Meaningfully Engaging Culturally-Diverse Families in School Mental Health

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Objectives

1. Describe and distinguish different types of parental involvement
2. Identify some barriers to successful parent involvement in school mental health
3. Identify the unique qualities of racial/ethnic minority families related to involvement and the types of relationships they are prepared to have with schools
4. Identify strategies that can be used to promote meaningful involvement of diverse families in school mental health
Defining Parental Involvement

Key Points to Consider

- Responsibilities of parents, schools and service-providers…
  - Where do these intersect?
  - How do we reconcile differences in the cultures of school, home and service system?
  - Are there important cultural considerations regarding the perceived responsibilities of parents?
Parent involvement in school

- Public schools are often mandated to involve parents in “education”
- Epstein’s 6 types of parental involvement
  1. Parenting
  2. Communicating
  3. Volunteering
  4. Learning at Home
  5. Decision Making
  6. Collaborating With the Community

Parent involvement in *school mental health*

- Parental involvement in *school mental health* typically takes one of two forms:

  - **Parent education**—training of parents in generic parenting issues in the context of universal prevention programming
  - **Parent training**—more common in the context of indicated intervention programming. Targets parents whose children share a common set of social-emotional problems

- In general, parents are **left out** of school mental health decision-making processes

*(Hoard & Shepard, 2005)*
A Case Example:
*Examining Pathways to Alternative Placement*

- Review of student records
- 2 part pilot study
- Parent phone interview
- CBPR

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Findings

- **Record Review**
  - mostly African American males
  - history of poor test scores and grades
  - a lot of grade retention
  - mental health problems (ADHD, ODD, depression)
  - a large unmet need

- **Parent Interviews**
  - **Official why**—failing grades, insubordination, fighting, classroom disruption, defiance
  - **Unofficial why**—"life problems" e.g. death of a parent, difficult peer relations, etc
  - **When**: transition from junior high to high school
  - **Process**: school-board decides with no input from parent
Conclusions

- Parents can be meaningful contributors— at minimum as a source of important information
- They provide a cultural context for understanding a student’s behavior
- Establish the degree to which problems cross the school and home contexts
- Provide strategies that are specific to the student and will likely be reinforced at home

Barriers to Parental Involvement

“You have your relationship and I’ll have mine”
What types of parenting styles do you see?

- What types of parenting styles do you see in your school?
- How do you see parents engaging in the life of the school?
- What strategies do you use to bring parents into the life of the school?

Barriers for families

- Economics (work schedules, time, social and financial resources)
- The parent’s own negative school experience that leads to disconnections from school life
- Language issues
- Stigma (note: it varies by culture)
- Culturally defined ideas about mental health and help seeking
- Differing definitions of families
Barriers for service providers

- Limited training
- Limited onsite resources
- Limited support from the administration
- No school-wide strategy

Case Example

Importance and feasibility of priorities set by teachers for ensuring students with mental health problems stay engaged and successful at school
Meaningful Engagement of Parents

Cultural Considerations

Understanding your school and community

- Do you have school/community programs that focus on parental involvement?
- What is the primary approach?
- What are the strengths?
- What are the areas of growth?
- Are/should strategies be culturally-specific?
Being in contact vs. having a shared agenda

- **Macrosystem**
  Mandating a certain number of contacts

- **Mesosystem**
  Establishing a meaningful relationship that includes affective qualities (trust, support, mutual respect)

Bronfenbrenner, 1979

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In pre-K, **quality** of the parent-teacher relationship matters more than **frequency** of contacts—especially for African American children

Serpell & Mashburn, 2011
Changing our perspectives: Parents as *meaningful* contributors

- Viewing the parent as:
  - the student’s first teacher
  - ensuring that students enter classrooms ready to learn
  - supporting academic work at home
  - promoting a positive attitude toward school

Important cultural considerations

- Tseng and Hsu’s (1979) model of cultural engagement:
  - gearing to the existing hierarchy
  - culturally appropriate communication
  - culturally relevant exposure of private matters
  - the ability to clarify approach, procedure, and goal
Key Strategies

- Plan, plan, plan!!
- “Build a bridge” (*Linda Starr, Education World, 2009*)
- Reconcile the cultures of school and home (e.g. redefine ‘parent night’)
- A regular positive phone call that indicates a personal relationship with their child
- Attend community events that allow you to connect on parents’ “turf”
- Use parents as resources, even if it appears out of their scope of “expertise.” e.g. how to cope with a child with a behavioral problem. Write/ tell a story about your child when they were a baby; they have cultural expertise.

Resources

- National Parent Teachers Association (PTA) [http://www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)