

# 1 Introduction

- 
- Parent Involvement Is Important and Up to You!
  - Your Personal Philosophy of Parent Involvement
- 

## **PARENT INVOLVEMENT IS IMPORTANT AND UP TO YOU!**

Virtually every contemporary American general and special education law, teacher organization, and parent association stresses the importance of parent involvement in their child's education. Parent involvement can take many forms, such as parents' becoming informed about their child's school program; communicating regularly with teachers; understanding their child's strengths, needs, and progress; helping with homework; attending parent-teacher conferences and other school functions; and volunteering in the classroom.

The critical need to get parents involved is backed by nearly 100 research studies that have found many positive and tangible effects of parent involvement on student success in school. Some of the benefits identified by these studies include better attendance, higher academic achievement, more appropriate social behaviors and attitudes, greater ability to adapt to change, more involvement in extracurricular activities, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in post-secondary education. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Conversely, children whose parents are not involved in their education may be placed at a very serious disadvantage, a situation especially damaging for students who are already struggling academically or socially and need additional support.

Although parents of typically developing children face many challenges in raising their sons and daughters in today's complex society, parents of children with disabilities have additional and often longer-term responsibilities necessitated by their children's special needs. These responsibilities may start very early on and continue into their children's adulthood. For this reason, parent involvement may be even

more important for parents of children with disabilities to give them ongoing support and help them meet their expanded roles and heightened expectations.

Parent involvement doesn't just happen spontaneously. It takes a systematic and continuous effort on all parts of the educational team, including school administrators, teachers, specialists, and of course parents themselves. Parent involvement doesn't happen all at once, and teachers need to take into consideration the needs, desires, and possible challenges presented by each family. In any case, parent involvement should start at preschool and continue through the high school years.

Teachers are the most important players in this team effort. They can promote parent involvement one step at a time by maintaining regular two-way communication through letters, newsletters, phone calls, e-mail, and meetings; by providing parent-training opportunities such as speakers, home learning resources, print and online references, and "Make-It-Take-It" workshops in which parents leave with instructional materials for use with their children at home; by inviting parents to help out with school tasks at home or to volunteer in the classroom to the extent they are able; by becoming knowledgeable about postschool and community resources and sharing this information; by soliciting information and feedback from parents; and by treating parents as valuable resources and partners in decision making.

This book shows a variety of useful and teacher-friendly strategies for getting parents involved. By the time you have finished reading the book, you should be well on your way to planning and implementing a yearlong—and potentially career-long—program of communicating with and involving parents.

Parent involvement is important, and it is up to you to get the ball rolling and ensure that the parents of your students feel included and welcome to participate in their children's education. Now let's get started!

## **YOUR PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT**

At first glance at this section's title, its contents might seem obvious and straightforward. But before undertaking this important reflective exercise of composing your personal philosophy of parent involvement, let's consider what exactly a philosophy is. What does constructing a personal philosophy of parent involvement entail? And why is it important that each teacher of students with special needs have a personal philosophy of parent involvement?

Dictionaries provide multiple definitions of *philosophy*, two of which work in harmony for the purpose of this activity: (1) "any personal belief about how to live or how to deal with a situation" and (2) "a belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group or school" (<http://wordnet.princeton.edu>). Applying these definitions to an educational situation, teachers' personal philosophies should reflect their individual beliefs and values, be compatible with those of a relevant and credible source such as a professional organization, and be applicable to their day-to-day professional responsibilities.

A personal philosophy of parent involvement, then, is a statement of a teacher's individual beliefs about professional responsibilities with respect to the parents of her students. A special educator's parent involvement philosophy will be similar to that of a general education teacher but will include a particular focus on meeting the additional individualized needs of parents of children with special needs.

Why take the time and effort to compose a personal philosophy of parent involvement? Your primary responsibility as a teacher is providing effective instruction to your students, and no doubt you've spent much time reflecting on this role. But you are responsible also for communicating with, interacting with, and supporting parents who share a common goal of nurturing their children and helping them achieve to the highest degree possible, and this responsibility merits serious thought and consideration as well.

Creating your personal philosophy of parent involvement will enable you to reflect and clarify your position on the critical and ongoing task of working with parents, give you a solid basis and framework for taking positive action, and set the tone for your future interactions with parents.

So let's get started by identifying the three key components of your own personal philosophy of parent involvement: (1) the role of parents of students with special needs; (2) your beliefs, values, and role as an educator; and (3) specific parent-involvement strategies.

### **The Role of Parents of Students With Special Needs**

First, consider the many roles and responsibilities of parents of children with disabilities. Certainly there are many commonalities in parenting children both with and without disabilities. But for parents of exceptional children there are several additional or perhaps more intense roles, including the following (adapted from Heward, Dardig, & Rossett, 1979):

- *Teacher*—Students with disabilities often require more practice than their typical peers to learn new skills and more direct and intensive instruction to ensure that their new skills are maintained and used in environments outside of the school. Parents can be key elements in providing this additional instruction. If given the necessary support and materials, many parents can provide important supplementary teaching for their children at home, which will certainly add to gains in their academic, social, communicative, and daily living skills.
- *Behavior Manager*—When a child with special needs is identified with behavior problems at school, these challenging behaviors are often present at home as well. In this case, parents must actively and systematically structure the home environment to reduce inappropriate behavior and teach more adaptive skills.
- *Counselor*—Unfortunately, many students with disabilities face teasing or may not be able to engage in typical activities with their same-age peers. In these cases, parents need to be able to counsel their children, help them cope, encourage friendships, and find appropriate activities in which they can participate.
- *Advocate*—Parents may have to become active advocates for appropriate programs and services, both in school and out, for their child during their school years and beyond.
- *Accessor of Community Resources*—Parents of children with disabilities must often navigate a maze of agencies and programs to locate and obtain community such services as medical treatment, recreational opportunities, and vocational training for their child.

- *Future Planner*—Although the active phase of parenting typically developing children usually wanes when the child enters adulthood, parents of children with disabilities often have lifelong responsibilities to ensure the domestic, social, recreational, vocational, and financial security of their children and must plan accordingly.

You will begin formulating your personal philosophy statement by explaining what you feel are the two or three major roles of the parents of your current students. Your response will be shaped by the age of your students and the types of disabilities and challenges they face. Use the previous list for ideas, and add any additional roles you feel are important.

### **Your Beliefs, Values, and Role as an Educator**

A first step in developing your personal philosophy statement is to read and consider the section of the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) *Code of Ethics and Standards for Professional Practice for Special Educators* that relates to the special educator's role in developing parent relationships. CEC is the largest and one of the most highly respected professional organizations in special education. This organization includes 17 divisions focused on the education of students with all types of special needs, including gifts and talents.

Professionals seek to develop relationships with parents based on mutual respect for their roles in achieving benefits for the exceptional person.

Special education professionals:

1. Develop effective communication with parents, avoiding technical terminology and using the primary language of the home and other modes of communication when appropriate.
2. Seek and use parents' knowledge and expertise in planning, conducting, and evaluating special education and related services for persons with exceptionalities.
3. Maintain communications between parents and professionals with appropriate respect for privacy and confidentiality.
4. Extend opportunities for parent education, utilizing accurate information and professional methods.
5. Inform parents of the educational rights of their children and of any proposed or actual practices that violate those rights.
6. Recognize and respect cultural diversities that exist in some families with persons with exceptionalities.
7. Recognize that the relationship of home and community environmental conditions affects the behavior and outlook of the exceptional person.\*

Some important beliefs and values that arise from these professional standards are demonstrating respect, maintaining two-way communication, providing opportunities for parent education, and recognizing diversity.

---

\*SOURCE: From the CEC's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (the entire document can be obtained at the CEC Web site: [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)).

The *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement*, established by the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), are another good source for identifying and writing your beliefs, values, and role with regard to parent involvement:

Effective parent involvement programs include activities that are addressed by the following six standards:

I. Communicating—Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

II. Parenting—Parenting skills are promoted and supported.

III. Student learning—Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.

IV. Volunteering—Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.

V. School decision making and advocacy—Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

VI. Collaborating with community—Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.\*

As you can see, the PTA standards are in sync with the CEC standards and provide some additional specificity that can be helpful in clarifying your beliefs, values, and role.

You may wish to consult some additional sources as well, including any policy statements about parent involvement issued by your school or district or other professional education associations.

In light of reviewing these standards from credible sources, you can now select two or three key areas and summarize your own role as a teacher in helping parents become involved with their child's education and in working with them to address the challenges they may face. Some areas you may wish to include are establishing ongoing channels of communication, listening to parents with empathy and understanding, treating parents as valued team members, providing parents with information about resources that might be of interest to them, and enabling parents to work with their children at home.

### **Specific Parent Involvement Strategies**

Next, identify four to six strategies that you will use with the parents of the students in your class for the current school year. You should list some specific practices, such as sending home a weekly progress report, inviting parents to volunteer in the classroom, and creating a monthly newsletter for them.

Finally, put the three parts (roles of parents of students with special needs, your beliefs, values, and role as an educator, and specific parent involvement strategies) of your statement together, add a brief introduction and conclusion, and you have completed your personal philosophy of parent involvement. Refer to this document periodically as a reminder of your core beliefs and commitments, and feel free to adapt or update it when necessary.

---

\*SOURCE: The *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement* established by the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

Throughout this book you will find that many of the strategies described relate to one or more of the statements you have included in your personal philosophy of parent involvement.

### Your Personal Philosophy of Parent Involvement Review Checklist

- Read and reflect on professional association codes or guidelines (e.g., CEC, National PTA, your own school district).
- Explain two to three major roles of parents of students with special needs at your grade level.
- Explain two to three of your major beliefs, values, and roles as an educator for communicating with, involving, and supporting parents.
- Identify four to six specific parent involvement strategies that you will use during this school year.
- Add a brief introduction and conclusion.

### Sample Materials

The examples of personal philosophies of parent involvement that follow are influenced not only by individual teachers' perspectives but also by their particular teaching assignments—the age and grade of their students, the types of disabilities experienced by their students, and their particular educational configuration.

For example, the personal philosophy in Figure 1.1 reflects the conviction of a prekindergarten teacher of students with special needs that a strong parent-teacher bond should be established early on. In Figure 1.2, a support teacher of elementary school (Grades 4–6) students with hearing impairments stresses the importance of facilitating communication, social interaction, and community access. In Figure 1.3, a middle school teacher of students who have intellectual disabilities focuses on the importance of home teaching, the use of community resources, and organizing paperwork as the student approaches the transition to high school. Finally, Figure 1.4 illustrates the commitment of a high school teacher of students who have severe disabilities to help parents seamlessly bridge the gap between high school and adult services.

**Figure 1.1** Personal Philosophy of Parent Involvement—Prekindergarten Special Needs

---

**Teacher: Karen Chang***Introduction*

Parents are their child's first teachers, and even before their child begins preschool they have spent countless hours in this important role. Since early intervention is so critical to the immediate development and future success of a child with special needs, parents and preschool teachers should collaborate to provide intensive and consistent programming in both of the child's daily environments.

*The Role of Parents of Students With Special Needs*

As mentioned above, teaching is probably the parent's most important role in early childhood. Both formal and informal teaching can address such areas as communication, social, motor, play, and self-care skills. Parents at this early stage should also become aware of the resources in the community in which it would be beneficial for their child to participate. Last, parents need to actively communicate with preschool teachers and other staff members about the needs of their child and family.

*My Beliefs, Values, and Role as an Educator*

As a preschool teacher who works with young children who have special needs or are at risk, I work with families who are new to the service delivery system and may not know what to expect or be knowledgeable about our program or other programs in the local community. I want to be sure that parents obtain information that will help them make good decisions on behalf of their child.

I also believe that I should provide parents with strategies and materials so they will be able to work with their child at home on Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) goals and other skills appropriate to the home environment.

*Specific Parent Involvement Strategies*

Some of my planned activities this year include

- Writing a monthly newsletter to explain different components of our program and highlight community resources.
- Periodically sending home information packets providing background information about specific disabilities.
- Offering several Make-It-Take-It workshops where parents can construct materials for home use with their children.
- Creating a lending library of toys and home learning kits for parents to check out.

*Conclusion*

By communicating regularly and working together, parents and I will become a team to further the education of their young children.

---

**Figure 1.2** Personal Philosophy of Parent Involvement—Elementary School Hearing Impairments

---

**Teacher: Lenore Atkins**

*Introduction*

Parents of children with disabilities face many challenges. Some of these challenges are shared by parents of typically developing children, while others arise from the age or stage of the child and the particulars of his or her disability.

*Roles of Parents of Students with Special Needs*

I think that the three major roles of the parents of my elementary school students with hearing impairments are to encourage communication by active home teaching, to facilitate social interaction between their child and same-aged peers, and to make sure that access to community resources is optimized.

*My Beliefs, Values, and Role as a Special Educator*

I want parents to feel that we are all members of the same team, working to provide the best opportunities for their child's growth and development. I feel that it's my responsibility to open the channel of two-way communication and keep parents informed about their child's progress on a regular basis. In addition, I want to be able to provide resources to parents who would like to work with their child at home and in the community.

*Specific Parent Involvement Strategies*

This school year I have identified a variety of strategies that I will employ:

- I plan to send home a weekly progress report for each student. This report will address not only academic but also social skills and reflect the student's progress in inclusive classes as well as in support-service settings.
- I will also produce a themed newsletter each month that deals with a particular issue of interest to parents and includes descriptions of a variety of community resources that they may want to look into and accommodations they might want to provide.
- I will provide a variety of volunteer opportunities for parents to become involved in my classroom throughout the school year.
- I will carefully document all interactions with parents, making note of any follow-up needed and making sure that this follow-up is completed.
- Last, I will arrange for at least one guest speaker (most likely an adult who is deaf or has hearing impairments) and one Make-It-Take-It workshop each year so that parents can come into school in the evening for a productive and nonthreatening experience.

*Conclusion*

Though my specific strategies may change over the years, my main commitment to making sure parents are involved in their child's education will remain constant because the benefits of parent involvement are well documented and worth pursuing.

---

**Figure 1.3** Personal Philosophy of Parent Involvement—Middle School Intellectual Disabilities

---

**Teacher: Glenn Hall**

*Introduction*

It's been said that being a good parent is the most important and difficult task we can have, but one for which we are least prepared. Unlike learning to read, do math, play basketball, or play the flute, few of us have formal training in parenting skills, and must rely on observations of other parents in action (including our own), our own experiences, or simply trial and error.

*Roles of Parents of Students With Special Needs*

Parents of children with special needs have weighty responsibilities to fulfill in order to maximize their children's potential and to make sure that they have the benefit of all their school, community, and the future have to offer. Parents who are not aware of the importance of their roles as teachers may miss the opportunity to help their children acquire adaptive skills at a faster rate and at a higher degree of proficiency. Similarly, parents who are not aware of or able to access community resources may be missing out on opportunities to enrich and expand their children's lives. Finally, parents who do not have a system to organize the paperwork relating to their children's educational and medical histories may end up feeling uninformed, confused, and unclear as to the next steps in their children's development.

*My Beliefs, Values, and Role as an Educator*

As a teacher of middle school students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, I want to be able to help parents work effectively with their children at home to reinforce their in-school learning, find community and other resources that might be appropriate for their children, and create an orderly system for organizing and easily accessing the many documents they have collected over the years. I also feel that communication between parent and teacher is crucial, and I believe that it's my role to establish and maintain ongoing communication with each family.

*Specific Parent Involvement Strategies*

This year, I plan to implement the following parent communication and involvement strategies:

- Provide a weekly report on each student's progress.
- Send home individualized parent-child instructional practice activities at least once a month.
- Continue to collect information on local community resources and inform parents about these resources on a regular basis.
- Conduct a Make-It-Take-It workshop for parents on creating an educational and medical history notebook and a resource file for their child.
- Continue to publish a newsletter each grading period.
- Arrange for at least one speaker for parents on a topic of interest to be determined.

*Conclusion*

As a teacher, I try to be sensitive to the needs and desires of parents and to provide opportunities for them to be involved as much as possible. Time and time again I have been pleasantly surprised at and very appreciative of how much time and effort the parents of my students are willing to expend on behalf of their children.

---

**Figure 1.4** Personal Philosophy of Parent Involvement—High School Severe Disabilities

---

**Teacher: Ray Carpenter***Introduction*

My high school students with severe and multiple disabilities are almost ready to graduate and enter the adult world. For that reason, my focus with parents is on helping to ensure a smooth transition for them and their children in the vocational, domestic, personal-social, and leisure domains.

*The Role of Parents of Students with Special Needs*

Parents of teenagers and young adults with special needs face the usual challenges of their children growing up and wanting more independence. For this reason, parents should be aware of the many choices available to their children in areas such as supported living, employment, recreation, and so on and be equipped to counsel them regarding these options. Parents will also need the skills to become active advocates for their children to ensure that they receive the most appropriate services once they leave school.

*My Beliefs, Values, and Role as an Educator*

I want to establish a personal relationship of mutual respect and trust with each parent so that we can openly discuss any problems that may arise.

I want to provide channels for two-way communication so that I can be responsive to parents' concerns and needs.

I want to become as knowledgeable as possible about postsecondary options in all domains and share this information with parents.

*Specific Parent Involvement Strategies*

This year, I plan to

- Invite speakers to talk with parents about current issues of interest such as supported living, organized social groups, financial planning, guardianship, and so forth. I will survey parents to see which issues they are most interested in.
- Compile a book of resources that pertain to postsecondary issues and options and make it available to parents.
- Use a weekly progress report to keep parents updated on their child's progress and obtain feedback and suggestions from them.
- Call or e-mail parents of seniors every two to three weeks to see if they have any questions as their child nears graduation.

*Conclusion*

I hope to establish a partnership with the parents of my students so that they will leave their child's school not only with solid connections into the future but also with the knowledge that they can always contact me after their child's graduation for advice, suggestions, or to share a success or significant milestone.

---