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# Involving Fathers

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Fathers are often the forgotten ones in family-oriented programs. Mothers have traditionally been more involved in the schools and community organizations. But with more mothers in the labor force and a growing recognition of the father's importance for child development, there is new interest in meaningful ways of involving dads in their children's education.

Schools can reach out to fathers in at least three ways: their basic orientation, their in-school programs, and encouragement of out-of-school learning activities.

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## Basic Orientation

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All forms of communication to families need to mention fathers as well as mothers, assume that both will be interested, and encourage both to participate in school-sponsored activities. Further, non-custodial parents, who are usually fathers, need to be informed of these activities too unless there are strong reasons for not doing so. (See *Involving Single and Working Parents* section also.)

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## In-School Activities

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These should be scheduled at times when all parents can attend, such as before school, in the evenings, or on weekends. They could include:

- Father-child breakfasts or dinners could provide an informal setting to meet teachers and school staff where adult male friends or father substitutes are also encouraged to come.
- In parent-teacher conferences, draw out the views of fathers and give them suggestions on ways to help children learn more at home.
- For school leadership positions such as PTA officers or advisory committee members, seek a balance of fathers and mothers.
- Volunteer positions should be filled from among both fathers and mothers who are free during the school day to help with activities such as being classroom aides or chaperons for field

trips. The presence of fathers or even older men as hall monitors may help reduce school discipline problems.

- Fathers should be invited to help with special events such as constructing exhibit booths or judging contests.
- On career days ask fathers and mothers to tell how their education helped prepare them for their careers.

A special opportunity for fathers and mothers too is NetDay96. This is a nationwide effort to connect all classrooms to the Internet. Modeled on the successful California NetDay, every weekend in October volunteers will help hard-wire classrooms. For more information, contact NetDay96 by phone at (415) 553-2311 or by Internet at [netday@kqed.org](mailto:netday@kqed.org), <http://www.netday96.com/>

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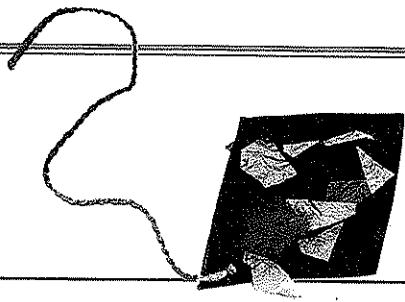
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## Out-of-School Activities

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Fathers contribute to children's learning and development in many ways, and schools can assist them by:

- Making a point to invite fathers and make them feel welcome at workshops and courses on topics such as parenting skills, helping students learn non-violent ways to resolve conflicts, and exploring college and career opportunities.
- Creating support groups for parents experiencing the death or departure of a spouse, a difficult or disabled child, alienated teenagers, and other traumatic events.
- Providing training for fathers and other men as well as women to learn how to tutor students in basic subjects and mentor them in long-term relationships.
- Working with major local employers to adopt family-friendly policies such as releasing workers to attend school conferences, allowing flexible work schedules, and creating lunchtime seminars on family and home-school relations topics.



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# Involving Single and Working Parents

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An increasing number of children live in single parent and step families. Many also live in foster families, and other non-traditional family forms. And in many two-parent families both parents work full days, so children come home to an empty house. Involving single and working parents presents many challenges to schools.

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## Communication

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Communication with single-parent and other non-traditional families will be more effective if schools

- Avoid making the assumption that students live with both biological parents.
- Avoid the traditional "Dear Parents" greeting in letters and other messages, and instead use "Dear Parent," "Dear Family," "Friends," or some other form of greeting.
- Develop a system of keeping non-custodial parents informed of their children's school progress.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the rights of non-custodial parents. Inform parents that schools may not withhold information from non-custodial parents who have the legal right to see their children's records.
- Develop a simple unobtrusive system to keep track of family changes, such as these examples:
  - ✓ At the beginning of the year ask for the names and addresses of individuals to be informed about each child and involved in school activities.
  - ✓ At mid-year send a form to each child's parents or guardians to verify that the information is still accurate. Invite the parents or guardians to indicate any changes.

- Place flyers about school events on bulletin boards of major companies in the community which are family-friendly to learning.

These approaches use different and more sensitive ways of communicating with non-traditional families, and do not require much more material resources.

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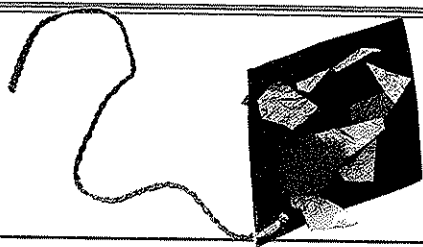
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## Involvement

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The following practices can make the involvement of single and working parents in school life more feasible:

- Hold parent-teacher conferences and other school events in the evenings.
- Welcome other children at such events, and provide organized activities or child care services.
- Provide teachers and counselors with in-service training that sensitizes them to special problems faced by children of single and working parents and the parents themselves.
- Gather information on whether joint or separate parent conferences need to be scheduled with parents.
- Sponsor evening and weekend learning activities at which parents can participate and learn with their children.
- Work with local businesses to arrange released time from work so that parents can attend conferences, volunteer or in other ways spend time at their child's school when it is in session.



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# Secondary School Strategies

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Research and experience indicate that parent participation falls off in the upper grades. Secondary schools can reduce some common obstacles to family involvement that stem from the organization and curriculum of the school, and help parents cope with the challenges of adolescence.

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## Welcome Parents

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One set of obstacles stems from the sheer size and layout of many secondary schools which make them less than visitor friendly. Schools can become more friendly to visitors in these ways:

- Place clearly marked signs on the outside of the building showing where to enter.
- Instruct guards or other monitors to welcome parents who enter the building and assist them in finding their way.
- Expect office staff to assist parents in a prompt and friendly fashion.
- Rethink the wording of signs that command outsiders to "report to the office" on arrival.
- Create a welcome sign for parents in the entryway, and repeat it in all the languages spoken by families of the students.

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## Promote Closer Relationships

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Another obstacle to family involvement is that students typically have many teachers. Parents can find it difficult to know which teacher to contact. Rarely does any one staff member have a complete picture of each student, except perhaps the guidance counselor. But they often have a heavy caseload of students, making it difficult to know each well.

Some secondary schools are reorganizing in ways that increase teachers' ability to form relationships with parents and students. Secondary schools can encourage family involvement in these ways:

- Create smaller units within the school through "clusters," "houses," schools-within-schools, and other organizational devices.
- Keep the same counselors throughout the high school years so that students have an ongoing relationship with at least one individual at the school.
- Create teams of teachers who stay with students for more than one year.
- Schedule periods for teaching teams to meet with each other to discuss students they all teach and how to build continuing relationships between the school and families.

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## Reach Out to Specific Groups

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Secondary schools are attempting to reach out to special groups of families to address their specific needs:

- Meetings for limited-English parents with translators for major school meetings and parent-teacher conferences.
- Meetings for parents of students who want to attend college to discuss college options and financial aid programs.
- Meetings to describe options available in vocational-technical and work-study programs and career planning generally.

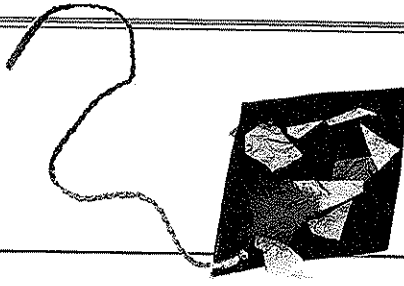
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## Explain the Curriculum

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The secondary curriculum is often more complex and technical than the curriculum parents experienced in their own schooling. Parents may feel incapable of helping their children with questions and homework and intimidated about discussing curriculum concerns or issues with teachers. This has led some schools to offer the following kinds of programs to parents:



# Parent Resource Centers

Parent resource centers in schools can support parents as both learners and teachers. These centers provide materials and a space where parents can get together with other parents and school staff to learn how to assist in their children's at-home learning. Parents can come to such a center for educational materials, training, informal meetings, and even for referral to other community services.

Parent resource centers may contain

- information about current school programs and events;
- reading materials to help parents guide their children's learning;
- games, books, and videos that parents can use with children at home, as well as toys and books for visiting pre-school children;
- a paid aide or volunteer who provides parents with instruction in subject areas and in using learning materials;
- a place where parents can "fill prescriptions" written by teachers for specific educational materials to be used at home;
- a "Parents Corner" with comfortable furniture where parents can talk with other parents and teachers who come into the center; and
- an exchange box where parents and teachers can drop off unwanted books, toys, and surplus household items and take or borrow them for their own use.

Parent resource centers send a very positive message to parents that they belong in the school and should feel welcome in it. Some have a coffee machine and other amenities to reinforce the welcome. Many have donated furnishings and equipment.

These centers can be used for a variety of purposes:

- meeting space for parent groups and workshops;
- an informal location for individual parent-teacher or parent-principal discussions;
- lounges and "waiting rooms" for parents in school on other business;
- recruiting tutors and classroom volunteers; and
- information and guidance about higher education opportunities, cultural and community services and agencies to help families with educational, health, and social service needs.

A parent resource center can be created in a spare classroom or a corner of a school library. The center will need some staffing by a paid aide, parent/community volunteer, or a rotating teacher.

Principals and central administration staff can encourage teachers working with parents to develop at-home learning activities as part of their curriculum. Principals and teachers may want to devote several professional development sessions to this task. Schools can also provide clerical and printing assistance to teachers who develop materials for parents.