Schmidt, 1999). Many schools in low-income areas are in great disrepair, sometimes causing health and learning problems for children (Agron, 1998; Fraser, Clickner, Everett, & Viet, 1991; Grubb & Diamantes, 1998). Children also come to school with things as basic as daily survival on their mind. This gets in the way of learning. Another kind of difficulty faces the executive who lives in a "nice neighborhood:" He or she may be under great pressure to maintain the family's standard of living and may therefore spend little time at home. Also, children in families under stress are more vulnerable to abuse or neglect

(Barnett, 1997; Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; Coleman, 1994; Dunst, 1987). The family that speaks another language will be wary of interacting with adults at school, knowing the language barrier is great. The child is then moving back and forth between two cultures. As we deal with parents of children with disabilities and other special needs, we must bear all this in mind, trying to understand the world from their point of view.

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Journey Into the Classroom
Practical Strategies for Building
Positive Working Relationships with Parents
Conversation with a Middle School
Language Arts and Social Studies Teacher

Martin Hiller has as a very positive reputation among parents and students alike in his middle school. He is known for his work with diverse students and for the respect he shows parents in his ethnically diverse community. We interviewed Martin about how he works for parents. He shared some practical, useful insights.

Michael: Martin, we hear that you have a very positive working relationship with many of your parents. Can you share with us what you do?

Martin: Well, thanks for asking. I believe that I must work hard to build a relationship with parents of my students. Parents entrust me with their most precious asset, their children. If I am going to be an effective teacher, I must make this a priority.

First priority is to understand the children that I teach. Often, they have many things going on in their lives. I need to understand why things are happening. For example, Melinda comes 30 minutes late almost every day. Initially, I was very irritated. She often missed the opening meeting where our team makes announcements and we get students started in the class (I work with an interdisciplinary team of 4 teachers for the 6th grade. We start every day with a gathering of all 90 of our students). However, when I talked with her I found that her mother works until 4 in the morning and Melinda let's her sleep the extra half hour because she knows how exhausted she is. There are similar issues with the kids involved in our sports team. They want to win the tournament this year and spend a lot of time into many evenings in practices. It's critical that I understand what is happening and then work out a solution with students and parents rather than just reacting.

Next, I also have a responsibility in helping make parent's lives easier. Sometimes all I can do is listen and show that I care. Many parents have never experienced this with a teacher and they really appreciate it. I pride myself on working to know about resources in the community that I can suggest to parents. I've connected parents with resources ranging from Big Brothers to a local store that sells appliances that have been repaired and sell at a low price. Knowing someone is behind them and cares about their family make such a difference.

Often, parents begin to consider me like a part of the family! As they begin to trust me, I have often been invited to dances, birthday parties, or church functions. I vividly remember the first birthday party I attended. The student was handing out birthday invitations to some students in class. He walked up to me and with a big smile handed me his card. Now I had a choice. I could gently tell him I had something

to do and get out of it. However, I chose to attend the party. It was the beginning of an important connection that made a huge difference as their son faced a major crisis later in the year.

Of course, to develop relationships I have to take the time to communicate with parents. There are so many ways to make communicating easy. At the first of the year I make a personal contact by phone or in person with each parent. You'll be thinking, of course, that with 90 students this takes a lot of time. For sure it does. My goal, however, is to talk to all parents no later than the first week of school. I start calling the week before school starts. I am not calling to discuss a problem but to simply introduce myself, see if they have any questions, get to know them a bit, and also ask them for ideas that may help their child learn. I make notes on a recording form I've developed for this. I add to this throughout the year. By the time classes start, I know a lot already about my students .

The school curriculum night is not the time to do this by the way. That night I build on a relationship that has already begun. Today, of course, email is often a quick and effective way to discuss things with parents. I even have parents who will email a response back to me and ask me to let the child read it. I also have students keep a planner in which parents can write notes and check daily. I send home a weekly newsletter that tells what is going on in the class and lists your email so parents can contact me.

A few children in my room will be on a weekly report that lists what they have completed and how their behavior has been. There are also a few students who are on a daily report. This is for those who are really struggling with either behavior or completing work. These reports can be very valuable if I have talked with the parent about this strategy and we have agreed to work together. .

An open door to parents is also a huge relationship builder. If parents know they are welcome in my room this changes how they feel when I contact them. Sometimes I invite them to participate in a lesson, to connect with their children at recess on their lunch hour once a week, read a book to the class, or share information about their job. With many working parents, they cannot come into school but they may be able to do contribute outside of school time. The possibilities are endless. For example, I may ask parents to help collect art supplies, create flyers for an event, or anything else that comes to mind. Parents will feel invested in my classroom if they feel they are a part of it.

Michael: Martin, thanks for sharing these thoughts. However, I am struck by how much energy and thought you put into dealing with the parents, in addition to your students. Can teachers really be expected to do this?

Martin: Well, I know that many teachers complain that they do not have time to relate to parents. However, if I want students to succeed I *must* take the time. When I do this, I find that, over the long run, it actually *saves time* because when problems occur we have a relationship where we usually can get to a working solution quickly. If I haven't taken this time, I will be imbedded in a crisis. It just helps my students be more successful and helps me enjoy my job more as a teacher!

Reflection Many teachers feel that their greatest challenge is not the students but the parents of students!! Yet, parents can also be our greatest allies and supporters. Martin gives us a lot to think about regarding how we can invest in positive relationships.

The Importance of Family and Community for Child Development: *An Ecological Framework*

For many years the importance of total family and community interactions, the "life ecology" of children, was not well understood. Researchers studied learning in controlled clinical settings, focusing at most on mother–child interactions, rather than seeking to understand the complex influences of family and community. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed a widely utilized theory, an adaptation of which is graphically presented in the figure on page 226, that broke with this tradition and posited an ecological model of human development. This ecological framework posits that all aspects of the environment have an impact on child development and growth. A hierarchy of interacting influences is apparent. Those most critical are in inner circles— family, intimate relationships, close friends, and community mentors. For optimum growth and development, a child will be supported by this inner circle—which is, in turn, supported by key community institutions—such as church, synagogue, school, or the business community. When this framework breaks down, children have problems.

The implications of this ecological theory for teachers and schools are substantial. What are teachers and educators to do if a child does not have a caring social support system? Comer (1997) and others (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Hyde, Burchard, & Woodworth, 1996; Moles, 1993) suggest that the school must become a caring community where children are nurtured and where adults and other children become a support system for the child. McKnight (1993) suggests that the school develop partnerships with the community to link community resources to parents; providing support for parents, in turn, can make them better able to care for their children. We will find that our approach to parents of children with special challenges is key to building a truly caring learning community for all families and their children. Let us consider, then, the needs and challenges of such parents.

Principles and Practices for a Family-Centered School

Our goal is to make the family the center of learning where services are available and easily accessible. What do we mean by this? Understanding the differences among system-centered, child-centered, and family-centered approaches, as summarized in the Tools for the Trek feature below, gives us a framework to answer this question.

Family, Child, And System Centered Services

	Definition	Examples
Family-centered	The priorities and choices of the family drive the delivery of services.	Child care is provided for the other children while a parent and child have a conference with the teacher. The school provides space for parent to parent support groups to meet at night or during the day. Meetings for I.E.P.s are arranged based on the family schedule. A teacher and parent together develop a plan to have a child do grocery lists for the family to help the child improve in writing.
Child-centered	The strengths and needs of the child drive the delivery of services.	The school psychologist asks a family to spend time each night with a child doing school work. The speech therapist orders an augmentative communication device that will be used both at home and school. Children with special needs are sent books home to read without involving the family in these choices or how they might be used.
System-centered	The strengths and needs of the system drive the delivery of services.	Office hours for a case manager, a mental health professional who helps coordinate services for children and families, are 9:00 am to 4:00 PM. M-F. An interdisciplinary assessment of psychological, cognitive, personality, and motor skills is required for a student to receive special education services and assistance. An educational plan is given to the parent for their signature at a meeting regarding her child.

System-centered services are organized for the convenience of the system—for the organization providing services and those in it rather than for the child or the family. This is both the most typical and the least desirable approach. Each of the three examples given in Tools for the Trek is driven by the needs and requirements of the system rather than by those of the family. In some cases, as with the example of the requirement for assessment, the original intent may have been to provide more effective

services for children. However, such requirements often develop into inflexible bureaucratic procedures that no longer serve the child or family well.

  Child-centered services focus on the needs of the child, usually without looking at the child in the context of the total family unit. In the examples in Tools for the Trek, service providers give directives to a family to assist their child, but without dialogue or consideration of family circumstances. For example, if library books are sent home and the parents themselves are marginally literate, these books will not be read and the child may receive negative feedback about reading. If a communication device is sent home without the involvement of the family, they may not know how to use it.

  Family-centered services, on the other hand, focus on the total family unit. The child is considered in the context of the entire family. Families are given choices for meeting times and choices regarding services for their children that fit into their overall structures and needs. They are given support and assistance (e.g., child care provided by the school) so they can attend meetings. Families can meet with school people based on their convenience, so it is unnecessary to leave work to attend an important meeting. These strategies, of course, require that schools and other organizations rethink how they provide services. The fact is that in most systems the customers fit the system's needs, rather than the system's serving the customer—which in this case is the family. Yet the impact this can make on the lives of children can be enormous. One parent of a middle school student shared with us her frustration at not being able to get in touch with her child's teacher. "I work late, and when I get off she is never here. She has no method of weekly communication, like Friday folders or assignment books; she does not return my phone calls, and I am very worried about my daughter's reading. I can't just take off work to come talk to her." The system was failing this parent (Allen & Petr, 1995; Kagan & Weissbourd, 1994; Knoll, 1994).

In sum, system-, child-, and family-centered services represent very different perspectives on education and other human services. Family-centered services are the most effective, recognizing the needs of the entire family unit and the important influence of the family in the life of the child. Several principles provide guidance as we develop family-centered education practices. From these principles flow a series of practices that schools can use to effectively engage parents as they educate children.

Engage Families as Partners. Partnership between two or more parties implies equality of power. As representatives of the school system, we hold great power. For a partnership to work, then, we must make conscious efforts to equalize the power between schools and parents. This is difficult but very rewarding. As described earlier in this chapter, rather than making demands of parents, we must seek their suggestions and ideas, offer choices, and invite them to participate in their child's school (Allen & Petr, 1995; Dunst, 1987; Knoll, 1994). One teacher shared a beautiful example of how

valuable parents' suggestions can be. She was very worried about a little boy labeled "trainable mentally retarded" in her fifth-grade classroom. In talking with the mother, the teacher commented that the boy was having great difficulty settling down and keeping his hands to himself. "I just couldn't understand what the problem was. He never used to be this difficult." The boy's mom explained that he had not been able to run and play for the last six weeks because of an air cast on his ankle. "It was hidden by his clothing, so I had forgotten it. Suddenly his behavior made sense."

Affirm and Build on Family Strengths and Gifts. All families have strengths. It is our job to see, understand, and draw on those strengths. This is sometimes very difficult, for we live in a culture that focuses on people's deficits. For example, a mother may be a drug addict, live in an apartment in great disrepair, and not have worked in two years. Some people, unable to see beyond her problems, might say she doesn't care about her children. However, as you confer with her you see how she talks about her son, see how hard she is trying to do better. This recognition becomes a way to connect with her, as we acknowledge her efforts and give someone with whom she can talk. Then we can find many strengths on which to build (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; Dunst, 1987.

Honor Cultural Diversity. Truly honoring cultural diversity is much easier to say than to do. We must develop a sense of who we are, an understanding of our own culture and of how it has influenced our thinking and values. A mistake is to not understand how our own cultural perceptions actually differ from those of others and to assume that our own judgments are unbiased or that they even transcend cultural mores.

We also must recognize that our school has its own culture and expectations—which are often different from the culture of the child. This "cultural mismatch" can be very problematic. Faltis (1997), for example, tells of a teacher who was concerned about a girl who did not engage in movement and choice activities and would never share in partner time. The teacher discovered, however, that in the girl's family culture, children were expected to talk little and to listen much when around adults. Once the teacher understood this, she and the parents were able to talk about ways that the student could share what she was thinking in the class. At first the student did this through writing in a journal, which she shared with a classmate. It often happens that as we understand the culture of a child's family, we can create conditions in our classroom that match better, thus increasing our capacity to know what the child's responses mean and providing a link between learning at home and the school. Families can and will often be our teachers in this regard if we let them (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; Dunst, 1987).

Virtually all cultures have their own ways of viewing children with disabilities. In some cultures, great shame is brought on the family. In others, the family sees the child as a special person from God and seeks to build a nurturing (though often heavily protective) circle around the child. In the former case, we have to help the parents see

the strengths of the child and model acceptance through our own behavior. In the latter, we can draw from the caring tradition of the family, yet suggest and model ways that the child can become more independent (Turnbull & Turn-bull, 1997).

Bumps in the Road
Parents of my kids don't care!
Parents of MY kids care too much!!

Perhaps the biggest bump in the road for effective, inclusive schools are negative attitudes of educators. There is no doubt that when things go wrong in schools that educators and parents often point fingers of blame towards one another. The more stress that occurs in the school environment, the more this happens. For example, anger and blame are often present in schools that serve poor families from minority groups, with parents (of any ethnic group or socio-economic status) who have children with special needs who work hard to advocate for their children, and with parents of gifted and talented children who want teachers to challenge and support the growth of their children.

Time magazine reported that some educators reported some parents as:

- Helicopter parents – who hover over their children and get in the way of their developing self-reliance.
- Teacher's pests – parents who ask too much of the teacher and school.
- Monster parents – who are constantly looking for reasons to disagree with educators.
- Dry-cleaner parents – who drop their rambunctious kidds off and want them all cleaned up and proper by the end of the day

This same article reported that while 90% of teachers felt that parent involvement was important only 25% were satisfied with their connections with parents. 31%, in fact, identified parents as their major challenge as a teacher. 73% said many parents treat schools and teachers as enemies.

As we look at this list we can see a pattern. Parents are criticized for either being involved too much or too little, particularly if the parents are poor or members of minority ethnic or cultural groups . Parents, on the other side, report that educators sometimes retaliate against their efforts to respectfully advocate for their children by (1) delaying, (2) responding in ways to threaten or seek to cause fear, and (3) engaging in acts that try to punish parents.

What do we make of this? Certainly parents are human beings and they will make mistakes. However, these characterizations don't really help build the partnership or suggest respectful strategies. It seems to us that we have a responsibility to do the best we can to develop respectful relationships with parents. We must go the extra mile. If we experience some of these actions, we first (and continually) ask: "Why is this parent reacting this way? What legitimate need underlies this behavior?" If we can listen and seek to understand, we may gain the trust of parents. When we do so we may be in a position to help parents better support the learning and growth of their children.

Treat Families with Respect and Dignity. Particularly when families are experiencing difficulty or when they challenge us, teachers can feel threatened and react in unhelpful

ways. When a mother living in poverty is concerned for her child's safety in her neighborhood but is also frightened of the school, she may be angry and defensive with the teachers. When a parent is concerned about her child's treatment by teachers, she may act suspicious or hostile. All of this requires that we try and understand why. We look for the strengths of families and are firmly grounded in a commitment to listen to families and treat them with respect, seeking to put ourselves in their shoes. As we take the initiative to reach out and communicate, we will often encourage trust and may have opportunities to see assets as well as problems. When we do this, we will earn families' respect (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Promote Family Choices. Providing choices is particularly important for families of children with disabilities or other special needs. Too often families have been given very restrictive choices and have been pressured by schools to accept the recommendations of educators with little or no consultation. This is particularly likely to occur when children are identified by the school as having academic or behavioral difficulties (O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

These principles ground us in our mission to develop effective family-centered services and lead us to partnership with families. You should note that these principles and practices relate to parents of all students, not only to those identified as having "special needs." However, family-centered education is particularly important for these families. With special students we particularly need inclusive family partnerships—so that their special needs and issues can be addressed not in separate meetings and structures but in the context of other parent partnership activities. Let's now consider specific practices through which we can partner with and support parents of children with special needs in our teaching.

Welcome Parents into the School as Partners. Schools that support families look for ways to welcome families as genuine partners in the life of the school. As teachers we are an important part of this process. Welcoming can be as simple as a friendly greeting in the hall when we encounter parents—or as complex as inviting elected representatives to serve on the local school board with authority to hire and fire the principal or on the school improvement committee. For all parents, coming into a school can be unsettling. This is particularly true of low-income parents and of parents who themselves did poorly in school (Ballen & Moles, 1994). They may remember feelings of rejection or hurt. However, even parents who have high status may feel that they are entering another world, a world they only partially understand. Reaching out to welcome people, making people comfortable, helping them to feel ownership is important (Barnett, 1997; Coleman, 1994; Epstein, 1994).

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Schools to Visit
Listening to Families and the Community
Puesta del Sol Elementary
450 Southern Blvd., SE
Rio Rancho, NM 87124

One school that listens to families is Puesta del Sol Elementary. The school serves a moderate- to middle-income group of families representing a cross section of New Mexico's ethnic diversity and is one of the eleven collaborating schools involved with the Dual License Program of the University of New Mexico, a teacher education program in which student teachers are certified in both general and special education to support inclusive teaching. As a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Puesta consciously practices the philosophy of building an inclusive community.

The principal, Connie Chene, came to Puesta with both an appreciation for special education and an awareness of the need to do things differently. Her previous experience, as an assistant principal in a school that served students with severe disabilities by teaching them on separate sides of the campus, opened her eyes to the issues of segregation. When she began at Puesta del Sol, a hundred students were schooled in the main building and in thirty-two outside portable buildings. All the special education programs were outside. Connie said the special education students and teachers "had been made second-class citizens just by the physical placement of the programs." Connie listened to her teachers, parents, and children.

Teachers helped provide the impetus for change. They wanted to team-teach, to talk to one another, and, most importantly, to make special education more a part of the school. "The reform efforts began here with special education knocking on the door and insisting that we open," Connie said; it was inclusion before Connie and her faculty had a name for it. The initial idea was to share resources, to be aware that everyone had something to offer someone else, and to know that there was a lot more that they could do.

The voices of parents advocating for their individual children catalyzed more change. Of the children who were bused to schools outside of the community, one boy with Down syndrome received maximum special education services. His mom wanted him to attend Puesta and learn to socialize with other children. Connie arranged to have him attend Puesta with the following conditions: The people involved (teacher, parent, administrator, and special education department) communicated almost daily, and a dual certified teacher worked with him in the general education classroom. The voices and caring behavior of the twenty-five general education children in the room demonstrated to this student how school works; they played with him and he taught them. The next year, a general and special educator team taught. Staff took a hammer to a separating wall in a double-wide portable classroom and broke down the barrier. This became the first inclusive classroom at the school, and many others have become a reality since that time.

By Liz Keefe and Pam Rossi, University of New Mexico

Welcome and Care about Children with Special Needs. Although it may seem simplistic, a most important element in working with parents who have children with disabilities is to welcome their children into our classrooms and show that we care about them. The experience of many families of such children is that teachers and other professionals reject their children because they feel untrained, fearful, or disinterested

(University of Alberta, 2000). When we simply welcome these children into our classes and communicate to families, we can make a difference to that child and family in many positive ways.

For example, in Helen's third-grade class (Hittie, 1999b), Manuel was having problems with behavior. Constantly in motion, he frequently broke things and periodically fought with other children. His previous teacher simply could not control him, and she and the school psychologist believed that he had ADD (attention deficit disorder). They suggested that Manuel's mother ask her pediatrician to evaluate him for medication. The mother did not want her child "put on drugs," and Helen agreed with her. She sought instead to help Manuel develop responsibility for his own behavior. She taught differently than the last teacher, trying to engage children in interesting activities while being both firm and respectful. Manuel still had trouble periodically, but Helen thought he was doing fine. However, Manuel's mother had become so frustrated with pressure from other staff that she was considering withdrawing Manuel from school. One day Helen sent the following note home in Manuel's assignment book:

> Mrs. Acosta, I am going to continue to do my best with Manuel. I have a new idea to try. I want him to pick one goal each day. What do you think? Give me some time with him before you give up on us.

Helen received the following response from this parent—a person described as "difficult" by others in the school:

> Thank you! So much. This is the only good thing that has been said to me. Yes, please, whatever you can do to help me. I will be glad to see ideas you have. Goals sound good. Let us go that way. Please write or call me at any time. [She then gave three phone numbers.] I'm really trying hard. I'm in tears almost every night for my son. Thank you again.

In this example, a simple act of communication on the part of this teacher made an enormous difference for this parent. Throughout the year Manuel's mother worked with Helen. Manuel, her son, continued to do better in this class than in any prior year. This story powerfully illustrates the impact that a simple welcome can have on a parent. It also illustrates the pressure that educators sometimes put on parents to obtain medication for their children—and suggests that a more effective approach may be working with the child and trying new strategies.

Back Pack
Parent and Family Involvement

The **National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education** seeks to advocate for the involvement of parents and families in their children's education, and to foster relationships between home, school, and community to enhance the education of all our nation's young people. www.ncpie.org/

The **PEAK Parent Center** provides resources to equip families of children with disabilities to advocate successfully for their children to help them live rich, active lives as full members of their schools and communities. www.peakparent.org/

Communicate Effectively with Families. One of our most important jobs as teachers is communicating with families of the children with whom we work. We may have difficulty responding to parents who get angry, appear unreasonable, or want us to cure the problems their child is having. It is easy to feel scared and to get defensive, return the anger, or blame the parents. In fact, too often this is what parents experience from teachers. We need strategies that will enable us to communicate effectively. This is particularly important when we need to talk with parents regarding concerns we are having about their children. Next we discuss helpful strategies.

Explain how our teaching works and helps children learn. If we are using best practice teaching strategies, it is highly probable that what goes on in our class looks very different from what the parents of our children experienced. We will need to be able to explain to parents what we are doing and why, helping parents to understand the theory of learning that undergirds our approach. As we do this, parents will become our best supporters and will also be learning how to be better partners with us in helping their children learn (Oglan, 1997).

Be a resource and support for families. We must expand our role from being solely centered in the classroom to caring about the whole lives of the children we teach. Teachers are constantly aware of needs, and we often encounter opportunities to serve as resources, even within a limited amount of time. As teachers assist families in these broader ways, we gain credibility among parents and community members (Epstein, 1994).

The following story illustrates how one principal played a key role in the life of one family. It was Steven Davis's first day as a principal of an elementary school that served many low-income children. Steven was told to watch out for Jim, a young boy who had

started a fire in the office last year, and he decided to make a home visit to talk with Jim's parents. As he drove down the dirt road to the dilapidated mobile home, he saw Jim's father step out looking as if no one had set foot on his property in years. Jim's father yelled, "What do you want?" Steven replied, "I'm the new principal. Just came by to chat a bit." Jim's father replied, "You wanna talk, come down to the barn." So Steven and the entire family walked down to the barn and sat on bales of hay among the pigs and talked. After an hour of conversation, Steven drove home. Jim continued to have some minor problems at school over the next few years, but nothing as drastic as setting a fire.

Almost three years later Steven answered the phone at his home one evening. Jim's father said somberly, "Mr. Davis, my wife just shot herself, and I'm not sure what to tell the children. If you could come and sit with us for awhile, we sure would appreciate it." Steven drove back out to the mobile home to sit, talk, and support Jim and his family (Arnold, 1998).

Listen reflectively. We recently visited a high school on parent–teacher conference night and overheard several conversations between parents and teachers.
"We have been getting such negative notes about Andrew in school. Why can't you tell us something positive?" we heard a parent ask tenth-grade teacher Rosa Sanchez. "Mrs. Rodriguez, you know your son has not been turning in his homework and has been causing trouble in the lunchroom," said Rosa. "It has just got to stop. You must control your son." Mrs. Rodriguez became more angry. We wondered what else was going on in Andrew's life that was influencing his behavioral choices.

Shortly we came upon a similar conversation. Mr. Hall was speaking to the English teacher Randy Brookes. "You called last night expressing concern that my daughter Shirley has missed several classes and did not turn in an important paper. We did not know about this! Why have you not called before now?" Randy responded, "Mr. Hall, I am so glad you came in. Last night I was checking my records and realized I did not have her paper and called right away. You seem concerned about Shirley." Mr. Hall visibly seemed to relax and settled in the chair. They continued to talk.

These two anecdotes illustrate, respectively, poor and good reflective listening. We must seek to listen carefully to parents (and children) as they talk with us. We must first attend to what they say, and second understand the feelings and deeper meanings underneath the spoken words. A simple but powerful communication technique involves several steps (Benjamin, 1981; Carkhuff, 2000):

1. Listen carefully to the person.
2. Check your accuracy by summarizing what the person says.
3. Probe for additional information or depth.

In the first example above, Rosa Sanchez defended her own actions rather than really listening to the parent and probing what was happening. In the process she created an adversary rather than a partner. Randy Brookes, on the other hand, simply explained his actions and reflected back to Mr. Hall his observation that the father seemed concerned about Shirley. Mr. Hall continued talking about his daughter in the spirit of trust that Randy had begun to build through this simple response. Rosa might have responded similarly: "Mrs. Rodriguez, I appreciate your coming to talk to me. I know it must be hard hearing that Andrew is having trouble. I have been concerned about him, and I am sorry if you've only heard bad things. Let's talk together."

As we work with families of children with disabilities, we will have many occasions to listen reflectively. Parents are trying to help their children, cope with stress at home and work, and deal with unfriendly schools and services, and they may become frustrated. If we listen reflectively and let parents know that we hear them and care about their children, we can build trust and provide support to parents. Of course, we must be genuine as we do so, not just acting as if we care. Parents will quickly recognize artificiality and withdraw (O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Communicate positively about children. Many children with disabilities have academic or social difficulties in the classroom—typically either doing poorly in their academic work or demonstrating problematic behaviors. As a result, unfortunately, families often receive repeated negative feedback from teachers that makes them feel defensive, creating conditions in which it is hard to engage in positive planning discussions. This does not mean that teachers should not address problems, but it does mean that we should do so in a way that recognizes the strengths and interests as well as the needs of the child. Here are some simple but effective guidelines for communicating positively with parents:

1. Frequently communicate positive strengths of the child—through notes home, comments to parents as they pick the child up in the afternoon, parent–teacher conferences, or telephone calls. Such actions build up an "emotional bank account" of positive rapport that makes dealing with problems much easier.
2. When a problem arises that needs to be communicated, do it as personally and as positively as possible. Ask for the family's input.
3. Develop a plan that involves a partnership between parent and teacher in which both have input. Establish a time and method for communicating progress.

Ask for input, ideas, and involvement of families. Families know more about their children than anyone and can provide us with some very valuable information if we ask and listen respectfully and carefully. As we develop teaching strategies for children, asking for the input and ideas of families regarding learning goals and strategies is

invaluable. The caution, however, is to refrain from expecting parents to solve the problems about which we are concerned.

Engage in parent–teacher conferences and planning meetings. Key times for teachers and parents to talk together are the times virtually all schools set aside for parent–teacher conferences. Many schools are using innovative approaches to these conferences, involving students and parents in more active and positive roles. **Student-led conferences** are particularly powerful ways to help parents see what has been occurring in class and student learning (see Chapter 8). For children with special needs, teachers will often have special conferences with parents that involve an **interdisciplinary team,** a group of professionals who help support a student; these teams often include a teacher, a psychologist, a social worker, an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, and others. The intent of these meetings is to provide an opportunity to review progress and develop plans for students. These include Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students who have been identified as having disabilities and who qualify for special education services and 504 plans for students with disabilities who do not qualify for special education (see Chapter 4). At other times, meetings may be called with the parents and children that bring together teachers and support staff who are concerned about a particular student. Ultimately, the aim is the same as the typical parent–teacher conference. They provide an opportunity to develop needed supports and accommodations in greater depth with the input of multiple professionals. Ongoing, informal communication with parents, however, is critical to make these meetings effective. If teachers and parents are communicating on an ongoing basis, they will be working together to arrive at many of the goals and strategies that will be formalized with other professionals in a meeting.

Bumps in the Road
Parents of my kids don't care!
Parents of MY kids care too much!!

Perhaps the biggest bump in the road for effective, inclusive schools are negative attitudes of educators. There is no doubt that when things go wrong in schools that educators and parents often point fingers of blame towards one another. The more stress that occurs in the school environment, the more this happens. For example, anger and blame are often present in schools that serve poor families from minority groups, with parents (of any ethnic group or socio-economic status) who have children with special needs who work hard to advocate for their children, and with parents of gifted and talented children who want teachers to challenge and support the growth of their children.

Time magazine (Gibbs, 2005) reported that some educators reported some parents as:

Helicopter parents – who hover over their children and get in the way of their developing self-reliance.
Teacher's pests – parents who ask too much of the teacher and school.
Monster parents – who are constantly looking for reasons to disagree with educators.
Dry-cleaner parents – who drop their rambunctious kids off and want them all cleaned up and proper by the end of the day

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This same article reported that while 90% of teachers felt that parent involvement was important only 25% were satisfied with their connections with parents. 31%, in fact, identified parents as their major challenge as a teacher. 73% said many parents treat schools and teachers as enemies.

As we look at this list we can see a pattern. Parents are criticized for either being involved too much or too little, particularly if the parents are poor or members of minority ethnic or cultural groups (Nakagawa, 2000). Parents, on the other side, report that educators sometimes retaliate against their efforts to respectfully advocate for their children by (1) delaying, (2) responding in ways to threaten or seek to cause fear, and (3) engaging in acts that try to punish parents.

What do we make of this? Certainly parents are human beings and they will make mistakes. However, these characterizations don't really help build the partnership or suggest respectful strategies. It seems to us that we have a responsibility to do the best we can to develop respectful relationships with parents. We must go the extra mile. If we experience some of these actions, we first (and continually) ask: "Why is this parent reacting this way? What legitimate need underlies this behavior?" If we can listen and seek to understand, we may gain the trust of parents. When we do so we may be in a position to help parents better support the learning and growth of their children.

Respond to the Special Needs of Families

As we work to partner with parents in an inclusive, family-centered approach to schooling, we will use the strategies we have just discussed in ways that respond to the unique needs and characteristics of students and families. Let's look at needs and approaches to various types of families.

Families with Ethnic, Cultural, and Language Differences

Parents of children who have a different cultural background have another layer of filters to sort through when communicating with teachers. They live in between two worlds. Keeping their heritage alive in their family is often important. They may speak another language, dress according to their cultural norms, and observe customs with which we are not familiar.

Families who come from different ethnic groups face substantial challenges in schools. We discussed some of these from the perspective of students in Chapter 1 and 2. As we discussed in Chapter 2, families of color are also more likely to be poor. In some cultural groups, teachers are seen to represent authority and they seldom questioned. These parents may be particularly quiet and withdrawn in our presence. Other parents may have had bad experiences with previous teachers, feeling that their children were treated poorly or that teachers acted as if the parents were unintelligent. We will have to work very hard to build their trust and be careful not to personalize their anger and resentment.

Parents from minority ethnic groups report particular concern about the cultural environment of schools . (Public Agenda, 2006), for example, reports that:

> If an adult had to work in an environment where disrespect, bad language, fighting and drug and alcohol abuse are practiced by a relative few, but tolerated or winked at by management, it might be considered a "hostile workplace." Yet, this is precisely the environment that many minority students face when they go to school. For too many youngsters, the data suggest, rowdy, unsettled schools are a significant hurdle to learning.

This reality is particularly true for minority parents who are poor.

Of course, this is not always true. We may be dealing with parents who have moved to areas where they hope the schools and neighborhood is better. In fact, communities all over the world are becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse. In such situations, for minority parents they often are moving into areas where members of their ethnic group are in the minority. Frequently these parents will have experienced a range of reactions in the local area from outright racist, rejecting responses to a sense of isolation. Many local communities are working hard to create acceptance and valuing of racial and ethnic diversity.

The point is, of course, we need to be sensitive to and seek to understand the past experiences of parents. This is critical to establishing trust and working relationships. Here are some key strategies we can do to build working relationships with parents from varied cultural and ethnic groups (Carasquillo, 1996; Comer, 1988; Education Alliance at Brown University, 2008; Gross, 2008; Moore, 1999; Pang, 2005; Townsend, 2000).

We will work hard to help parents and families feel comfortable in our classroom. Let them know they can come to our class at any time. Many teachers provide parents many methods of contacting them including email addresses and cell phone numbers.

We can show interest in the culture and experiences of the family. We want to communicate that we seek the parents and family as having important assets and contributions. Ask questions. As we come to understand, incorporate aspects of this culture into our classroom instruction and how our room is decorated. Ask family members to come in and share their personal story and information about their home country and/or culture. We must remember that this goes far beyond an ethnic food fair! Be attuned to issues of social justice, the political dynamics of their home country, their experiences in schools and the community. When we show a listening ear and honor family experiences we'll often be surprised how we may be accepted into the family and culture itself.

We also seek to understand social customs and interaction styles. Schools have their own culture and expectations that often conflict with cultural norms of families. For example, students may be taught to be submissive to authority figures, including teachers. These students may not talk in class. We may consider, on the other hand, children from other cultures as loud, boisterous, and even aggressive. This stereotype is often applied to boys who have ethnic roots in Africa, for example. As we understand cultural patterns of social interaction, we'll be in a better place to communicate with parents and our students.

Attending events in the neighborhood of the family, particularly those tied to cultural events, can give us a presence in the local community and put us in a new role where parents can see us as real people, more than just an authority figure and professional.. We can also visit local community centers and explore the neighborhoods in which our students live (see later in this chapter). Families will see that we actually care about their community which can help deepen support and respect for us as a teacher.

We can also work with others in the school to create forums and opportunities where families can express their feelings and where their input can be used to help improve the school and organize events where families have a meaningful part in connecting with their children's education. For example, some schools have had 'science nights', 'math nights', 'writing nights' where families and children will engage in a collaborative learning activity. Such events can help families in understanding how their children are learning and help us strengthen relationships with them.

Families Who Are Poor

Parents who are poor struggle in ways that make it hard for them to reach out to teachers. Daily life is difficult in ways that are hard to comprehend. All parents have dreams and goals for their children. They love them and want what is best for them. However, for some daily reality is so harsh that those dreams and goals take a backseat to daily survival. Such parents may be thinking: "How can I expect to plan for my child's future if I do not know if I have any food to put on the table for dinner and I am scared for their safety every time they leave my doors".

Many teachers are vocal in their complaints about the lack of involvement of parents in lower socio-economic areas. They say that parents do not care and their interactions are often negative and judgmental. Yet, another group of teachers are realize that far from not caring, these parents are doing the best that they know how for their children.

What can and should we do with parents who are very poor? Here are a few suggestions:

First and foremost, we must treat these parents with the same respect as we do any other parent. We can work to establish a relationship, understand their daily struggles and living situation, and made them feel welcome.

Often poor families may be difficult to contact. They may not have a phone and notes carried from students may not reliably be delivered to parents. We need to consider various ways to make an initial contact. One strategy we should consider is a visit to the parents home to introduce ourselves, establish rapport, and make connection. We need to understand that parents may be ashamed but if we treat them with respect and gentleness we may create an important trusting relationship. Oftentimes, of course, families who are poor live in areas that are considered 'bad'. However, when we chose to see positive qualities that are there in any neighborhood and show courage in arranging to safely visit a home, parents will understand and appreciate how we are reaching out to them.

Second, we need to be thoughtful about how some school expectations can cause great difficulty and stress for parents who are poor. These include: school fees and supplies, homework, and access to books and reading material. Typical school requests for supplies or fees when going on a field trip may be a great source of stress and shame for parents who are poor. We should work with other teachers in the school and local agencies to obtain funds that we can use for students from poor homes. We might conduct fundraisers during the year for this purpose or access any special funds available to the school such as Title I monies.

We need to understand also that students who are very poor have home conditions where doing homework is very difficult if not impossible. Therefore, it is important that we create opportunities for students to be able to work on homework at school. If a student is in an after-school program, ensure that the child does homework during that time. If in secondary school, help the student incorporate a time to do homework as part of their class schedule. Many secondary schools have 'advisory' times daily where students can meet with advisors and work on school projects. Study periods may also be scheduled.

A very practical way to develop relationships with parents who are poor is to make it our business to know about helping resources in the community and seek to connect parents with such resources that may be helpful to them. If we know agencies, for example, that provide wrap-around services (see below) or help families who have children with special needs, we may be able to facilitate an important connection that will make a difference in the lives of the family and their children (our students).

Families of Gifted and Talented Children

Families who have children considered gifted and talented are often challenging to teachers in a very different way. While a common complaint from teachers is that parents are not adequately involved with their children, with these families traditional teachers feel that families are *too* involved! These parents are often successful and professional people who have high expectations for their children and their teachers.

Key in connecting with these families is understanding the perspective and hopes of parents and communicating to them how we plan to both challenge and support their children at high levels of learning. As inclusive teachers we may surprise parents of gifted and talented children. It is common for parents of gifted and talented children to express concerns regarding having lower ability students included in our classes. Frequently, parents have found teachers to 'teach to the middle' and have not helped their children capitalize on their assets and gifts. A key in our developing a trusted relationship with these parents is to explain in clear terms how we work as inclusive, multilevel teachers, challenging and supporting each child at their own ability level. Many inclusive teachers report that such parents can actually become quite excited about the learning opportunities for their children, cognitively as well as socially. For truly inclusive classes, in fact, provide opportunities for very advanced learning of social skills and creative responsibility in a learning community.

We think of Dennis Mitchell, a parent of two children considered gifted. His daughter, Elana, was in Melanie Fitzgerald's 3rd grade class. That year Melanie had three children with cognitive impairments, two with learning disabilities, and two dominant language learners. However, Dennis was amazed at what was happening in Melanie's class. While concerned at first, he began to see that Elana was being challenged. She did several very in-depth creative projects in the school year. Yet, the students with cognitive disabilities were working on the same projects. Elana became good friends with one of these children, Maira. At the end of the year Dennis approached Melanie and told her this important story.

> You know, I have been so pleased with Elana's learning this year. She has progressed academically but she has also learned so much more. She has learned about helping other children who learn at a slower rate than she does. She's actually learned a lot about learning in the process. She and Maira have become good friends and her being a part of Maira's circle of friends was very important to her. She read a lot of information about Down Syndrome and inclusion and wants to help Maira be part of her community. I have another daughter 3 years old that Elana. She went to a separate school for gifted children in grades 3-5. While she was academically challenged socially she has suffered. Thanks for a good year!

Inclusive teachers have found that parents of gifted and talented children have always responded to the idea that all children will work at their own level of challenge, as long as the teachers actually made this happen. Like Dennis, if they understand what we are trying to do they can be our greatest allies with the school administration and with other families. When Melanie was involved with a local network of inclusive teachers who were organizing a conference, Dennis presented about his experience in Melanie's inclusive classroom.

Families of Students Who are Homosexual

What's perhaps most important with families of students who may be homosexual is what we should *not do*. It's not our role to communicate to parents that their children are homosexual. Given the attitudes prevalent, parents not infrequently may ask their children to leave home when they find out. We need to leave this issue to their children. We will, of course, be supportive of these families as we are with all families. If they have concerns, we can and should listen with empathy. It may sometimes happen that parents may share their concerns regarding homosexuality and their children with us. This may give us the opportunity to share resources and information that may help the parents rethink their position.

Families of Children with Special Needs

When we speak of families of children with special needs, we recognize that in one sense these families are like all other families. That is, all children are "special," presenting their own unique gifts and needs. On the other hand, some children place greater demands on the resources of the family, community, and school than others.

Responding to a Child with Special Needs. Being a parent is always challenging and exciting, and this is true of raising a child with special needs as well. Parents respond to a child with a disability in many ways, depending on their own personality, resources, and support. Some will be overwhelmed and angry; some will be thoughtful and reflective, gleaning insights into the challenge of human living. Some will be active advocates; others will cope by withdrawing. However parents may respond, they have much to share with us, and we can do much to support them.

Children with disabilities come into families in many different ways. Some have observable disabilities from birth. Some have a special need that may not be identified until the child enters school or later. Some families adopt children with special needs. For other families, a disability may occur as a result of a tragic accident.
Guilt. Families often struggle with guilt and issues of self-esteem. When a disability results from an accident, particularly from an accident that involved negligence, this can

be particularly difficult. For example, one young father and his son were out fishing and the boat capsized. The boy survived but suffered severe brain damage. When genetic factors cause the disability, both parents may feel responsible for the struggles their child experiences (Fialka, 1997; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001; Perske & Perske, 1981).

If the child has a severe disability, the family may take responsibility for home-based medical care requiring that they learn the use of medical equipment and obtain assistance from family, friends, and medical personnel. Daily routines of bathing, feeding, and play take more time and energy. Coupled with therapies and doctors' appointments, these substantial new responsibilities tax families' time, energy, emotions, and finances (Featherstone, 1980; Knoll, 1994).

Cycle of Grief. Families of children with disabilities often experience a cycle of grief that is not unlike dealing with death. All parents hope to have children who are bright, able, and talented. Most of us have to deal with the fact that our children have limitations. For parents of children with disabilities, however, this realization is often intensified. For example, the parents of a boy with severe mental retardation, whose language development by the first grade is very limited, know that he will not be a doctor, lawyer, or teacher. They also know that he will need significant support and assistance all his life. Such a family must allow the original desired image of their child to literally die so that they can accept their child as he is and rejoice in his strengths and capacities (Fialka, 1997; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Some family researchers, however, question the degree to which the experience of grieving is either typical or necessary. "It is misleading to describe parental reactions without also considering how professionals share the diagnosis," say Turnbull and Turnbull (1997, p. 137). O'Halloran (1995) takes a different approach. She describes a "celebration process" in which the emotions prompted by a diagnosis can be connected with deep reflections regarding hope for the future; the positive contributions of people with disabilities; and the capturing of negative emotions as a catalyst for energy, persistence, and learning.

The Tragedy of Abuse. Parents of children with disabilities develop strategies to cope with the stress of raising their children. Given the lack of support for parents, we sometimes see patterns emerge that limit or even directly harm children. Some 25 percent of the caseloads of welfare agencies dealing with abused children, for example, involve children with disabilities (Finkelhor & Hashima, 2001; Sobsey & Doe, 1991). Some parents believe that their children cannot learn, do not expect anything of them, and reinforce negative behaviors. As such children grow older, they sometimes are violent when their wants are not met immediately; parents may then withdraw, intimidated (Ammerman, Van Hassett, & Hersen, 1988; Finkelhor & Hashima, 2001.

Informal Support for Families. Parents of children with disabilities find themselves coping with other problems. Babysitters are often very difficult to find. In some cases, having a child with a disability is seen as a great shame to the family. Some families have experienced increased social isolation as neighbors and friends are uncomfortable being around a child with a disability. People may even make hurtful comments, clearly indicating that the child with disabilities is not accepted. In such situations the weakened bonds of community and neighbor relationships represent a dwindling support network just when families face increased responsibilities (Fialka, 1997; Knoll, 1994; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001; Perske & Perske, 1981).

However, families and their allies also are developing alternative social supports to help them cope. The type of parent support meeting we described at the beginning of this chapter is one powerful example. Networks of family support groups and parent-to-parent connections are growing throughout the country (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001). Circles of support that bring people together around children with special needs also provide enormous assistance to families (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 1998; O'Brien & O'Brien, 1996). Parent-based advocacy organizations help parents connect with others who face similar challenges (Turnbull &Turnbull, 1997).

Professional Services and Supports. Professionals in medical, educational, and other social service agencies can make an enormous difference in the lives of families, and an expanding network of support programs now exists (Knoll, 1994). A growing number of physicians have training related to the disabilities of children (Society for Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 2001). Mental health programs help families locate resources and provide **respite care,** a service that allows the family to leave their child with trained caregivers and have some time to themselves. Although these programs are generally inadequately funded, they do provide needed support to families (Knoll, 1994; Shelton, Jeppson, & Dennisson, 1992).

Yet professionals often display attitudes, ignorance, and disrespect that greatly increase the stress on the families of children with disabilities (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). To be sure, these families encounter many professionals whom they deeply respect and appreciate; still, virtually all such families have dealt with a significant number of professionals who have caused serious problems.

Consider Brenda's story. Brenda's child, Monica, was born in 1984 with severe physical and mental disabilities. Brenda received training in the hospital to provide care for Monica, who used a respirator and other medical equipment. This was difficult, but she and her husband were committed to raising their child at home. As Brenda prepared to leave the hospital, the chief neurologist approached her. "I know what you should do

with your child," he said. Brenda paused. This is a renowned physician, she thought. Maybe he knows something someone else missed. "What is it?" she queried anxiously. "You should put your child in an institution and get on with your life," he said, then quickly walked down the hall to complete his rounds. Brenda was shocked. When she recovered, she had the doctor paged and confronted him. "How dare you say to me what you did? This is my child. Her place is in my home. You have no right to use your position to give such devastating messages to parents." Eventually, Monica became the first child considered "medically fragile" to enter a public school in her state (Crider, 1998).

Many families continue to receive such messages from many kinds of professionals, despite gradual changes and the move away from the practice of institutionalizing young children. After experiences like Brenda's, a parent may naturally come to be cautious and defensive. As teachers, we must bear this in mind. When we communicate with the families of children with disabilities, we must seek to understand the experiences of the family.

Rethinking Life and the Road to Inclusion. In the midst of all these challenges, many parents of children with special needs rethink their view of life. They learn to look at strengths differently. They also ask difficult questions about where their child belongs in their community—and in school. Many professionals and extended family members suggest that their children belong in special places with other children who are "like them," hoping they will be protected from rejection, safe from harm, and able to find friendship with other children with disabilities. Parents of children in segregated schools often develop close and mutually supportive bonds with one another. In many locations, in fact, segregated schools were initially developed by parents' groups and have been virtually the only option available.

A growing number of parents, however, are beginning to question segregated special education. They often come across the idea of inclusive education by happenstance—in a talk with another parent or at a local conference. In school districts where inclusive education has become part of the natural order, parents are given much support in understanding inclusive education as well as other placement options on the continuum. Schools that have not embraced inclusive education, however, typically provide little information and often resist efforts by parents to have their children in general education full time. Some parents report that embracing inclusion means giving up their connection with and support from other parents of children with disabilities, who are fearful of having their child leave a segregated class or school. Yet the opportunity for their child to grow, learn, and become a real member of the community helps these parents continue to push for inclusion and to seek allies and support from others (Fialka & Mikus, 1999; Hampel, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Advocacy and Parents. The difficulty of caring for their children while meeting—too often—with frustrating responses from professionals has often thrust parents into a new role as advocates for their children. Over time parents have had enormous impact on policy. Parent advocacy, however, is in the midst of a substantive paradigm shift. Parent advocacy is torn between advocacy for inclusion and support in the mainstream and provision of special services.

The initial efforts of parent advocates were to develop special, segregated programs for their children in education, mental health, and rehabilitation—special education schools, separate classes, sheltered workshops, group homes. Many parents became convinced that the only way their children could be safe and that the families could have a life of their own was through segregated programs.

However, a growing number of parents are seeing a new vision of community life for their children that begins with being part of the regular school (Fialka & Mikus, 1999; Hampel, 2000; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997), and new advocacy efforts have emerged that have taken several tracks. Most centrally, parents work very hard to advocate for their own child—interacting with teachers, principals, even school board members. A growing number of court cases have resulted from such individual advocacy efforts. However, parents also network with one another for support, often seeking to build collaborative efforts to have impact on the policies of a local school, district, or state. Nationally, TASH, which developed as a coalition of parents and university faculty, has been a major force for inclusive education since the early 1980s. Many other organizations have joined in this effort, and many state networks of parents working toward inclusive education have been established.

The Gift Teachers Have for Parents

All this means is that when parents come to our class, they often bring a long history of struggles, learning, isolation, and dreams for a better day. What they want most of all is a teacher they can trust who will welcome their child into the class, seeking to teach their child effectively and willingly. We have a special opportunity and responsibility to parents of children with disabilities and other differences. Rather than merely tolerating such parents and their children, we can reach out, helping parents understand that our class, our school is theirs also. We can help break the cycle of isolation, rejection, and hurt. We can come together with our principal and other teachers to say that our school is for *all children,* communicating this message in multiple ways:

- We can help develop brochures about the school that highlight our commitment to children of difference learning together, specifically stating that children of different colors, cultures, economic resources, and abilities are welcome. We might

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give an example of a child with autism who has succeeded in our school, along with children from different ethnic groups.

- We can distribute this information to offices of physicians, agencies, and parent advisory councils for special education in our district and county.
- We can incorporate students with disabilities and their parents into literally every aspect of school life.
- We can help parents of any culture obtain information and make connections in the language they can access.

Our potential for having dramatic impact on children, parents, and the total culture of our school is very high as we welcome parents into the life of our school. Let's discuss principles and practices by which we can be supportive of families of our students.

Leia shared a story after a recent meeting with school staff that shows the potential of our impact as educators. Her son, Sean, is a second grader who has epilepsy and autism, who is being included in general education classes.

We have been pushing for inclusion since we moved to this district last year. They have been doing a good job this year. During the meeting many wonderful positive things were said! You could tell that Sean had really found a place in the hearts of his team. The second-grade teacher said her dream for Sean was that he be in her class without a para-educator. Wow! On the one hand this is exciting. On the other hand it is scary. Sean has behavioral issues, and when he is done with something he is ready to leave. The teacher is a miracle. She and Sean have connected. She has a sister with autism and is able to see Sean in a different light. With her on Sean's side this year, full inclusion is a real possibility.

Back Pack
Parent and Family Involvement

> The **National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education** seeks to advocate for the involvement of parents and families in their children's education, and to foster relationships between home, school, and community to enhance the education of all our nation's young people. www.ncpie.org/
>
> The **PEAK Parent Center** provides resources to equip families of children with disabilities to advocate successfully for their children to help them live rich, active lives as full members of their schools and communities. www.peakparent.org/

Linking Parents, School, and Community
Resources for Learning and Family Support

A most critical element in working with parents is linking home, school, and community learning. Let's survey some examples of ways to link home and classroom learning (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Epstein & Salinas, 1998). The figure below provides a survey that we may send home to parents to obtain their input regarding how they might like to participate in our classroom.

Linking Home and Classroom Learning

We can use several strategies to link learning in the home and classroom. Let's look at a few of these.

Home Learning Activities Teachers can collaborate with parents to identify tasks that are part of the family routine and that children can perform as learning activities at home. This allows parents to help children develop skills using authentic tasks that fit into the daily functioning needs of the family. For example, as families engage in various activities together (from going grocery shopping to taking family trips), a child can collect artifacts, take pictures, and write or tape-record a description of the activity that becomes part of a family-focused educational portfolio.

Meaningful, Engaging Homework Homework can become a powerful tool for linking home and school learning. Typical homework often involves completion of worksheets of math problems, spelling words, or additional reading. In contrast, authentic homework that links to family and community life can provide an opportunity for children and parents to engage in an enjoyable, educational project together at the child's own level of ability. For example, one teacher asked students to do a project that lasted several weeks and focused on heroes in their lives. One student interviewed an aunt who was a singer and produced a poster. Another student met with a friend of the family who was a photographer, and together they took pictures and made a display. Students presented their projects in class. Several had their heroes come to the class with them. Other examples of such meaningful homework might include:

- Writing out the grocery list and shopping with a family member to obtain items. While shopping, the child can be responsible for adding up the prices of the items and helping to decide what funds should are needed for weekly grocery shopping.
- Helping to prepare dinner, including reading recipes, measuring, and cooking.
- Researching historical community events and developing a presentation.

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Parent Preferences For Home-School Involvement

Dear parent: We would like to know your preferences regarding ways to be involved. Please check your preferences and we'll try to do our best to involve you in the ways that are most helpful..

A. Meetings: what are the best days and time for you to meet?
B. Communication: what are the best options for you?
  ____ Daily notebook
  ____ Brief phone calls
  ____ Drop-in before or after school
  ____ Notes sent home
  ____ Parent group meetings
C. Information: What information is critical to share?
  ____ Brief phone calls
  ____ Drop-in before or after school
  ____ Notes sent home
  ____ Parent group meetings
D. Involvement. I could see myself becoming involved in the following ways:
  ___ Coming in to problem-solve around situations that arise related to my child.
  ____ Sharing adapted materials that we sometimes use at home.
  ___ Sharing information and resources that will help you understand my child and his/her educational needs.
  ____ Participating in a school-wide planning committee/task force
  ____ Coming in and demonstrating techniques that have been successful with my child
  ____ Sharing video tapes from home
  ____ Providing encouragement - compliments, cookies, comforting words
  ____ Being in contact for another parent whose child may attend this school
  ____ Using my network to bring in speakers
  ____ Volunteering in class - reading; helping out; sharing a unique talent such as _____
  ____ Talking with the school administration, school board, or others when an important issue arises
   attending team meetings occasionally
  ____ Preparing materials
  ____ Other

E. What else might you want to share about how you might be involved in your child's learning?

Adapted from Ford, Fitzgerald, Glodoski & Waterbury (1997).
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Reading Together Families can be asked to read to and with their children. We must be careful, however, to ascertain the ability of the parent. If a parent cannot read well, this activity may be embarrassing and the parent may unintentionally discourage the child. Teachers can suggest and make available simple books that can be read aloud to children, or can provide books on tape for loan to a family. If the children are living in a home where books are unavailable, then providing some resources to read is critical. Create a system in which classroom books can be checked out, as long as they are returned responsibly.

Connecting with Community Resources

If we are to be effective teachers, we must also help families access resources and supports in the community. This becomes much easier if our school is committed to community partnerships. As we develop outreach relationships between the school and the wider community, we identify a wide range of possible resources for teachers, children, and families. By understanding the interests, needs, and skills of our families and their children and knowing about resources in the community, we can help link families to community. Schools and teachers who are effective use three key approaches:

1. Bring resources—people, organizations, materials—*into the school* to support learning and provide support for children and families.
2. *Connect learning* to the local community.
3. Engage children and the school community in activities that strengthen the neighborhood and community.

Let's see how this works in a process developed by McKnight and Kretzmann (1993).

Map Resources in the School First, we can identify school resources that might be used in partnership with others in the community. What resources does our school possess? How might we make these available in new ways to families and the community? The most valuable resource of all is people—teachers; students in classes, who have enormous gifts to bring to the community; and families of students. Schools also have many other resources: space to be used for people to meet, office equipment, and so on. It can be helpful to compose a written list of all potential resources.

Map Community Resources Surrounding the School Learning to view the assets, rather than deficits, of neighborhoods, families, and children is the key to what McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) call **assets-based community development (ABCD).** Too often, particularly in low-income communities, only the deficits and problems are reported. The figure below contrasts assets and deficit-based neighborhoods maps or descriptions. However, any community is rich in positive resources. For a community to become stronger, people must identify and build on strengths rather than trying to repair deficits. A critical starting point is simply to identify what is good about a community. Notice that this way of thinking closely parallels suggestions earlier in this chapter that we build on the strengths of families, an approach that applies directly to students with special needs as well.

Assets And Deficit-Based Neighborhood Maps

DEFICITS MAP	ASSETS MAP
Crime Graffiti Mental disability Child abuse Broken families Slum housing Welfare recipients Gangs Unemployment Truancy Illiteracy Lead poisoning Dropouts	**Gifts of Individuals** Artists Elderly 'Labeled people' Youth **Citizen's Associations** Churches Block Clubs Cultural Groups Interest Groups **Institutions** Schools Libraries Parks Hospitals Community Colleges **Businesses** Locally owned Corporate

Each community is composed of five key building blocks (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993):

1. Individuals (children, youth, elderly, people with disabilities).
2. Associations (formal clubs, church choirs, the local garden club).
3. Spaces (parks, downtown area, lakes, etc.)
4. Institutions (schools, hospitals, welfare offices, mental health services).
5. Businesses (stores, law offices, etc.).

Associations, according to Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) are the most powerful resources. Whereas schools often gravitate toward the large organizations in their

communities—government officials, businesses, hospitals, and the like—smaller-scale associations bring people together voluntarily based on their interests. This is their power and contribution, because they can connect people who have interests and gifts to contribute with other people with similar interests. A local garden club might involve a class of students in planting flowers on the school grounds and invite specific students who are interested in plants to be part of their monthly meetings. A local block club might work with a class to investigate their block—interviewing residents, doing presentations on the history of the block, helping clean up a vacant lot, or researching why the city had not cleaned it. As students learn to see the rich resources available in their community, they come into contact with positive role models and acquire ideas about productive ways to grow and learn.

As teachers we can identify concrete ways for adults in the community to help children and their families. As we gather information, we will begin to build relationships with various community people. We can, for example:

- Conduct interviews of local residents regarding their skills, interests, and so on. Have students conduct these interviews in pairs and develop reports of what the people said.
- Draw maps and take photographs or draw pictures of the local community.
- Divide the class into teams to explore each of the building blocks of a community—individuals, associations, businesses, and institutions. Have each team collect information about the resources and assets of its "building blocks."
- Invite five to ten community leaders to the school and hold a focus group with teachers and students serving as the interviewers. Record this on tape and video.
- Send a survey to community associations asking them what they do, what they think needs to be done to make the community better, and what one thing they could do that is not a part of their normal activities. Students could draft, compile, and interpret this survey with assistance from local community people.

> We can use our findings in many ways: compile them into a book, make a bulletin board with changing components, or publish sections in the newsletter. This project itself could be published by a local community association after being illustrated with art, photography, and written work by students.

Develop School–Community Partnerships As schools gather information about what they have to offer and the resources in the community, teachers can develop specific partnerships with community people. The possibilities are infinite. The key is to start small, have fun, and build trust. It starts when people get together and explore how to link the interests, needs, and gifts of people or organizations with one another (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

- A teacher invites a local artist to school to share her work. They discuss ways in which the class and this artist might be involved with each other. One student who wants to be an artist is invited to see the studio of the artist.
- A local family support group is created to help parents deal with the problems and challenges of being a parent.
- The members of the school support team (psychologist, special education teachers, Title I teachers) meet with three local block clubs to discuss how they might work together to build circles of support in neighborhoods for families.
- The school sponsors a meeting of local block clubs to talk about how they can work together.
- When the city recreation department holds a community planning meeting for a local park, the school takes a group to provide ideas.

Develop Connections for Families and Children in the Community.

Once we have identified resources in the community, we are in a position to connect children and families with these resources. First, we identify the gifts, interests, and needs of the child or family. As we get to know children, we will also get to know their families. We can have special nights when children and families come together and share their gifts and interests with one another.

We then match the interests or gifts of the family and child to community resources. We can have an evening workshop for families, teach them how to identify community resources, and encourage them to assist one another in locating such resources. Individually, we can look for resources throughout the year and work to make connections with families.

Get Help from Community Guides in the Area In every neighborhood and community there are wonderful people known by many in the community. McKnight (1995) called these individuals **community guides:** trusted community members who know the neighborhood inside and out and who can be invaluable sources of information and connections for the school, children, and families. McKnight (1995) identified their key traits. Community guides are first and foremost people who see gifts in their community and the gifts in people. They see possibilities more than problems. Such people are also very connected to and involved in their community. They know many people and are, in turn, trusted and respected. This gives them access to a great number of people and resources in the community. Not surprisingly, they see their community as a caring, welcoming place and are willing and able to help connect people who need support and welcome. If we can locate these individuals, we can tap into a valuable resource for our school, our children, and their families. For example, they can help build a mentoring program, establish circles of support in a local community center, or run potluck dinners where families gather for fun and recreation in the school.

Community Agency Resources for Families

Numerous human service agencies have been established to provide assistance for families. Some specifically target families of children with special needs. We should be aware of agencies that may be helpful. The figure below provides a listing of comprehensive family support services available through one or more agencies.

Parent Training and Support Programs Most states have programs that organize parent-to-parent help. A growing number of programs in the country also provide parent support groups. Such programs often have a staff of parents of children with disabilities who facilitate and coordinate a statewide network of support groups for parents of children with disabilities and special health care needs (Briggs, 1996; Briggs, Koroloff, Richards, & Friesen, 1993).

The U.S. Department of Education funds a national network of *parent training centers* that provide information to parents regarding their rights under special education law. Sometimes these centers also provide parent advocates who will attend IEP meetings with a family, sponsor a variety of informational seminars, or conduct other types of family support programs (Office of Special Education Programs, 2000a).

Early Intervention and Family Support. Public Law 99-457 provided funds for early intervention assistance to babies and young children through age three who show clear signs of disability or who are at risk for developmental delay. States have developed interagency coordination plans to provide services based on the family-centered principles. That is, services must be developed in the context of the needs of the total family and documented in an Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) (see Chapter 4). In each area of the country, one agency will be designated as the coordinating agency from which services and assistance can be requested. Teachers working in early childhood programs may contact the local agency for more information (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001).

Protection and Advocacy Each state also operates a program funded by the federal Developmental Disabilities Act whose intent is to protect the rights of children and adults with developmental disabilities or mental illness. Typically housed in the state's department of mental health or mental retardation, protection and advocacy agencies provide training and can be called on for legal assistance when violations of state or federal laws occur (National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems, 2000).

A Medicaid-funded program, usually called a Medicaid Waiver plan, also provides funds for the health care and related needs of children with severe disabilities. Both of these funding sources are most often coordinated by a local mental health agency (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001).

Family Financial Assistance Some programs provide financial assistance to families who need help coping with the high medical and care needs of children with severe disabilities. In an increasing number of states, a family support subsidy provides a flat

Community Mental Health Services Numerous therapists provide family therapy, in which counseling is provided for the family unit. Family therapists view the family as a system and see family members' emotional difficulties as a function of the family dynamic and relationships rather than as the problem of individual members. Supportive family therapists can give important assistance to families. In addition, community mental health agencies can provide additional practical services—respite care, to give families a chance to get away from the care of children with high needs; information and referral; adaptive equipment; assistance with therapies; summer camps; and parent training on many issues (Knoll, 1994).

Neighborhood Family Resource Centers In many communities centers have been established to provide a range of family services under one roof. The most effective of these function as community centers, combining activities for children with supportive services for families. Parents obtain counseling while their children receive tutoring and are involved in arts and recreational activities. Oftentimes, parent-to-parent support groups will meet in such centers (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Wraparound Services Public family services fall under the jurisdiction of multiple federal, state, and local agencies. Nonprofit organizations receive government funds to operate services and often compete for clients in local areas. Private family services typically are funded by payments from individuals with higher levels of income or insurance. This multiplicity of organizations has made the provision of coordinated services difficult. Numerous efforts have been made over the years to promote interagency coordination. One of the most recent and most promising attempts is the model of wraparound services. In this model multiple agencies commit to work as a team around a specific family—to "wrap their services around" the family. In addition, this model is based on family-centered principles and provides flexible access to funds and resources based on the practical needs of the family. Such programs will also work to partner with informal resources in the community. Wraparound services are governed by a family–professional board that attempts to develop an effective partnership between public agency resources and the resources of the local community (Hyde, Burchard, & Woodworth, 1996; Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993).

RESPITE AND CHILD CARE

SPECIAL NEEDS

Transportation

Special diet

Special clothing

Utilities

Health insurance

Home repairs

Rent assistance

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Information and referral

Advocacy

Futures and financial planning

Training

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Family counseling

Family support groups

Sibling support groups

Individual counseling

IN-HOME ASSISTANCE

Homemaker

Attendant care

Home health care

ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTATIONS

Adaptive equipment

Home modification

Vehicle modification

RECREATION

Accessible recreation services

Day and summer camp

DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES

Behavior management

Speech therapy

Occupational therapy

Medical/dental care

Physical therapy

Nursing

CASE MANAGEMENT AND SERVICE COORDINATION

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Direct cash subsidy

Allowances

Vouchers

Full-Service Schools Schools are at the center of every family's life until the family's children are about eighteen. Yet schools have often been isolated from the larger community and from other service organizations that assist families. Many schools throughout the country have made a commitment to function as a community center for families, to house multiple services that can provide assistance to families—in other words, to be **full-service schools.** Such schools, in partnership with other human service agencies, include many services on-site (Dryfoos, 1994).

Welcome Home

In this chapter we have described family-centered teaching and schooling. Rather than seeing the community and the family as helping schools, we need to do the opposite. We must see ourselves and our school as both supporting and learning from families, as building a "village" in which people care for one another. These are vastly different practices and entail a huge paradigm shift. As educators we can implement new ideas for involving parents and families in the educational process. We can serve not only as partners in the children's education but also as friends and members of the community. So we have begun our journey into inclusive schools by thinking about the community and parents—the two driving forces for the existence of schools in the first place.

Traveling Notes

Parents and teachers may find themselves at odds about how to teach children—and particularly children with special needs. Conversations in teachers' lounges often revolve around this problem. In a school that is working on creating powerful relationships with parents we would expect to see these things:

1. As teachers we empathize with parents and their situations. We work with parents to think of ways to help with whatever frustrations are an issue. Our parents we will listen to and value them.
2. We have multiple ways of sharing information with parents including daily logs, notes in planners, home visits, emails, to an open door policy for parents to stop in.
3. We are genuinely seems happy to see parents when they arrive, even if it is at a time that is not the best in the schedule. We are willing to talk about their concerns and let them know they can ask them to come in for a more detailed talk if it is needed.
4. We make an effort to contact or visit every parent at the beginning of the school year to see if they have any questions or concerns that they want to talk about. This sets the tone for a relationship before any issues have had time to develop. Then, parents will later be more responsive to our requests.

5. We put families at the center rather than focusing primarily on the needs of the school (a system-centered approach) or the child alone (a child-centered approach).
6. We welcome all children into their classrooms. This is evident in the literature that is available about the school, in the books children are asked to read, and the work that lines our walls. We display multiple strategies for working with children that reflect best practices and are willing to spend the extra time and explain to parents the how and why of our approach to instruction.
7. We have a working knowledge of community resources that strengthen students' learning and provide helpful resources for both parents and children. We help link parents agencies that provide assistance to families.

Stepping Stones to Whole Schooling

Following are some activities that will help extend your understanding and actions you may take towards partnering with families.

1. Use the information and strategies in this chapter to develop a checklist of gest practices regarding interactions with families and parents. Do a self-assessment.
2. Use the information in # 1 to develop a plan to improve your relationships with families. Review this with another teacher or your principal to get their input.
3. Interview parents of a child with special needs in the family's home. Ask the parents to tell his or her story of the child and of past interactions with teachers.
4. Locate a teacher who has a reputation for partnering effectively with parents. Interview this teacher and ask about his or her philosophy and practices with parents. Join the teacher at a planning meeting where she is doing some collaborative problem solving with a parent. Implement some similar strategies at the next meeting with a parent from your own class.
5. Attend a support group meeting for parents of children with special needs. What do the parents discuss? What stories or issues do they bring up that have to do with interactions with teachers and other professionals? Ask their advice on how to effectively become an inclusive teacher.
6. Identify a local school that has a reputation for exemplary practices in partnering with parents. Interview the principal and observe some school activities. What do faculty and staff do?
7. Conduct a neighborhood map, involving children and parents together in the process. Use the information to help make a connection between a community resource and the needs of one family.
8. Obtain information about agencies that service the area in which your school is located. Pull out those that may be particularly helpful to families in your area.