

Every child has a right to a good relationship between school and parents

by Peter DeVries (trans. by Oldrik Weigand)

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People in many countries, especially teachers and school administrators, have been talking about the role of parents in education. Under discussion are difficult parents, parents that cannot be persuaded to visit school and parents that find it difficult to communicate with the school. Let's take a close look at parental involvement: What is it and why is it so important?

Differing terms

Let's first define the terms *parental involvement*, *parental participation* and *parental responsibility*.

Parental participation occurs when parents participate in school activities or perform tasks at school. In the Netherlands for example, there are "lice mothers" in primary education who check the children for head lice. There are also "reading mothers" and "computer mothers" who support children in reading or in working with a computer. Parents are actually present at school.

There is *parental involvement* when the behavior of parents shows that they feel responsible for the development that their children undergo at school. This means that the parents are (emotionally) involved. Parents can show interest, create conditions for doing homework and guide their child in doing so if necessary. They can also attend meetings for parents and show respect for the teachers in doing so. In short: parental involvement mainly happens at home and is important both in secondary education and in primary education.

Many schools for secondary education communicate less with parents as students get older. *The student is old enough, right? We can solve it with him or her ourselves, and we don't need parents to do that.*

However, this is where terms can be confused: (emotional) parental involvement and *parental responsibility*. Parental responsibility decreases as the child becomes older and more adult. Parental involvement will remain regardless of the age of the child.

When speaking of a good relationship between school and parents for the sake of the child, we are mainly speaking of *parental involvement*.

Scientific research

There is only one reason to invest heavily in parental involvement: it is in the students' best interest. This has been confirmed by scientific research. Below you will find the conclusions of numerous scientific investigations.

1. Multiple investigations in the USA and Britain show that parental involvement has a significant positive effect on the functioning of students in the school, on their cognitive functioning, their school performance and their attitude to work. This applies to students of all ages regardless of their family's economic or ethnic background and the education of their parents (Smit et al., 2006).
2. There is a relationship between school performance and parental influence. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) give insight in how much influence school and parents have at different ages. The educational success of a seven-year-old child is 29 percent

- determined by his or her parents and 5 percent by the school. As the child grows older, this relationship shifts. With an eleven-year-old child, parental influence accounts for 27 percent, while the school accounts for 21 percent. The performance of a sixteen-year-old is 14 percent determined by parents and 51 percent by the school. In conclusion: while parental influence grows smaller as a child ages, they still play a major part in secondary education.
3. Robert Marzano, an American education scientist, performed a meta-analysis on education research over the past 35 years. He found that the home situation, and therefore the role of the parents, is one of the important success factors in the educational performance of children (Marzano, 2003).
 4. Parental involvement has a positive effect on the social functioning of students, as is determined by Smit et al. (2006) and Henderson and Mapp (2002).
 5. More parental involvement has a positive effect on the atmosphere in school. It also causes increased openness: the school will focus more towards its environment (Smit et al., 2006).
 6. Expectations are a big part of education. Teachers often have faulty expectations from parental support: they can overestimate the support from parents in higher social climates and underestimate the support from immigrant parents. These expectations of the parents then also influence their expectations of the students' performance. Teachers who expect more from parental support generally also have higher expectations of the performance of the child that these parents are supporting. The opposite is also true: the more they expect their students to perform, the better their impression of parental involvement (Smit et al., 2006). Smit et al. also notably conclude that teachers tend to be more positive about the involvement of parents who regularly visit parental meetings than about those who rarely if ever show up. Whether parents also speak to the teacher at other times or not is shown to be of less importance.

What do students say?

It is interesting to not only listen to the notions of education specialists and scientific research, but also to the students themselves. What role do they think their parents play in their education?

Youths (age 16) note in an interview how important they think it is for their parents to encourage them; they called this one of the most important tasks their parents should perform. John says, "I can do my homework without my parents. I can get myself to do that. But sometimes they help me and motivate me. In that sense my parents are like guides for homework."

The youths that were interviewed also indicate that the school has to maintain good communication with their parents; according to them there is still much that can be done in that regard. Laura: "Take my studies abroad, for example. My parents are worried that I have to go to an English-speaking country on my own. The school informs us about what will be expected of us, but they don't discuss it with my parents. With the school not wanting to cooperate with my parents, I am having a hard time." Jim: "I think it's very important for the school and my parents to be held accountable to each other. The school about what they do and my parents about what I do. When I am sick for example, the school has a right to be told by my parents what's going on if necessary." Laura also has a second remark on the communication between school and parents: "I think it's good that there are group meetings

with parents. Before my mother visits one of those meetings, she always asks me if I have anything important to add. That way she can talk about what I think is important."

Two other students (aged 13) are equally clear about the role of their parents. Jennifer: "My parents help me when I'm having trouble. I am dyslexic, so I sometimes need them to do my homework with me because it takes me much longer than the other children in my class. I also think it's great that my parents often discuss things with my student advisor. For example, when I have too much homework to do or when something goes wrong in class they can solve it together." Ruben: "Parents will always be there for their own child. That's why parents are important at school and why the school should work with parents."

Naomi (age 6): "I like that daddy and mommy sometimes go to school with me. That way they can see what I do at school. Sometimes daddy and mommy talk about me at school, so I can hear about how I'm doing. I also like that daddy and mommy sometimes teach me the same things that I learn in school. I remember things better that way."

Conclusion

Cooperation between school and parents is effective when it is characterized by compulsory and equivalent cooperation between parents and school that allows both parents and school to work for the (educational) betterment of the child from a sense of mutual responsibility.

In practice

In practice, this means applying four essential basic principles. As a principal or teacher, be a good ambassador, not for parents, but for the cooperation between school and parents, by sticking up for these principles and thereby being an ambassador for the child. Doesn't every child have a right to good cooperation between school and parents?

1. Always think and work from the basis of mutual responsibility.

Education is by definition the mutual responsibility of school and parents. Children perform better, stay at school longer and love the school more when schools, families and the community work together in the learning processes of children (Henderson & Mapp 2002).

2. Always act from a position of equals and talk about this to your colleagues in the interest of the students.

Parental involvement means equivalent contact between school and parents. School employees and parents each have their own say in matters, and the places where these discussions are held should be comfortable and equivalent for everyone. There should also be enough time for each participant. As such, a discussion with parents can never only be about informing the parents. All parents should be viewed as capable parents. Equivalence also means that the student's files should be open to parents (digitally for example). Information from both teachers and parents has a place there. This motivates school and parents to act unanimously in the student's interest, makes parents co-responsible for the process of education and will more easily bring to light any differences between the development of a student at home and his development at school. These differences can serve as the basis for a common approach. For example, a child that is rather shy at school can (as a result?) be difficult to handle at home.

3. Always act and speak respectfully.

Talk about parents positively and speak to your colleagues when they speak about parents negatively. This is something that can happen during a coffee break: you may just want to

vent about some parents. Of course you should speak your mind, but you should always do so in a professional context, for example in a private conversation with the principal. In the interest of the child, you can also demand this of your colleagues.

4. Motivate high expectations for parents.

Parents without an education or immigrant parents—can you expect anything from them? Especially these parents need an extra little push. They often have high expectations of the school and low expectations of themselves.

According to American scientist Anne Henderson, parental responsibility should always be aimed at increasing educational performance.

To increase parental involvement, schools should

- let parents know that they *should* be involved, in the interest of their child,
- help them feel capable (The school has a task here.),
- let them feel invited and welcome to contribute to the educational development of their child.

If you notice that your colleagues' expectations of parents are too low, facilitate a discussion about it.

Sometimes it is necessary to provide additional guidance to some groups of parents in their task of supporting their children through the process of education. A good way to actualize parental responsibility in this form is by organizing Family Learning Events. After all, parents should also be continually trained to be able to perform their important duties in the education of their child. For immigrant parents these Family Learning Events might take a different form than those for highly educated parents, but both groups need them. You might organize study evenings for parents and spend your time on linguistic activities for some parents. Talk to parents when they do not visit these meetings. After all, parental involvement is a necessary and equivalent cooperation between parents and school that allows both to work for the (educational) betterment of the child from a sense of mutual responsibility.

Literature

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