

## Differentiating Family Supports

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Differentiation is a “hot topic” in education right now. It is the practice of modifying and adapting instruction, materials, content, student projects and products, and assessment to meet the learning needs of individual students (Tucker, 2011). The rationale for differentiating family supports comes from theory, research, and educational common sense. Today’s classrooms are becoming more academically diverse in most regions of the United States. Many, if not most, classrooms contain students representing both genders and multiple cultures. They frequently include students who do not speak English as a first language and with a range of exceptionalities and markedly different experiential backgrounds. These students almost certainly work at differing readiness levels, have varying interests, and learn in a variety of ways. Educators know that one standard approach to teaching will not meet the needs of all—or even most—students.

Unfortunately, most educators still have one standard approach to dealing with parents. We, as educators, must understand that parents are not all the same. Parents are people, too. They have their own strengths and weaknesses, complexities, problems, and questions, and we must work with them and see them as more than “just parents.” In my work with parents, I coined two terms, *differentiated parenting* and *parentally appropriate* to help teachers find new ways to think about who parents are (Edwards, 2004, 2009). I proposed the concept of *differentiated parenting* as a way to urge schools not to place all parents into one basket. When schools design programs for parents, one size does not fit all. I used the term *parentally appropriate* to stress the point that “because parents are different, tasks and activities must be compatible with their capabilities” (Edwards, 2007, p. 64). This is not to say that parents’ goals for their children vary greatly (they all want their children to succeed in school), but it’s clear that their situations, perspectives, and abilities affect their capacity to support their children in particular ways. For example, asking parents to read to their children appears to be a simple request. But some parents never experienced proper modeling of how to read interactively with children. They might not know what materials are most appropriate for children to read. They may also underestimate the positive effects of talking with their children about what the children have read. More than 15 years ago in my work with parents at Donaldsonville Elementary School in Louisiana, I learned from personal experience how uncomfortable parents felt when teachers asked them to read to their children. Such parents require different support than parents who might readily respond to the request to “read to your child” because of their own positive past experiences.

The point I make is more subtle and significant than merely matching the school’s request of parents with each parent’s ability to respond. The greater point is that parents, like students, are best served when treated individually. This means knowing them, listening to their stories,

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and understanding what will be most helpful to them in raising their children and supporting their children's school learning. Parents' needs are not static; they change over time with the advancing age of their children. Parent programs require a scope and sequence and differentiation to meet the needs of the parent relative to the age and progress of the child.

### **Action Principles**

#### **State Education Agency**

1. Require that teacher preparation programs have pre- and in-service teachers participate in cross-cultural conversations and interactions.
2. Require teacher preparation programs to provide training for pre- and in-service teachers to effectively work with parents.
3. Develop guidelines for helping schools to create family-friendly schools.
4. Require teacher preparation programs to integrate community action projects in their educational programs in order to connect with and support community agencies (i.e., service-learning opportunities).
5. Develop guidelines for prioritizing issues of equity, diversity, and language differences in funding opportunities.

#### **Local Education Agency**

1. Encourage parents and students to create a vision statement with schools about family involvement.
2. Support and utilize parent focus groups to make important decisions at the schools.
3. Encourage family events and invite parent stories.
4. Determine parent capabilities, interests, willingness, and responsibility in order to make home-to-school connections.
5. Conduct a school climate assessment survey to understand family perceptions and open dialogue about family involvement.

#### **School**

While state and local education agencies have an important role to play in supporting parent involvement, it is ultimately the schools that provide the front line contact with parents. The following action principles will help schools to proactively engage families in their children's education:

1. Define parent involvement so that everyone understands what it means in your school. For instance, you need to ensure that the teacher's and school's definition of family involvement do not conflict. In a broad sense, parent involvement includes home-based activities that relate to children's education in school. It can also include school-based

activities in which the parents actively participate, either during the school day or in the evening.

2. Assess parent involvement climate. Many of the parents at your school may not become involved if they do not feel that the school climate—the social and educational atmosphere of the school—is one that makes them feel welcomed, respected, trusted, heard, and needed.
3. Consider the needs of parents. Before launching any program, first consult with a group of parents to identify the needs of the children and their families. Remember that any programs your school offers to benefit adult family members also will have positive effects on the children in the school. When the parents or guardians receive support, they become empowered and develop better self-esteem. This affects the way they interact with their children.
4. Ask questions. As J. L. Epstein noted in a 1988 issue of *Educational Horizons*, “Schools of the same type serve different populations, have different histories of involving parents, and have teachers and administrators with different philosophies, training, and skills in involving parents” (p. 59). Epstein’s observation should encourage teachers/schools to consider several questions:
  - What is our school’s history of involving parents and families?
  - What is our school’s philosophy regarding parents’ involvement in school activities?
  - What training and skills do we need for involving parents in school affairs?
5. . Create a demographic profile. This is a short questionnaire that compiles information about the school’s families. There are two different types of demographic profiles—one is conducted at the school level and the other at the classroom level (Edwards, 2009). Gathering this information has several benefits:
  - **Set your scope and sequence.** It is vital to help teachers and parents “get on the same page” by organizing and coordinating parent informant literacy groups, which will make school-based literacy practices and skills more accessible to parents. In essence, the goal is to make the school’s “culture of power” (Delpit, 1995) explicit to parents so that they can familiarize themselves with school-based literacy knowledge (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991). You need to have a clear plan and a set of goals that you would like to achieve at each grade level and decide how parents can assist.
  - **Raise awareness.** Once you’ve identified the needs of your school’s families, make community members aware that they can help. Make announcements on local radio stations and cable TV channels. Print ads in local newspapers. Meet with the “movers and shakers” of the community—political leaders, religious leaders, business owners, or influential parents.

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## Angela *Patricia A. Edwards*

Angela was so tired of teachers telling her to read to her child and assuming that she knew how to do it. She felt like no one at the school would listen to her or understand her frustration. Donaldsonville Elementary School had been recognized for its “good curriculum,” even though teachers were disappointed with the progress of their students. Eighty percent of the student population was African-American, and 20% was white; most were members of low-income families. Teachers felt that they were doing all they could to help these children at school. Without parental assistance at home, the children at Donaldsonville were going to fail. The teachers’ solution was to expect and demand that parents be involved in their children’s education by reading to them at home.

The teachers felt that this was not an unreasonable request. There is good evidence of positive gains made by “disadvantaged” elementary students when parents and children work together at home on homework or simply read together. What the teachers did not take into account was that 40% of the school’s parents were illiterate or semi-literate. When the parents didn’t seem willing to engage in reading at home, teachers mistook parents’ behavior as a lack of interest in their children’s education. The school continued to demand that parents read to their children at home, which had a particular meaning in teachers’ minds. This sparked hostility and racial tensions between teachers and parents. Each group blamed the other for the children’s failures; each felt victimized by the interactions. Children were caught between their two most

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important teachers—their classroom teacher and their parent.

Angela, a 32-year-old African American mother with 5 children ranging in ages from 22 months to 16 years old, becomes fearful and sometimes defensive when her child's teacher requests that she read to her child. The mother quietly admitted to me something that mirrors the reality of some parents:

"I'm embarrassed, scared, angry, and feel completely helpless because I can't read. I do care 'bout my children, and I want them to do well in school. Why don't them teachers believe me when I say I want the best for my children? I know that my children ain't done well in kindergarten and first grade and had to repeat them grades. My older children are in the lowest sections, in Chapter 1, and are struggling in their subjects. My children are frustrated, and I am frustrated, too. I don't know how to help them especially when the teacher wants me to read to them. These teachers think that reading to children is so easy and simple, but it is very difficult if you don't know how to read."

Mrs. Colvin, a first grade teacher at Donaldsonville Elementary School, expressed her frustration with parents or other caregivers like Angela: "Year in and year out these parents who are mostly low-income African American and white send their children to school with serious literacy problems. It seems as if the children have no chance of passing. They don't recognize letters of the alphabet, numbers, and they can't even recognize the letters in their own name.

Consequently, it is not surprising that most of them have had to repeat kindergarten and first grade. All of the kindergarten and first grade teachers have seen similar behaviors in these children. These behaviors include limited language skills and the inability to interact with adults. We feel that these children have not been read to and have rarely engaged in adult-child conversations. Each year, when we see parents at the beginning of the school year we tell them the same old thing, "Please read to your child at least two to three times per week. It will make a world of difference in how well your child does in school." We know the parents hear what we are saying, but we don't think they have read or plan to read one single book to their children. We, as kindergarten and first grade teachers, cannot solve all of these children's literacy problems by ourselves. The parents must help us."

If a child comes from a reading family where books are a shared source of pleasure and part of every day, he or she will have an understanding of the language of literacy world in schools. They will then respond to the use of books in a classroom as a natural expansion of pleasant home experiences. Neither Mrs. Colvin nor Angela knew how to approach the other to understand why reading in the home was not taking place or why it was so important.

Donaldson Elementary School realized that by providing the parents with tools and classes to help them read to their children at home, then the response to asking them to read to their children at home might have very different outcomes. They implemented a reading program that showed parents how to read to their children and how to make a difference in their children's education.

Angela attended the classes. She remarked, "I stopped pretending that I knew how to read to my child. I admitted to myself that I needed to take the time to participate in the reading program so that I could learn how to do what teachers expected me to do... read to my child. The program made me feel that I was my child's first teacher, and now I feel more comfortable

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in this role. I've always loved to read, but I didn't read as effectively to my child as I should have. But now I know it; now I'm always reading a child's book, and I'm enjoying it because of what I've learned."

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