

Family and Consumer Sciences and schools -- a perfect partnership for parent education

Marilou M. Rochford

Abstract

To effectively reach parents, Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educators must develop strong working relationships with the schools in their respective communities. Forging these partnerships takes time, but the benefits produce notable results and significantly impact the lives of the parents and children in those communities.

Introduction

In the human development field, parent education continues to surface as one of the most important areas of concentration. Family well-being, along with improved parenting, coping, and stress management skills, ranked highly as issues that clientele need for enhanced lifestyles, according to a 1991 survey by the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. To effectively reach parents, Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educators must develop strong working relationships with the schools in their respective communities. Forging these partnerships takes time, but the benefits produce notable results and significantly impact the lives of the parents and children in those communities.

Reaching parents through schools

Children experience critical stages in their development, one of which is the transition to formal schooling, commonly occurring between ages 4 and 6. At this developmental stage, both children's and parents' lifestyles are changing, sometimes dramatically. The way both groups adapt to these changes influences their experiences with education for years to come. For students, building confidence at an early age predicts future educational achievement. For parents, building relationships with school personnel enriches the learning environment and creates a successful learning atmosphere (West, et al. 2000). According to the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, there are many studies demonstrating that family

involvement encourages student achievement, positive attitudes, and other behaviors that increase school success.

The importance of parent involvement is underscored by its inclusion in the National Education Goals, which state that schools must work to increase parental involvement (U.S. Department of Education 1990). Given these factors, FCS educators can and should create partnerships with schools to provide education and to facilitate parents' early involvement in their children's education.

Kindergartners are Special: Handle with Care

The program, Kindergartners are Special: Handle With Care (KAS) was designed to fill the need for the kind of parent education outlined above. The program was developed by Marilou Rochford, Family and Consumer Sciences Educator, with Rutgers Cooperative Extension in New Jersey. This five-session program, presented in an interactive lecture format, covers the following topics for parents of four to six-year-old children: Building a Child's Self-Esteem, Communicating and Disciplining with Love, Nutrition, Health and Fitness, the Fourth "R" -- Responsibility, and Ready for Kindergarten. Each session lasts approximately two hours. In that time, parents have ample opportunity for interaction and for practicing new skills learned. Each session incorporates family literacy activities.

Program objectives

The program enables parents to build their skills in the following areas:

- Building their child's self-esteem
- Increasing their use of positive discipline and guidance skills
- Forming a partnership between home and school
- Increasing their use of positive coping skills
- Improving their communication skills
- Identifying and developing family literacy skills

In addition, parents who have participated in this program reported that they have gained confidence and feel better about themselves as parents, and that they were better able to express their feelings, values, and ideas more effectively.

The program achieves its objectives in a variety of ways, using an interactive lecture format, audio-visual support, and many hands-on exercises designed for the adult learner. During the sessions, participants are given ample opportunity to interact with each other and to engage in open discussion with the instructor.

One unique feature of the program involves the use of "P.S. (Parents Supporting) Parents" pages, an activity that establishes a network of support for parents. P.S. Parents pages, which are included as part of the curriculum, are distributed to participants at the beginning of each session. Participants complete a P.S. Parents page relating to that session's topic. For example, during one session, parents are asked to write down three positive qualities about their child(ren). Responses are deposited in the P.S. Parents box and are used to enrich discussion and to create self-esteem builders for children. Participants are free to identify themselves on their responses or may choose to remain anonymous. Participants can also use the P.S. Parents box to pose questions for discussion individually with the instructor or with the group. Using this procedure is helpful for participants who are reluctant to raise concerns publicly.

There are several ways that instructors use the P.S. Parents activity. In some cases it may be appropriate for the instructor to give parents a particular topic to respond to. In other cases, the instructor may direct parents to focus on a topic that was raised by someone in the workshop. Based on class participants and topics raised, instructors can tailor this activity as they see fit. This activity allows parents to practice and improve their own literacy and communication skills by encouraging them to write. It also provides an open, anonymous forum for parents to explore sensitive feelings and topics in their family lives.

Program marketing

For optimum effectiveness, the program should be conducted in partnership with a school district. FCS educators should work to establish contact with school administrators, i.e., school principals and superintendents, in their communities. To market this program, the FCS educator should fully explain the program rationale and should prepare information about the program that can be easily distributed by the school to parents. Some schools host events strictly for parents of prospective kindergartners, often in conjunction with school registration. These events, as well as "Back to School nights," "New Parent Orientations," and others, are excellent forums for FCS educators to explain the program and to solicit potential attendees.

Once interest has been established, the FCS educator and the school administrator should develop a "calendar of responsibility" that details the activities and coordination necessary to host the program. Both the school administrator and FCS educator should share the tasks, as these programs are far more successful when the school district has invested time and effort into the marketing and coordination of the event.

Scheduling

Ideally, the course should be conducted with parents before their children actually begin kindergarten. The school administrator should be able to guide the FCS Educator in choosing the most appropriate dates and times for the course, given the administration's knowledge of the parents in their district. Working closely with the school administrator can help to avoid scheduling conflicts with other school or community events, enabling a higher attendance rate.

Facility and additional supports

The best location for this program is within the school itself. Classroom, library, or cafeteria space can all be used. The room must be large enough to accommodate the number of participants comfortably, with space for participants to take notes and review handouts. Instructors should also have access to the necessary audio-visual items for this program, i.e., overhead projector, screen or blank wall, TV, VCR, etc.

Some school districts have provided refreshments, childcare, transportation, and other incentives to ensure good attendance. The FCS educator should negotiate these points ahead of time with the school administrator.

Impacts and success stories

Since its development in 1995, the program has been tested in New Jersey with more than 500 participants. A curriculum guide was recently approved for statewide and nationwide use, and the author is in the process of compiling nationwide data.

Participants who have received this training represented a wide variety of ages, economic, social, rural, and urban populations. Participants were from intact, single-parent, and grandparent-headed families.

Participants complete a pre-test and a post-test to assess their knowledge both before and after the program. In addition, after each session, participants completed an evaluation that indicated areas of behavior change, learning opportunities and knowledge gained during each session. A follow-up evaluation is conducted after 4 to 6 months that further assesses behavior changes and future needs for training and support.

Highlights of results from the follow up evaluation follow:

- 96 percent of respondents used techniques to build their child's self esteem

- 90 percent of respondents indicated that they had increased the use of positive discipline and guidance that they learned in the course
- 95 percent of respondents planned to participate as a partner with their child's school to enhance their child's educational experience
- 88 percent of respondents increased their use of positive coping strategies
- 89 percent of respondents noted that they had improved their communication skills
- 95 percent of respondents reported increased family literacy activities

Conclusion

Through programs like Kindergartners are Special: Handle with Care, FCS professionals and schools can form lasting partnerships to provide parent education and encourage parent involvement in schools. Taking the time to create these partnerships and educate parents is well worth the effort. Children benefit through higher educational achievement. Parents benefit through improved skills and stronger support networks. With these solid foundations, the future looks bright for stronger, more resilient families in the years ahead.

References

Barth, R.S. 1990. *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Berger, E. H. 1991. *Parents as partners in education*. New York: Macmillan.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. 1996. *Helping your child*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, Publication Series 416-709.

U.S. Department of Education. *National Education Goals*. 1990. National Education Goals Panel. Washington DC, <http://www.negp.gov>.

West, J.; K. Denton, and E. Germino-Hausken. 2000. *America's Kindergartners*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Publication, NCES 2000-070. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Author

Marilou M. Rochford, M.A., Assistant Professor, Rutgers University, Family and Consumer Sciences Educator, Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Cape May County, New Jersey.

Cite this article:

Rochford, Marilou. Family and Consumer Sciences and schools --- a perfect partnership for parent education. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 5.2 (2000): 19 pars. July 2000.