

PARENTS: PARTNERS IN LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

All teachers know that parents want the best for their children and they want their children to be happy. What they perceive as the best may not be the same as that of the teacher, but their commitment is unquestionable. As professionals, we must show a positive attitude toward parents by listening to their concerns and asking for their input regarding the individual child's needs. The parent knows the child better than anyone else. They have watched their child's growth and patterns of behavior emerging over her life-span. As an objective outsider, the teacher brings a fresh set of eyes and will often notice things that may be so familiar to the parents that potential problems are over-looked. The best way to assess a child's needs is to consider both parental insight and the thoughtful observations of a teacher. Given the frenetic pace of everyday life, many parents have little time to spend at their child's school. A variety of ways, therefore, are needed to enable them to connect with the teacher and take part in the school-life of their child. These include inviting parents into the classroom as:

- participants involved in helping the children with projects such as cooking;
- volunteers to assist with routine tasks, such as using the camcorder to capture an episode of play;
- guests at special events, such as a celebration of culture;
- expert presenters to share expertise with the children, perhaps on based work, hobbies or special collections.

Teachers may wish to keep parents up-to-date with children's progress in learning as they engage in inquiry play. This information may be communicated in a variety of ways.

- In a classroom newsletter, children can contribute stories about what they are learning. (In the grade 2 classroom newsletter, Jeffrey wrote about what he learned from building different kind of bridges.)
- Work and pictures can be posted on a class website. Visitors to the site may also post questions.
- In an open house night, parents can view samples of their child's learnings.

- Information may be sent electronically (depending on the school policy). However, parents must have access to a computer and must indicate interest in receiving information this way.
- Photos that show what children are learning through inquiry/play based learning may be displayed in the halls of the school in different formats, (documentation panels, storyboards). These photos may also be turned into a class-made book and sent home, in turn. As well, photos can be put on a CD that is also made available for borrowing. (The grade 3 class had been experimenting with clay and cooperatively made sculptures of playground scenes. Photos were taken of each sculpture with comments about the learning process involved in creating the piece.)
- Photos could be made into a powerpoint presentation for distribution.
- Audio recordings can be made of children talking about their learning.
- Regular forums or discussions can be held in which parents are invited to ask questions and talk about ideas.

The establishment of parent councils has provided teachers with a means of helping parents understand what is happening and why. Through the council, on-going professional dialogue can take place with presentations, books, and articles used to spark discussion. Using videos of play provides parents a unique glimpse of their own children, and shows the process of learning through play in action. The video can be edited with sensitivity on the part of the teacher to ensure the dignity of every child in the class is respected.

Teachers and parents need to combine efforts as advocates for quality education. They need to work with organizations to support the integration of play as a means of learning into the school programs. The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario provides leadership in this movement and looks to its teacher members to pick up the challenge. There are a number of other provincial and national associations that address children's issues. By joining one of these groups and encouraging parents to do so, a unified voice will be heard calling for learning through play as a fundamental right for children.