

Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.

**WORKING WITH PARENTS**  
Building Relationships  
for Student Success



Payne, Ruby K., Ph.D.

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***Do not confuse having  
physical presence with  
parental involvement.***

The research seems to indicate that when a parent provides ***support, insistence, and expectations*** to the child, the presence or absence of a parent in the physical school building is immaterial. Therefore, training for parents should concentrate on these issues.

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## WORKING WITH STUDENTS' PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

***Think of parents not as a single group but as distinct sub-groups.***

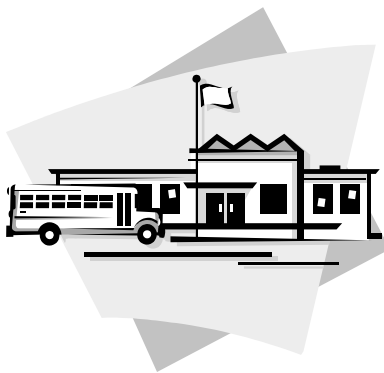
***For example:***

- 1) career-oriented/too busy to attend school activities.
- 2) very involved in school activities.
- 3) single parents working two jobs/too busy to attend.
- 4) immigrant parents with language issues.
- 5) parents with overwhelming personal issues, such as addiction, illness, incarceration, evading the law.
- 6) surrogate parents: foster parents, grandparents, et al.
- 7) children who, in effect, are their own parents; they no longer have involved parents or guardians.

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In your campus plan, identify specific ways you will target each group. Many discipline problems come from students whose parents are in sub-groups 5 and 7. These students desperately need relationships with adults that are long-term and stable.

As a rule of thumb, the best (only?) way to make contact with groups 5 and 6 is through home visits, when and where possible. In sub-groups 5 and 7, the children/teens themselves are the *de facto* parents. Often they work full time in order to provide enough money for both the children *and* adults to survive. Time is a key issue for those students. *It is unrealistic to treat parents as one group. The needs and issues are very different.*



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## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS' PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

- Phone systems: Let parents and guardians talk to a real person. Phone systems at secondary schools often make it very difficult to talk to anyone.
- Have an awards assembly for parents.
- Identify a clear mechanism for getting information. For affluent parents, a Website is wonderful. For all parents, videos work. The videos need to be short and focused. For example, how to talk to your teenager, how to find out what is happening at the high school, how to get your child back to school after a suspension, etc.
- Another option is a predictable newsletter. But it needs to be simple, clear, and to the point—and it must include many icons or visuals so that it can be used whether you're literate or extremely busy. These newsletters can be posted outside the building in glass cases and updated weekly. They can be posted in supermarkets, Laundromats, etc. The National Honor Society could take it on as a service project. Newsletters can be mailed home, a better option than children carrying them home.
- Pay parents to come in and call other parents. Have a list of things to say and have two rules: You may not discuss teachers and you may not discuss students other than your own children.

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- Have gatherings that involve *food*. For example, anyone can come to the school for 50-cent hot dogs.
- If you do parenting classes, don't call them that. Focus on the student: "How to help your child ..."  
Many parents of teenagers are desperate for good information about teens. Teenagers are typically tight-lipped and, unless you have much opportunity to be around them, as a parent you may not even know what is "normal." Find ways for individuals with lots of exposure to teenagers to share that information with parents and guardians.
- Adopt a plot of land to keep landscaped and clean. One school in a very poor neighborhood did this. Parents took pride in it. (Some even planted tomatoes!)
- Divide parents up among all the staff members (secretaries included). Each staff member contacts those parents and tells them, "If you have a question you cannot get an answer to, you can always call me."
- Create emotional safety for parents by being respectful of their concerns, openly sharing school activities, clarifying behavioral parameters/expectations of the school, and identifying available opportunities.
- For all activities, organizations, handbooks, etc., use simpler formats for giving the information. Liberally use visuals to appeal to the illiterate, the immigrant, and the busy.

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## WORKING WITH PARENTS FROM POVERTY

The first issue to address when working with parents from poverty is mutual respect. The second is the use of casual register. The third is the way discipline is used in the household. The fourth is the way time is viewed. And the fifth is the role of school and education in their lives.

First, for many parents in generational poverty, school is not given a high priority. It is often feared and resented. Their own personal experience may not have been positive, and school is alternately viewed as a babysitter or a necessary evil (i.e., “If I don’t send my child, I will have to go to court”). Second, when parents come in, because of their heavy reliance on a win/lose approach to conflict, they may begin with an in-your-face approach. Remember, they are doing this, consciously or unconsciously, as a show of strength. Just stay in the adult voice. Use language that is clear and straightforward. If you use “educationese,” they’re likely to think you’re trying to cheat or trick them.

Use these kinds of phrases with parents from poverty (these are the types of comments they often use with their own children):

- “Learning this will help your child win more often.”
- “The mind is a mental weapon that no one can take from you.”

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- “If you do this, your child will be smarter and won’t get cheated or tricked.”
- “Learning this will help your child make more money.”
- “This information will help keep your child safer.”
- “I know you love and care about your child very much or you wouldn’t be here” (but don’t say this if you don’t mean it).

Discipline in generational poverty vacillates from being very permissive to very punitive. The emotional mood of the moment often determines what occurs. Also, in some cultures, the approach to boys is very different from the approach to girls. When the discipline is highly punitive, there is often a belief system that (a) the harsher the punishment, the greater the forgiveness, and (b) the harsher punishment will make the young person stronger and tougher. Consequently, the notion of a systematic approach to discipline usually doesn’t exist. There is rarely mediation or intervention about a behavior. Generally, it is a slap and a “Quit that.” If guidance is being provided to the parent about behavior, use a *WHAT, WHY, HOW* approach with visuals.

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## GETTING PARENTS FROM POVERTY TO COME TO THE SCHOOL SETTING

One of the big difficulties for many schools is simply getting the parents into the school setting. Howard Johnson, a researcher at Southern Florida University, has done work with why urban parents come to school. The first reason they usually come is a crisis. What he has found is that rarely do they come to the school for reasons that school people think are important. So the first question that must be asked when trying to get parents to school is: "What's in it for the parents?"

A study done by the U.S. government in 1993 with Chapter 1 schools looked only at schools that were 75% or more low-income. Administrators of the study then identified students within those schools who achieved and students who did not. They developed a questionnaire looking at criteria in and out of school to understand the variables that made a difference in achievement. Interestingly, whether parents actually went to school or attended meetings at school was not a significant factor.

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What made the biggest difference was whether or not parents provided these three things for their children:

- ***support***
- ***insistence***
- ***expectations***



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**SOME SUGGESTIONS (WHEN PARENTS FROM POVERTY COME TO THE SCHOOL)**

- 1) Rather than the meeting format, ***use the museum format***. That way parents can come and go when it's convenient for their schedule and their inclination. In other words, the school would be open from 6 to 9 p.m. Parents could come to one room to watch a video or a student performance. These would be repeated every 20 to 30 minutes. Another room could have a formal meeting at a given time. Another room could have board games for the students. Another room could have food.
- 2) ***Have food***. Give gift certificates to grocery stores. These tend to be popular. Another favorite is clothesbaskets that have soap, shampoo, perfumes, etc., since food stamps don't always allow those purchases.
- 3) ***Let the children come with the parents***—for several reasons. First, there often is jealousy or suspicion by the husband when his wife goes out alone. If the woman's children are with her, there is none. Second, school buildings tend to be big and confusing to parents. If the children go with them, the children help them find their way around. Third, a babysitter frequently isn't available. And fourth, children are natural icebreakers. Parents meet each other through their children.

- 4) ***Have classes that benefit parents.*** For example: how to speak English; how to fill out a job application; how to get a Social Security card; how to make money mowing yards, doing child care, baking, and repairing small engines. Also, schools can make their computer labs available on Saturdays to teach things like CAD (computer-aided design) and word processing—simple introductory courses that last four to five Saturdays for a couple of hours.