

## Family Night Out: A Way to Involve Low-Income Parents

Tonight's menu is a paella of bright bits of tomatoes, red peppers, and assorted seafood, accompanied by buttered garlic bread and a tossed green salad. A fresh fruit salad and oatmeal cookies end the meal.

The relaxing sound of people talking and laughing fills the room. Children dash about as teens circulate pouring iced tea and coffee, and clearing tables. When the meal is finished, the children are gathered together at one end of the room where art supplies, toys, blocks, and a dramatic play area are available for them. The adults arrange chairs in a circle and start an animated discussion.

You might think you are at a family reunion or a church social. But you're not. You're in a school lunchroom, and the adults are parents, grandparents, and other relatives of the children, plus the children's teachers and principals. They are sharing a meal and evening together at Family Night Out.

Family Night Out was a parent involvement activity of the Montgomery County, Maryland, Public School Transition Demonstration, a program of family support and involvement, health services, and developmentally appropriate classroom practices that follow Head Start children and their families as they make the transition from Head Start to kindergarten and the first three grades.

The Transition Demonstration, which took place in 30 states, was developed in response to findings that the gains made by children and their families in Head Start often disappear by the end of third grade. The premise was that by easing children's transition to school with a Head Start-like program, children would have a better chance of maintaining their original gains. Family Night Out was designed as an activity that would help parents become equal partners in their children's education.

### The Objectives

With the major goal of empowering parents, the specific objectives of Family Night Out were:

- establishing equity between parents, teachers, and other staff members;
- supporting families;
- promoting mental health; and
- increasing parenting skills.

*Establishing Equity:* Teachers, principals, and parents come to school with differing experiential and economic backgrounds. As these differences could increase the difficulty of involving parents as equal partners (Fine 1993; Fraser 1990), the first objective of Family Night Out was to help bridge any gaps that might exist between parents and educators. By spending an evening eating and

discussing concerns together, teachers, parents, and principals are able to establish a more level playing field on which to build true partnerships. One of the principals put it this way: "Of course people are of differing backgrounds, but at Family Night Out everyone is equal. The very act of eating together unites people."

Another principal said, "Parents have to feel comfortable in the school. So many of our parents are recent immigrants, totally unfamiliar with the culture of our schools. Family Night Out helps them feel a measure of comfort and security in the school."

Teachers say that Family Night Out helps break down potential barriers between them and parents. One teacher said, "I always think I'll just stay for dinner, then the discussion begins and I find it so useful I stay until the end. I really do learn as much as the parents do."

Parents, too, find Family Night Out a way of bridging experiential gaps. One said, "I didn't realize how much teachers really cared about my children until I saw them together at Family Night Out."

*Supporting Parents:* Many parents are busy, struggling economically, perhaps holding down several low-paying jobs. They need support, and Family Night Out provides that. As invited guests, parents don't have to concern themselves with child care or preparing a meal. All they have to do is relax, enjoy each other's company, and bask in an atmosphere of friendship and support.

*Promoting Mental Health:* A licensed therapist was in charge of group discussions. Nearing the winter holidays, parents wanted to talk about the added pressures and stresses associated with Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. Nearly all the parents were concerned about not being able to afford the toys and things their children wanted. The leader began by asking parents to recall something about holidays when they were children. They spoke poignantly of the way their kitchens smelled when holiday foods were being prepared, stories their grandparents told, and the love they felt. Not one spoke of gifts or toys they had received. "Isn't this interesting," a mother said. "Here I am worried about what toys to get my kids, and not one of us said anything at all about getting toys or gifts."

Another night the topic was putting children to bed, and one parent told how she had solved the problem. A teacher said, "Wow! Those are great ideas. I can't get my daughter to bed until nearly 10 p.m. I'm going to try your ideas as soon as I get home." By sharing ideas and solving their own problems, parents find they know a great deal about child rearing, and their belief in their own competence is enhanced.

*Increasing Parenting Skills:* When parents develop feelings of competence and power they may be more open to the suggestions of others (Johnson, Walker and Rodriguez 1996). One Family Night Out, a child refused to taste a chicken dish that was new to her, and her parents began chiding her to clean her plate or "no dessert." A parent across the table said, "I didn't think I would like chicken this way either, but I tasted it and it's pretty good. Taste it and see if you like it." The child did so, found she liked it, and finished the entire portion. Trying to save face, she turned to her parents and declared, "Well, I won't eat this green stuff then," pointing to the salad. Her father smiled and said, "You don't have to eat it, just taste it and see if you like it."

## **Does It Work?**

Is Family Night Out worthwhile? That depends. The Montgomery County program was very popular. Attendance began high and nearly doubled by the end of the project, and parents took over much of the leadership in organizing, formatting, and running it. Further, children whose parents attended appeared to make greater academic gains than those whose parents did not.

But Family Night Out is only one way to involve low-income parents. No one parent involvement activity is better than another, nor is any activity always beneficial for families, schools or children (White, Taylor and Moss 1992). Family Night Out does, however, meet some basic obligations of schools to parents and families.

Parents primarily want their children to be known and cared for. It was clear to parents attending Family Night Out that the school, teachers, and principal did know and care for both the children and their families.

Free and open communication between home and school is another basic obligation. Watching parents, teachers, and children talking, eating, and laughing together, no one could deny that free and open communication was taking place. And when parents know their children's teachers, and the teachers know them, both groups have a base of knowledge and information on which to build further communication.

Parents also want their children to know that parents' participation is valued. Many parents resent being asked to volunteer at school, only to be assigned a meaningless task like cutting out dozens of bunnies for a bulletin board, which could demean them in their children's eyes (Fine 1993). At Family Night Out, children can see that their parents have important roles to play in their school. They observe their parents interacting with teachers as equals, setting agendas, solving problems, and becoming leaders.

Perhaps most importantly, this is a family event, a fun, relaxing evening out for busy families. Yet the benefits of Family Night Out go beyond fun. Its very structure recognizes and respects families. What really happens at Family Night Out is that parents learn they can trust teachers, and teachers learn to trust parents. On this foundation of mutual respect, equal partnerships have a good chance to develop and grow.

## **Can You Do Family Night Out?**

"Family Night Out sounds great," you may say, "but where in the world would I get the money? Serving seafood paella to families, teachers, and staff that's impossible."

Admittedly, the Family Night Out program described here was supported by Transition Demonstration funds. But it is not impossible. Funds can be found and donations can be solicited. For example, the ingredients for the paella were donated by a restaurant that employed one of the parents, who also donated his time to prepare and serve the meal. Fast-food chains could be asked to donate a meal once a year and supermarkets could be asked to donate food they can no longer sell, but which is perfectly edible.

By emphasizing that the goal of Family Night Out is to promote family mental health, funds may be available from alcohol and drug prevention programs or public health agencies. The parent

association may also be able to sponsor some Family Nights.

But money is not the only requirement. A successful program needs a willing school staff, supportive policies, clear goals and objectives, a limited group size, and a good leader or coordinator.

*Supportive Policies:* School policies may serve as an important source of support for teachers and other school staff in reaching out to parents (Chrispeels 1996). Especially during the initial phases, policies on parent involvement seem to provide direction and sanction for activities, and serve to motivate teachers and other staff.

*Clear Goals and Objectives:* Without a clear purpose, any program could flounder. Although all parents were encouraged to attend Family Night Out, the goals were developed primarily for and by low-income parents. It's likely that Family Night Out would be successful with parents of any income level, but they might be guided by goals and objectives quite different from those of this project.

*Keeping It Small:* Limiting Family Night Out to a specific grade helps parents and families focus discussions or meetings around an issue relevant to a specific age or grade level. Involving just one grade (or, if the school is large, only two or three classrooms of a grade) helps keep the program manageable. Limiting the program to fewer than 100 adults and children makes food preparation and serving, as well as communication, easier.

*Leaders:* You need to have a teacher or staff member in charge of planning and coordinating Family Night Out. Even though parents often take leadership roles, a person skilled in leading group discussions must also be available, someone with expertise in relating to and communicating with parents.

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