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**Abstract**

This tongue-in-cheek article highlights the barriers parents face when trying to involve themselves in the school life of their child. It recommends that education personnel take a moment to self reflect after reading the article. **Keywords:** Education, School age

# PARENT INVOLVEMENT???

This is an article that was published in Exceptional Parent/ January-February 1988. We would challenge school board and Dept. of Education personnel to take a minute and self reflect after reading it. Do you recognize yourself or is your conscious clear.

## PARENTS, NO LONGER EXCLUDED, JUST IGNORED

Some way to do it Nicely  
by Alan Gartner

Education laws require, and many professional groups profess the importance of, contribution and involvement by parents with decisions concerning the lives of their children. However, evidenced by their behavior, professionals often undervalue parental knowledge and experience.

The bad old days are gone. Parents of children with disabilities no longer are ignored. Indeed, in recent national study (or meta-analysis as we now call them) parental involvement was identified by various groups of professionals as two of the top five priority areas. One would think that if professionals cared so much as they profess to, they would be able to do better. In fact what is happening now is more subtle than the old ignoring but less pernicious. And it has the same result, namely the work of the professionals is unaffected (that is not bothered) by the significant involvement of parents.

Let us look at some of the techniques used, each characterized by 1) the rhetoric of concern for parents involvement and 2) the consequences of noninvolvement or at least nonsignificant involvement. Thus the professional can have their cake --- high scores on expressing concern, and eat it too - little actual interference with what they do!

## DAMNING WITH FAINT PRAISE OR PRAISING WITH FAINT DAMNATION

Addressing a group of professionals at a recent national conference workshop on ways to increase parental involvement, the speaker concluded his plea by telling the audience, "parents have lots of valuable tidbits." Now, why

would parents not welcome the opportunity to be "tidbits" providers?

## RECOGNIZE THEIR RIGHTS

A suburban school district, widely praised for the quality of its educational program, does as the law requires: its letter which informs parents of the mandated annual review concludes, "If you feel it necessary to attend, we can try to change the date." Doesn't this reflect commitment to parental involvement?

## TEACH THEM WHAT YOU KNOW

"Parent training" is increasingly a component of school and rehabilitation agency programs. Recognizing that parents do not know what they do, professionals now are prepared to "train" parents. Of course there is nothing that professionals do not know, so there is no reason for parents ( who live with the children) to train professionals.

## HELP THEM UNDERSTAND THE SOURCE OF THEIR BEHAVIOR

Often, parents challenge what professionals know best for their child. Sometimes, when we tell them of their child's limits, parents reject that - this is because of their unwillingness to face the reality of their child's disability(ies). Other times, when we propose more than they wish, they reject that - it is because they are overprotective. While both of these reactions can be troublesome for us, note that it makes clear the need for a new professional service, parent counselling.

## MAKE THEM FEEL SPECIAL

Being the parent of a disabled child is hard enough. We can help by at least letting the parent feel special. No need to let parents know that all couples face stress or that child-rearing is hard work for all parents. Let them think that all their problems are because of the disabled child or their failure to adequately adjust.

## TREAT THEM AS NORMAL

This may seem to contradict the previous suggestion but only to the unsophisticated (dare \_\_\_\_\_ the unprofessional). We all know that the normal family has a working father, a

nonworking mother, and 2.3 children. And it is mothers who care for the children. Time, anytime it is convenient for us, that is during our paid work day, will be convenient for them. Surely, we should not be troubled (less change our behavior) by the report of a recent national survey that two-thirds of students with disabilities in transition programs have parents who work full or part-time.

#### GIVE THEM MORE

The measure of our concern has already been reflected in the ever growing numbers of children in special education. We can add to this well deserved reputation for caring by multiplying the special services we offer. No need to recognize that most find jobs and gain support through social networks; we can offer special placement and counselling services.

#### INVITE THEM TO OUR PLACE

It is hospitable (and a sign of caring) to invite people to your location, so be sure all meetings take place at your base. If parents really care, they will take time off work or other obligations and come to our office. If they do not, see "Help them understand the source of their behavior" above.

#### KEEP OUR SERVICE PACKAGE WHOLE

When the lack of available transportation makes our program inaccessible, add a transportation component to them. Of, course, this shows our concern. No need to consider that this leaves the transportation system unaffected. We have enriched our program and anyhow caring parents can always drive their children. Furthermore, there are not so many accessible places to go anyway.

#### DO NOT BURDEN THEM

Of course, P.L.94-142 requires parental involvement in the I.E.P. ( Editor's note: In Alberta we do not have such a law but it is common practice to invite parents to such a meeting). But we all know how hard the lives of parents of disabled kids are so it is helpful to have the I.E.P. prepared prior to the meeting, then after a brief chat, the parents can just sign it. No need to wonder whether their input would

have made it better; they do not understand the technical language we use and they do have so much else burdening them.

#### DO NOT MAKE THEM UNCOMFORTABLE

Parents can be taught to honor our expertise. It would discomfort them to think a mere disabled person could help their child. So let us be sure we support our colleagues in the visually-impaired field, for example, who are fighting against blind adults serving as travel trainers. No telling what might happen if parents and the organized disabled got together; there might be a revolution. And then where would we be!