

Considerable research shows how parental involvement promotes the school readiness of children served by Head Start programs. This increased school readiness is reflected in the development of children's early math, language, and social skills. Head Start programs foster the benefits of parent involvement by requiring that 51 percent of the members of each Head Start program's policy council consist of parents. Each policy council shares program governance with each program's board of directors. Unfortunately, this important means of promoting parental involvement is now threatened by some federal lawmakers who would like to reduce the role of parents to an advisory one.

The focus of this *Dialog Brief* is on the essential role that parents should play in the decision-making of their child's preschool program. M. Ann Levett, Executive Director of the School Development Program at Yale University, contends that parents should play this essential role by examining how important parents are to the strong development of their children at an early age and how parents and schools must work together in partnership to make this happen. For this partnership to work most effectively in a Head Start program, she argues that parents must be permitted to play more than an advisory role in the decision-making of their Head Start program.

## Parents' Voices: Essential to Decision-Making in Preschool Education

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*"We can't do it alone. We need your help."*

### Introduction

Tough words to say, but I have said them on several occasions. I have said them as a teacher, as a principal, and as a mother. In my role as an educator, each time I said those words I was inviting a partnership — a partnership working with a parent in the best interest of his or her child and in the best interest of our community's future. As a professional educator, I invited the parents

of my students into that partnership because I realized and respected the power and influence that parents have in the lives of their children.

Parents helped me ensure their child's success in my classroom and in the schools that I managed. The parent is a child's first teacher, and the home is their first classroom. Parents know their child intimately, can see their potential, and can provide encouragement as few other adults can. They bring knowledge to the table about their child's growth, development, personal-

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ity, likes and dislikes, habits, and interests that can prove very powerful and helpful in the formal education process. I deemed it wise to capitalize upon the knowledge that parents have.

A child is a natural explorer. It is in the home that the child internalizes his first information about this strange, wonderful, and intriguing new world, through smell, taste, seeing, hearing, and touching. It is here that he first learns to get along, to get his needs met, to express his emotions and thoughts, and to attach meaning to words. It is at home where he first learns praise and punishment. Parents and families provide these first learning experiences for children, so they naturally know about their children's strengths, talents, needs, and their areas of underdevelopment. It is the parents' knowledge of their children that allows schools to enhance their children's learning opportunities. A partnership with parents allows professional educators to draw upon a bank of personal knowledge that may determine whether a child has an exciting, engaging, and successful school experience or a dull, uninspiring, and unproductive one.

As a school leader, I often reminded the staff about the importance of recognizing the crucial roles parents played in making the school experience a positive one for each child we served. When we worked in partnership with parents to plan for their children's schooling, from course selection to choosing extra-curricular offerings, the outcomes for the children were more likely to be supported by all parties involved. We saw even greater parental involvement rates and positive student outcomes when we invited parents to become involved in the schools' governance committees. As those committees made decisions that affected the operations of our schools, from school policies to hiring new staff, the voices of parent representatives

brought a perspective that deserved to be heard and, in some cases, made a significant difference in the committees' thinking. The voice of parents proved essential to our decision-making process.

#### Parents' Role in Strong Development

Parents want their children to grow up healthy and to become independent beings. They watch their children grow excitedly and with amazement during their first months and years. Most parents understand, inherently, that their children depend on them to provide a safe, secure, and healthy environment in which they can grow and develop. Healthy and responsible parents and family members give their children a clean and safe place to play, nutritious meals and snacks, attention to health concerns, love, support, understanding, comfort, and discipline. These parents promote a child's healthy curiosity about the world, an eagerness to learn, and a belief that he or she is valuable.

Scientific evidence shows that a child's early development is influenced greatly by his daily environment and experiences with others, particularly parents and family. Recent neuroscience research also shows that the connections the child makes with caring and responsive parents promote healthy brain development. Healthy brain development enables a child to engage fully in organized learning experiences. Thus, parents play a significant role in influencing a child's development from birth to age 6, a period of profound and rapid growth for a child.

In a matter of three years, a child grows from a helpless, vulnerable, and dependent being to one who crawls, walks, uses language to communicate, gets along with others, and is self-confident. These years have been deemed a critical

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“starting point” (Carnegie, 1994) — a point sensitive to parental and family support and the experiences children have during this growth period. If parents fail to give adequate attention to the needs noted above (nourishment, safety, care, and nurturing), they may contribute to a child’s underdevelopment in several areas that may lead to difficulties in learning and life.

### **Critical Learning Period**

Learning begins at birth and is lifelong. The early years of a child’s life are central to the development of the young mind. Birth to age 6 is a decisive period in the overall development of children as important learning takes place from the earliest weeks and months of a child’s life.

Scientists note that these years are a time of active brain development and the beginning of emotional attachments to others in the child’s home. The child’s experiences during this period have a profound effect on how the brain develops and have great influence on his further learning capabilities. In this period of life, the groundwork is laid for adult functioning. And who is alongside the child during this period? The parents and the family are.

Doherty (1997) maintains the learning that takes place from birth to age 6 occurs in the following categories: motor development, confidence and emotional development, social knowledge and competence, language skills, and general knowledge and cognition skills. Let’s take a quick look at what happens in these developmental areas during this period when the brain is most ripe for the learning and acquisition of new skills.

Parents play a key role in fostering the motor development of children. Their understanding of a child’s interest in motor activities can facilitate his/her development and refinement of gross and fine motor skills. Parents and fami-

ly members help the child learn to crawl, walk, climb stairs, play with objects, run, jump, kick, skip, and throw. The skills are taught under the parent’s guidance, with practice, and patience. Learning these skills allows the young child to gain some independence and confidence as he explores his world. These gross motor skills and activities also allow children to develop their body strength.

Fine motor skills are skills that require smaller movements and indicate capabilities. They usually involve eye-hand coordination. During preschool years, children are generally introduced to tasks such as drawing or coloring. Their fine motor skills are also essential to school tasks including writing. It is at home and with the parents’ or family members’ help that a child draws his first pictures, does his first writing, and creates his first artistic masterpiece.

Social and emotional development is a very important part of school readiness. From birth, children learn about themselves and other people. Early on, they interact socially and begin to show preferences for familiar persons. Based on their social connections, they learn to imitate others, self-regulate, and demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect. During this early period, children learn to express a wide range of emotions. As the child gets older, he/she develops a range of self-help skills, learns to play with other children, explores new areas, and learns more about him/herself as an individual.

Parents are the primary agents for a child’s socialization skills. If parents teach and model acceptable behaviors (including language), set reasonable limits, and establish rituals, routines, and practices, children are likely to have positive experiences when interacting with others in settings within and outside their home. These solid socialization skills are critical to a successful school experience and

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can contribute to positive outcomes throughout their lives. These skills can become building blocks for successful intellectual accomplishments.

Developing speech, language, and communication is a gradual process. It is at home that this process first starts taking shape. Speech is the verbal expression of language and includes articulation, which is the way words are formed. Language is the entire system of expressing and receiving information in a way that is meaningful. Children learn speech and language by interacting with others. They begin to understand words before they can say them. Children learn a whole range of different sounds and learn to use all of their skills to communicate with others. This process of using their speech and language, fostered first through their interactions with parents and family members, allows them to communicate — to understand and to be understood by those around them. They create great excitement for parents and family members when they say their first words and begin to learn the names of people and things in their world. After words, they learn phrases and sentences while surprising family members, eventually, with evidence of their organized and logical thinking through well-articulated conversations about topics or situations of interest to them.

The foundations for self-confidence and self-esteem are also laid during this critical period and are based upon the attachments formed by the child to parents and other persons in his life. The child's feelings of worth are linked to his perceptions of how these persons respond to him, how these persons demonstrate care for and interest in him and what he does, and his perception of his value in their lives. Parents influence a child's self-confidence and self-esteem by showing respect and appreciation for him. When parents acknowledge a child's learning of new skills, teach him new

skills, and praise his achievements, his sense of confidence increases. These early experiences with learning and family members have a lasting impact on a child's interest in learning and on his willingness to explore new territory.

While development in these areas does not stop at age 6, some of the most significant developmental milestones occur during this time. As children meet these milestones during this active phase of their awakening to the world about them and to their culture, they become prepared for the formally organized school experiences to come. This is a period of rapid learning about social behavior and social relationships and, generally, the period in which children acquire the basic skills of linguistic communication and numeracy. Strong development in these areas ensures that children enter formal school programs ready to benefit from the school learning environment. Parents have played a major role during this critical period in a child's life and their contributions cannot be ignored, devalued, or minimized when the child enters the formal learning setting.

Finally, all of these skills contribute to a child's development under the watchful eyes of parents and family, and often, before there is any exposure to formal learning environments. Teachers often observe that when children enter school there may be considerable differences in their readiness levels to acquire basic curriculum skills. Such differences often appear to be attributable, at least in part, to the types of learning opportunities that parents provided for their children at home. For example, widespread evidence indicates that reading by parents to their children makes an important contribution to children's emerging literacy. That literacy is reflected in such behaviors as pretend reading of books and scribble writing. Children also benefit if their parents provide direct instruction about reading-related

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skills; for example, by identifying letters and letter sounds. In general, such experiences appear to promote children's development for both oral and written language capabilities, affecting their vocabulary, listening comprehension, and alphabet knowledge. (Krascum et.al, 2002)

Strong development and support in these areas prepare a child for a world that offers him many opportunities for success.

### **Preschool Education**

For children, preschool education cannot be narrowly defined. Preschool includes the learning that takes place both within and outside of organized settings. As outlined here, families and communities have a major role in supporting the development of young children before they enter and while they are in formal learning programs. The formal education system has a role to play in seeing that families and communities are supported in providing growth and learning for children in the preschool period. Since parents play a natural role in a child's education, it seems logical that they would be invited to partner with schools to plan, manage, and offer the formal educational experiences for children.

The changing state of the American economy and the American family demands a greater partnership between parents and schools. Since the first formal schooling experience for children is typically preschool, it is vital that parents feel welcome there and know that the information they have to offer about their children is welcomed and respected. Active parental engagement practices and policies, as demonstrated by well-established programs like Head Start and Early Head Start, can serve to strengthen the weak parental involvement levels often reported by schools serving young children and families. Head Start and

Early Head Start program officials understand the influence of parents and recognize that a parent brings powerful observations and experiences to the school setting that are fortified by love and a sense of responsibility for their child's well-being and academic success. Program staff encourages their full participation in the teaching, learning, and decision-making processes. Parents are members of the Parent Policy Councils, a body that has a direct voice in the management and administration of Head Start program units. Working in partnership, the staff and parents can ensure that the full range of a child's development — physical, cognitive, and social-emotional — is given the attention needed to facilitate future learning. Through listening and sharing with parents, this partnership contributes to a child's healthy development. Substantial research on Head Start shows that parental involvement promotes school readiness, specifically in early math skills, language skills, and social skills. Head Start parents have also demonstrated greater parental involvement levels when their children move on to elementary school. Increased school readiness levels and higher parental involvement rates have been linked to higher academic achievement.

It is imperative for teachers and parents to develop a partnership, a connection with one another. The healthier the relationship between the parent and the teacher, the better the conditions for learning become for the child. With this kind of powerful partnership, a child can take advantage of the full knowledge of both parties and the outcomes from their positive collaboration.

### **Importance of Parental Involvement**

Various levels of active parental participation in all schools must be encouraged because it is in the children's best

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interest. That participation helps to create the optimal environment for the development of a child's learning possibilities. Educators generally believe that attention should be paid to increasing parents' real and practical opportunities to contribute effectively to their children's education. The practical involvement of parents providing learning experiences for their children is a popular and useful form of participation.

Many preschool programs, including Head Start, offer educational services to children and their families to encourage parental involvement. The most effective programs include a parent education component. This component involves helping parents support their children's learning at home. Parents get specific and doable ideas for learning activities that support the skills and concepts children are learning at school. Often, parents learn games and other activities that facilitate the children's learning or practicing of new skills. For example, parents and families may take "field trips" together to explore new territory or reinforce something the child has learned at school. When parents perform these activities, they demonstrate their commitment to helping the child learn and may spark their own interest in learning.

By accessing the educational and family services provided by Head Start, participants often become a part of a parent support network. Here, they support each other through their personal trials and help each other celebrate their personal triumphs or their children's success. They also learn problem-solving skills and become informed about resources available to them and their families. This support network provides emotional connections to each other and to program staff that would have been absent otherwise. These kinds of programs increase parental support of school programs and children's learning outside of

school.

Traditionally, parents may participate in their children's school by attending routinely scheduled meetings and special events, talking with the staff as needed, and assisting with special projects. Some parents choose to volunteer their time in the classroom or in the school building. Many parents attend regular parent organization meetings and may even hold leadership positions in these organizations. Most parents demonstrate their support for the child's schooling by making sure he/she is present for school with the necessary supplies. In a few cases, parents are encouraged to participate in the life of the school by offering their voice to the process of making decisions about school programming and management issues.

When parents participate in the decision-making process in preschools, or at any school level, they offer benefits that are realized in the overall community. Their participation gives them some level of power in affecting the achievement outcomes for their children. Including parents in this capacity empowers all the persons who have a stake in the child's academic success. When parents become a part of the decision-making process, they bring additional kinds of information to the school discussions about what is best for children. They bring their observations about the unique needs of the children being served and community issues or concerns to which school personnel may not be privy. Having parents participate in decision-making can help with building ownership of and support for the program as a whole or for needed changes. This level of involvement is empowering for those participating and the parents they represent.

When parents become involved in Head Start programs, they take on a new role and learn new skills. They learn

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how the school operates, how the curricula is developed, how the staff is selected, how the budget is created and managed, and other aspects of the school about which they might be unaware. As a part of a Head Start policy council, parents participate in making decisions affecting the operation of their Head Start program. As a Head Start policy council member, parents share the legal responsibilities for financial oversight with the program's board of directors, and parents have a responsibility to know the laws and policies that govern the program. The parents who participate at this level have the respect of the school officials and their peers.

Many of these parents also take on the role of advocating for the school and its programs or methods after they fully understand how the school or the system works. Another important role these parents may play is to serve as a parent educator, encouraging other unengaged parents to become involved or encouraging specific kinds of programs for these persons. The possibilities are endless. The outcome we can be assured of is that these parents see their function differently going forward as their children move through school. They see themselves as empowered to affect the future of their children and sometimes, all children in their community.

Some officials argue that parents should not be involved directly in the decision-making process, only as advisors to those persons charged with being the professional educators. Often, it is suggested that parents be appointed or elected to an advisory committee. In this advisory role, the

parents would have no authority to make decisions about important issues affecting the education of their children. This advisory position could simply be ceremonial and without any real power or voice. Having parents function in such a role has some value over having no voice at all in school governance. It is clear, however, that if we value the contributions that parents can make to the performance of a school, we would invite them to be full and equal partners in the decision-making process. Parents currently participate as full and equal partners on the Head Start policy council, but some federal lawmakers who support changing the role of parents to that of an advisor now threaten this valuable partnership.

### **Conclusion**

When parents and school staff work together as equal partners, children are the winners. A partnership built on mutual respect can yield great benefits for all involved in the lives of the children served. The information shared can offer progressively more imaginative ideas on how best to educate the children, support families, and address challenges. Since parents play such a pivotal role in a child's early development, it is essential that they have a voice in the decision-making structures present at every level of schooling — particularly at the preschool level. Finally, it is essential that parents and educators remember, neither can do it alone. They need each other's help.

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