

How to run successful parent information sessions

Many parents are interested in parent education programmes that are aimed at managing behaviour or promoting their child's progress, and running formal events for families is reported to make parents feel part of the school. Parents' initial expectations of their children's education programmes are often determined by their own schooling experience, as well as their cultural background, and parental education programmes can enable parents to add alternative ideas, strategies and practices to their repertoires.

The most effective format for parent education workshops combines guidance or input from the school or facilitator alongside opportunities for parents to discuss their concerns. A sense of partnership is crucial for family engagement in these sessions, as offering opportunities for involvement without forming strong partnerships is unlikely to increase family participation.

Planning

- **Find out what parent information sessions families want.** Have parents identify topics for meetings and workshop, and alternate these with topics considered important by the school.
- **Decide whether to focus meetings on different subjects, year groups, or early childhood groups.** Parent education can take place in workshops for small or large groups, or can be conducted individually. Smaller schools might consider running meetings and offering workshops as a cluster. Plan a series of meetings, rather than one-offs.
- **Tap into parents' interests,** and emphasis the connection with their child's learning. Give parents an opportunity to do things that interest them.
- **Think about using small discussion groups and home visits** which are more individualised, rather than large parent meetings. Some research shows that parents are more willing to participate in small-group discussions and programmes based on their particular needs.
- **Find out when it is best to hold parent information sessions** and presentations. Schedule some activities to suit working parents' needs and different shifts, or consider offering the session two or three times across a day to enable as many families as possible to come. Evening sessions might be difficult for parents in terms of the evening meal and childcare, so consider providing these, or involving the children in the sessions. Whole-family approaches were found to be most transformative in terms of participation rates and literacy outcomes in the NZCER's Home-School Partnership Literacy Programme.
- **Check for community events** and special celebrations and avoid a clash of dates.
- **Create invitations** which convey that families are welcome and their participation is desired and valued, and can motivate families to become involved. Invitations can be from the school, the class teacher, or from the children. Children's involvement in inviting families seemed to be the most effective strategy for increasing parental participation in the events planned for the NZCER's Home-School Partnership Literacy Programme. Also consider that families want schools to announce events and meetings with plenty of advance notice.
- **Create invitations in community languages** and use cultural liaison people for word-of-mouth advertising
- **Use face-to-face recruitment.** Parents cite face-to-face recruitment, a convenient time and location, trusting relationships and an informal, welcoming environment as important factors influencing their decision to attend group meetings and workshops.
- **Consider a range of advertising methods,** such as banners and posters, adverts in the local paper or on radio, a telephone tree, in-person invitations, and having tickets that serve as entry into a prize draw. Put photographs and parents' feedback on the value of an earlier information evening up on display. Two or three days before the event, send reminder notes home with children.

Running the event

- **Make the setting attractive and welcoming.** Have students or other parents greet families as they arrive and show them around.
- **Have an official and culturally appropriate welcome.**
- **Provide food,** which shows that you value the people coming, and acknowledge them culturally. Arrange food and drink to promote opportunities for informal conversation.
- **Use ice-breakers,** energisers, a variety of media, and games to create a friendly, supportive and inclusive environment.
- **Use families' first languages where you can,** such as greetings, or within the content of the session (counting in different languages in a mathematics session for example). Perhaps involve children as translators.
- **Have students teach their families school activities** such as literacy and maths games, for example, to demonstrate how these subjects are taught at school.
- **Enable parents and children to lead sessions or parts of sessions.** Parents feel that finding ways for parents and families to lead events and activities is a good step towards strengthening partnership. These parents will also champion the event or initiative among other parents.
- **Keep sessions short** – one to one and a half hours. Longer durations may put families off attending subsequent sessions.
- **Make the information available to all families that need or want it,** even if they aren't able to attend meetings or functions held at the school. Consider redefining the 'parent workshop' to include engaging with information available in a variety of forms, that can be viewed, read or heard, anywhere, at any time.
- **Gather evidence from parent information sessions** to find out where you might strengthen relationships and contribute to students' achievement.

References & Further Reading

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