

Parent Meetings: Creative Ways to Make Them Meaningful

by Karen Stephens

Do you frequently complain about holding parent meetings because “hardly anyone shows up.” Do staff huddle up grouching that the parents who “really needed the information” didn’t even attend. Have you felt a little resentful about having to *bribe* parents into attending meetings by offering food and free child care?

If so, you’re not alone. Many of us early childhood professionals get discouraged when parents don’t seem as enthused about family enrichment opportunities as we think they *should* be. But if you are *consistently* seeing your parent relations cup as half empty, rather than half full, you and your staff need a bit of an attitude adjustment.

What kind of adjustment? First, *re-define* your criteria for a successful parent meeting. It’s always easy to be disheartened by numbers, especially in the U.S. where we often judge success by size — big showy numbers denote achievement whether we’re discussing our family incomes or our sports team’s performance.

In our work, if we focus **ONLY** on numbers — namely how many parents attend any one meeting, we set ourselves up for disappointment. We also jump to some false assumptions.

For instance, if attendance numbers don’t meet our expectations, we consider *no show* parents as less committed to or interested in child-rearing. Assumptions like that undermine family-staff relations and most often are just not true.

Families are incredibly busy. Parents’ full time employment outside the home robs families of treasured time together. If we offer only night-time parent meetings, sometimes parents don’t attend, not because they don’t care, but because they care **MORE** about the time they actually have *with* their child. Can we fault them for that?

Overall, I consider a program a success if 10-25% of parents attend any one meeting. I also consider it a success if a variety of parents attend different meetings; rather than **JUST** having the same core group of parents attend. Variety means we are offering topics or events that appeal to diverse interests, rather than just a core group who think like us.

Encourage program staff **NOT** to take it personally when parents choose not to attend all your parent meetings. Like most of us, parents do what they can do — and they do what their conscience can live with.

MUCH more important than counting numbers is focusing on the quality of impact a meeting makes on parents’ attitudes and behavior. With your staff, discuss what constitutes *making a difference* in parent’s lives. Why are you offering parent meetings? Discuss the fundamental goals for reaching out to parents. Is it important to us that parents establish friendships with each other and not just us?

If you focus on making a qualitative affect on even **ONE** parent, you’ll be more encouraged. After all, don’t we believe that impacting even one child’s life can do a lot to create a better world? It makes sense also to believe that helping even one parent feel more competent, confident, or supported is a worthy success in our profession.

With that said, the remainder of this article will share a bevy of ways to make parent meetings successful — in a meaningful way.

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Setting the stage for success

First things first. Below are some guidelines to keep in mind as you plan parent meetings.

Survey parents on what THEY want to learn about or discuss regarding childrearing or family life. Don't assume you know what parents want to know, or even need to know. Asking parents is respectful, and it helps you plan events that are *responsive* to their immediate needs.

Include parents in planning meetings. Strive for diversity and inclusion. Resist including only those parents who already seem to think like you do. Be sensitive to family *culture* when planning experiences.

Find motivating ways to get parents through the door. The best way is good word of mouth. The more fun, engaging, and meaningful meetings are, the more attendance will build. However, there are also other ways to motivate parents' attendance — some are cheap — other's not. Many programs offer door prizes or give parents a paperback children's book to take home. Offering free child care during a meeting is a great way to remove an obstacle to attendance. Rhonda Swanson, director of Northern State University Children's Center goes a step farther. She holds a raffle for a free day of child care. You might also consider bringing in a *local celebrity* occasionally, for instance a local newspaper feature writer or radio talk show host who covers family issues.

Set the physical stage for success; creature comforts count. Plan for camaraderie and casual networking. And yes, offer food — even just snacks — to nourish the body as well as the mind. They sustain energy and are a cultural way of building a sense of



community. (One year our kick off parent meeting featured a pie buffet for a pie-tasting party. It was a fun ice-breaker!)

Provide comfortable *adult* seating. Arrange seating for lots of face to face interaction among parents. Home-like, rather than office-like lighting and room temperature are helpful. Candles add warmth and ambiance, as can simple windchimes or background music. Fresh flowers or a bubbling table top fountain contribute beauty and harmony. Such small things are easy to overlook, but they really do show parents respect and demonstrate that you value your time together.

Whatever you do, move away from *classroom* settings. For parents cooped up inside all day, a meeting room with windows reduces stress. If you don't have a parent lounge with comfortable couches and loveseats, consider reserving meeting space at a local coffee shop.

Occasionally vary the meeting day. While it's easier to remember a set monthly meeting date, it's harder for everyone to HAVE that particular day

available. Occasionally vary days to expand parent options for participation.

Vary the meeting times. Most programs plan meetings immediately after closing time so families don't have to go home and come back. That also requires serving a supper during a meeting for parents and the children in child care. But sometimes, offer lunch time meetings for those families who really don't want to give up evening family time together. A breakfast meeting at a local café is another option.

Put technology to work. Think about a meeting of the minds rather than just physical face to face meetings. For some parents, discussing a topic with staff and fellow classroom parents online via a chat room is a preferred meeting method. At the very least, it can allow follow-up discussion to a parent meeting. Also offer a parent lending library with video and audio tapes. You can then hold parent discussions on a particular tape several parents checked out, or ask a parent to write a newsletter review of a tape they viewed.

Intentionally include fathers as well as mothers. A great start is to ask some

fathers to help plan or even facilitate a meeting.

Allow enough TIME for parents to process dialogue and information. Pace meetings for plenty of reflection, hands on activity, and discussion. I'm convinced that guiding and supporting parents through self-reflection and a parenting decision-making process is far more important than inundating them with facts and pressuring them to competently perform specific parenting skills.

Plan for ADULT learning styles. Find ways for parents to present and apply their unique expertise/insights/experience. Vary activities to include all learning styles for adults. Think hands-on and speak to all the multiple intelligences. Lecture less; coach, facilitate, ask reflective questions MORE. Encourage PEER learning and support rather than dependence on an *expert* presenter or staff person. Generate alternatives rather than dictate advice or quick fixes.

Infuse training with unexpected creativity, uniqueness, and fun. Employ a variety of methods of presentation or discussion. Use jokes, cartoons, props, guest speakers, dramatic play, peer discussion, etc.

Provide short and jargon-free take-home materials and handouts. These help parents to refer back to information, and they help them share ideas with those who co-parent with them, whether it be spouse, partner, or grandparent.

Meaningful and creatively engaging parent meetings

From bubbles to pebbles to children's books and poems, I use lots of different tools to encourage groups to open up and discuss issues. The props are often purchased at the local party store or handmade. I choose props based on how

they might engage thought, symbolize a specific concept, engage hands-on involvement, and/or spark fun and relaxing conversations.

Other people hold different types of meetings to entice parents. Some sponsor formal parenting classes, such as STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting). Others are less formal. For instance, Candice York, director of the University of Northern Iowa Child Development Center, reports hosting art fairs, game nights, and "silly suppers" where kids and parents make suppers out of what are typically considered breakfast foods. In our program we hosted a "Trading Places Night" where everyone came to play typical classroom activities, but the children were the "teachers" and the parents the "children." It really helped parents respect children's learning and gave them a *child's eye view* of developmental skills encouraged through play.

Obviously, there are as many ways of offering parent meetings as there are directors. Below are some specific ideas I've found successful with parent groups. I hope they inspire you to find your own creative ways of reaching out to and working with parents.

■ **What's parenting like for you?** Ask parents to pair up in twos. Provide a hand-held toy microphone. Ask parents to take turns interviewing each other about the rewards — and yes, challenges — of parenting. Inevitably, parents will get to know each other better. Most importantly, they'll learn they are not alone in a lot of their parenting experiences.

Variation: Pretend you're filming a segment of a morning talk show. Ask parents to volunteer to be on an interview panel for a specific topic. For instance, how about a panel of parents talking about strategies for getting kids to bed on time — or for toilet training.

■ **Wish Upon a Star.** Give each parent a shiny cardboard star and a marker or pen. On one side of the star, ask them to write down (or draw a picture of) their hopes for their child. On the other side, ask them to write down or draw their dreams for their family. After writing/drawing is finished, ask parents to share their hopes and dreams with each other. Discuss specific ways for achieving our hopes for our children and dreams for our family. At meeting's end, encourage parents to take their star home to share with their children. And they might want to hang the star in a window or post on the refrigerator as a reminder of their heart's desire.

Variation: Pass out magic wands to parents. Ask each to share what they'd wish for in terms of parenting. More patience? More time?

■ **Ever felt like a broken record?** Before parents arrive, have one of those *old-fashioned* vinyl records placed at each seat. (You know, the ones stored in your basement collecting dust.) Then discuss. For instance, has anyone felt like a broken record with the kids? In what ways? Why do they think kids need repetition or reminding?

Variation: Play a song that could be used to foster discussion. For instance, as parents come in, play the song "Can't Buy Me Love" by the Beatles, or "Imagine" by John Lennon. What can those songs imply for parenting? Can parents think of other song titles that could serve as a theme song for parenting?

■ **A Wonder from Childhood.** Ask each parent to bring one special item that will reveal something special about their childhood. Suggestions might be a favorite book, toy, or nature item. Ask volunteers to share their item with the group. What made it special? What meaning does it hold? What items do they believe are special or full of meaning in their child's life and why?

How can we help children find things to love and cherish in life?

Variation: Ask each parent to bring in a favored photo from their childhood. Discuss what made the experience in the photo memorable enough to treasure. What childhood experiences do they hope their child will treasure?

■ **Bubbles for Reducing Stress.** Give each parent a miniature bottle of bubble solution and wand. (Often sold as wedding reception table favors at party stores.) Ask each parent to silently think of a parenting concern or minor worry from the day. Then blow bubbles together, imagining the bubbles carrying their worries away. Ask BRAVE participants to share their imaginings. As people share, how many are similar? Encourage parents to suggest productive ways for coping with the particular concerns expressed.

Variation: Balloon pop. Have parents share a worry, write it on a slip of paper and then put it into a balloon. Everyone can blow up their balloon and then pop their worries away. (While inflating the balloons, encourage deep, relaxing breathing — not hyperventilation.)

Variation: Bubble wrap hop. Give everyone a sheet of bubble wrap packing and a permanent marker. Each person writes a frustration on their bubble wrap and then jumps on the wrap to stomp the worry away.

■ **Connecting with Childhood.** Give participants a set of questions related to childhood to reflect upon and answer. Ask them to share their responses with each other. How will their responses affect how they will parent? How will they influence what experiences they offer their own children? Sample questions:

- During childhood, where was your favorite place to be?

- Describe play activities and settings that fully engaged you, the ones you could do for long periods with no sense of time passing. What was it about them that maintained your full, extended attention?

- What places or spaces or persons relaxed you most in childhood? What and/or who calmed you most easily?

- What scared you most as a child?

- What experiences do you believe every childhood should include?

■ **Myth of the Perfect Parent.** For each attendee provide a party paper plate and a marker. For mothers, provide a “Barbie®” paper plate; for dads, a “Superman®” paper plate. Talk about what each person considered to be the *perfect* parent BEFORE they actually became a parent. Compare that image to the reality of day in and day out parenting. Is the standard of perfection realistic for a parent? Are priorities needed? What is most important to be good at as a parent? After discussion, ask parents to list on their paper plate those things they’d like to give up in their pursuit of perfection. For instance, perfectly made beds or a huge income? At meeting’s end, everyone tears up their paper plates and throws the pieces into the air. Do shoulders feel lightened? How can parents be more gentle in judging themselves in the future?

■ **Tuning into Children’s Needs.** Provide a variety of chimes in the meeting room — whether table top or hanging. As parents enter, encourage them to test out and play with the chimes. Begin a discussion on children’s need for responsive parenting. The chimes can symbolize the need to *tune into* children’s developmental stages as well as unique temperament, abilities, and interests. If you can afford it, send each

family home with a chime for their home.

■ **A Voice Like No One Else’s.** Pam Tuszynski of First Presbyterian Church Preschool in Hollywood, California, asks parents in her program to dictate children’s books on tape for their children’s use in the classroom. What a smoothing thing to do for children! Making those tapes together would be a great parent event. Ask parents to bring one of their child’s favorite books to the meeting. After parents share the books with each other, provide a tape recorder and tape so they can spread out in the room for a group recording session. Especially close groups of parents might team up to read different characters in each other’s book choices.

So there you have it, a bevy of ideas to bring your program’s families together for engaging reflection and discussion. I hope these ideas inspire your own creative juices as you reach out to the parents and children in your circle of care. Enjoy the connections and more importantly, savor the relationships that spring from them.

References

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