

Involving Parents as Partners for Youth Development

by Jennifer Tiffany and Sarah Young

Young people, youth service providers, educators and researchers agree: parents' actions and attitudes have major impacts on young people's development. They agree on something else, too: sometimes the best ways to involve parents in youth development efforts are elusive. Parents and other adults understand that they play important roles in young people's lives, but also sometimes find it challenging to build and maintain open lines of communication and to stay "connected" consistently. Community-wide youth development efforts see the engagement of parents (and other significant adults) as essential to their work. This prACTice MATTERS issue addresses some approaches and challenges to parent involvement.

There is a wide spectrum of ways parents can be involved as partners for youth development:

- Young people want dialogue with their parents and other adults about the issues, choices and pathways facing them.
- Educators want engaged parents, who can help with the development of school-based programs, extracurricular activities and the kind of reinforcement and extension of academic learning that happens best at home.
- Youth service providers want parents who support their agencies and programs, practically and politically.

- Human service and health care providers want parents who understand the primary, secondary and tertiary interventions they offer and who support their children when they access programs.

But, often, deliberate efforts to involve parents fall flat – special workshops draw only a few people. Parents may even be absent from events (like special performances or parent-teacher conferences) that are clearly important to their child. What is going on?

From the parents' perspective, there are many challenges to staying consistently connected. In an increasingly insecure economy, parents may be working more and more hours and feeling increasingly driven by their need to earn a living for their families. Parents may feel that the issues facing their children are so new and different that their children have more expertise than they do; they may believe that adolescent children no longer want or need a parent's perspective. They may even feel that their children don't want or need their presence, their connectedness. Parents may find it hard to negotiate the developmental changes of their adolescent children and to find a mix of "monitoring"

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and “supporting independent decision-making” that is “right”— especially when this mix often changes rapidly! Parents may feel isolated, as if they are the only ones facing a particular set of challenges. They may also feel that they have few or no role models — they want to interact with their children differently than their parents interacted with them, but this is hard to do without social supports and “scripts.”

Most parents want to do right by their children, and by the children in their community at large. And most adolescents say they want parents and other elders “in the loop.” So, how can we help to make this happen more consistently?

It is important to bear in mind the wide range of ways to engage parents – from one-to-one interactions (formal and informal), to support groups (parents coming together simply as parents so that they can identify common challenges and provide moral support and share ideas), to topical workshops (like those provided through Cornell University’s “Talking with Kids about HIV/AIDS” Project¹), to community-wide celebrations, work sessions and participatory planning efforts (like the Liberty, NY, Planning Workshop or the Growing Up in Cities Project²).

Within this wide range of possibilities, it is useful to keep some principles in mind:

- Parents (and people fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of parents) are everywhere, so opportunities to reach and engage them abound.
- Parents worry about whether they are doing the best they can for their children.
- Parents often feel isolated, like the only person who has ever faced a particular set of challenges.
- Parents often enjoy talking with their peers and learning that others share some of their feelings and experiences.
- Parents are often very interested in the perspectives of young people.
- Parents, like young people, want to feel respected and appreciated and to be treated as equals by professionals and service providers.

What do these principles mean for the practice of parent involvement?

- It often works best to go to parents where they are rather than expecting them to come out to a workshop or event that is “targeted” to parents. (Try taking written resources to workplaces, social service agencies, religious organizations, and businesses. Try offering workshops or forums “on site” in locations where parents already are.)
- Demonstrate understanding and respect in tangible ways, by ensuring convenient scheduling, accessible locations, translation or multilingual facilitators, refreshments, child care and a friendly environment.
- Peer programs work well – in programs like Headstart, parents provide resources and support to other parents.
- Youth led events, celebrations, and forums in which young people have a strong voice meet many parents interests and need to understand “where kids my child’s age are coming from”.

Parent involvement takes time and sustained effort. Parents themselves are the best source of information on barriers, on ways of overcoming challenges and of taking advantage of unique opportunities. Try inviting a small informal group of parents to serve as consultants and co-designers of parent involvement activities!

All parents are unique individuals, so approaches to parent involvement need to be flexible. For example:

- Some parents may be very hesitant to come out to a formal event, so informal or one-to-one methods of engagement can be very important.
- Some parents say they had negative experiences when they were in school, so they are hesitant to attend school-based workshops and meetings.
- Some parents may be facing overwhelming health, social, economic, and job-related demands and special efforts may be required to engage them.

Never underestimate the power of informal approaches to engage parents in community wide youth development and building the supports, services and opportunities that will help to develop their children’s capacities and health. Adult coalition members, youth workers, and health and social service providers themselves are often parents, and can play a strong informal role in making other parents feel welcome, respected and engaged in youth development efforts.

Events designed specifically to engage parents can become important elements of community-wide youth development, especially when they are sustained over time. The next column gives an example of a long-standing parent-teen retreat program in one New York community. For more information or technical assistance on parent involvement, please contact the ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence.

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² For more information, contact: David Driskell, Cornell University, Department of City and Regional Planning, Sibley Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853; phone-607/257-4244; email-dd96@cornell.edu.



Parent-Teen Retreats

by Sarah Young

In March 2003, when I was 21, I had the unique experience of being a co-facilitator (with my own mother Mary Dykeman) for a mother-daughter retreat. The purpose of the retreat was to bring mothers and their pre-teen daughters together for an 8-hour day to talk about puberty, adolescence, and menstruation, tough topics for both groups of women.

The mother-daughter dyads were recruited through an article advertising the event in the local newspaper, through pamphlets scattered among the 10 co-sponsoring agencies, and, most effectively, through word of mouth. This was the 20th annual retreat held in Cortland County, and my mother, a facilitator for 15 years, had begun to see mothers return to the retreat with different daughters who now were old enough to participate. Having an enjoyable and effective program design brought families back year after year and made the retreat an established part of youth development and parent support efforts in the community.

As co-facilitator, I was conscious that I wanted the mothers to testify to their own experiences growing up and going through puberty. I wanted them to be “experts” in these areas and to be resources for their daughters. I also wanted to help create an atmosphere where it was safe for both moms and daughters to talk about their feelings and experiences and to not be judged on what they said or felt.

The retreat had plenty of icebreakers to help the participants get to know each other. We also included role-plays, the most memorable of which asked the mom and daughter to switch roles and act out a common scenario (for example, the daughter wants to stay out past her curfew with a person that she wants to date). It was an opportunity for the mom and daughter to see their roles from the others perspective.

Perhaps the most useful outcome of the day was the way the mothers, with minimal prodding by the co-facilitators, were able to participate in their daughters’ lives in a way that was respectful. While discussions about puberty can sometimes lead to the dreaded “talk” between parent and child, this retreat reinforced the mothers’ role and expertise and personalized the topics of puberty and menstruation. The moms were able to share their stories, and in doing so gained recognition as “experts” in the area and as a needed resource for their daughters. Daughters freely asked questions of their mothers and genuinely sought their advice. I believe that bringing together a group of mothers to collectively share anecdotes and advice with a group of daughters who shared questions and concerns helped to strengthen the individual mother-daughter relationships. It also helped to contribute to the community-wide effort to support parents and to promote positive youth development.

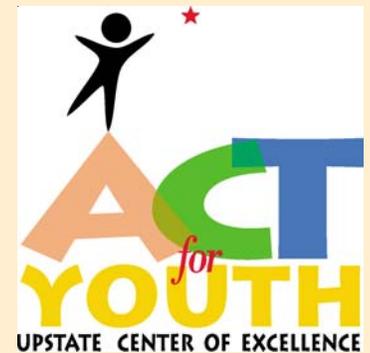
Keys to Successful Parent Involvement:

- ★ Take events and programs to parents where they are.
- ★ Demonstrate understanding and respect in tangible ways.
- ★ Allow time for parent involvement efforts to take root.
- ★ Develop parent-to-parent peer programs.
- ★ Create opportunities for parent-teen interaction.
- ★ Invite parents to youth-led and youth-centered events.



The Upstate Center of Excellence invites you to visit the ACT for Youth website where additional copies of this newsletter and many other youth development resources are available.

www.actforyouth.net



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