

How To Make Families Safer

The third focus for affiliates that want to create safer schools involves working to reduce family violence. This focus is necessary because the effects of such violence are often manifested in school through a child's academic failure, behavioral problems, emotional difficulties, truancy, and dropping out of school (American Psychological Association 1996; NRC 1998; Reiss and Roth 1993).

In this effort, educators and community leaders need to address the ways that adults relate to and work with children and other adults, such as parents and education employees. NEA offers suggestions for helping children and developing cooperative relationships.

Suggestions for Making Families Safer

1. Model positive behaviors when educating, supervising, and parenting children
 2. Encourage parental support for children
 3. Help education employees to become more aware of parents' roles in educating children
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Suggestion 1: Model Positive Behaviors when Educating, Supervising, and Parenting Children

For children to grow, learn, and compete in a global society, and have positive relationships with others, they must be free of stress caused by neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Even if family violence continues to be a problem, education employees can work to change its proportions and outcomes. This can be achieved by teaching children to use positive behaviors in a community or family in which violence is a major factor.

To help adults work better with children, members of school safety committees and community safety boards might consider modeling and publicizing positive ways for adults to relate to children. These include—

- Distributing a one-page suggestion on parenting to families in the community
- Staying next to children when giving individual instructions or setting limits. Adults should bend down and talk directly to them in a quiet voice
- Being aware of your body language
- Wording statements positively, which draws children's attention to what they should be doing rather than what they are doing wrong
- Helping children develop options other than displaying aggression by defining limits on unacceptable behavior
- Giving children choices, within limits
- Differentiating between feelings and behavior. Abused youth have poor models for impulse control, generally lack vocabulary for labeling their feelings, and fail to understand what causes their feelings. Therefore, it is important to help them identify differences between feelings and behavior, define their feelings, and learn why they have particular feelings—moreover, helping them to develop introspection
- Encouraging assertiveness. Emphasize to the classes, children's groups, or youth groups, that children have rights. Then teach them how to assert those rights appropriately, effectively, and respectfully

Suggestion 2: Encourage Parental Support for Children

Research shows that parental support is an important predictor of student achievement. Parents can influence children's self-esteem and set the value they place on education. However, for appropriate parental support to occur, parents must first know how to function as parents, be capable of learning how to function as parents, or be helped to become better parents.

In optimally functioning families, parents or guardians balance their needs with the needs of their children. They comfort and befriend their children, and they teach their children by—

- Setting limits while demonstrating patience and understanding until children learn their limitations and the ways of the world
- Socializing children so they will be able to use appropriate behavior in interacting with their peers while understanding and exhibiting family values, which may differ from society's values
- Providing role models so children can learn from example instead of the "school of hard knocks"

Such ideal teachings may be used as yardsticks by families wanting to evaluate their parenting skills. Unfortunately, in modern American society, parents often lack such yardsticks for a number of reasons. People who don't know how to function as parents often lack the support or self-confidence to do so because they didn't receive adequate parenting or are individuals isolated from their parents who could advise them. Divorce and chronic mobility have also interfered with the transfer of child rearing information from one generation to another. The increase in the number and kinds of nontraditional families, the number of mothers who work outside the home, and the number of parents who are busy with their careers or establishing themselves socially have also increased this isolation. Adding to this problem

are changing and confusing gender roles, as well as conflicting advice on child rearing from experts.

Finally, some parents are parents in name only. They may love their children and want to help them but be unable to do so. They themselves may be products of dysfunctional families that abused or neglected rather than parented them. They may be unemployed workers coping with poverty and dangerous neighborhoods. They may be addicted to drugs or alcohol. Or they may be absorbed and overwhelmed by their plight or condition, which engulfs them in chaos and violence and contributes to the neglect of their children—all of which make a successful school experience difficult.

But parental involvement in the education of children is necessary. And affiliates that are helping to create safer schools are strongly encouraged to build strong family-school partnerships by working with school districts and communities to—

- Communicate regularly and creatively with parents, which might involve contacting and meeting with parents before school begins; developing and mailing a regular newsletter; sharing grade-level objectives; holding regular parent-teacher conferences; and holding brainstorming meetings to develop creative activities for bonding students, teachers, and parents into a cohesive, supportive community
- Develop a parent-student-teacher contract, detailing goals and responsibilities for both students and parents
- Establish a homework hotline to answer students' questions. Let parents know their children's homework assignments, and give advice for getting children to do their assignments
- Mobilize parents as volunteers to help in monitoring school buses, hallways, restrooms, lunch rooms, parking areas, trips, and assisting in time-out rooms.

This may entail providing lunch and transportation for some parents

- Encourage parents to attend school functions. Ask them to help develop parent-student-teacher activities, and provide social activities for parents and school staff. Identifying parents who need transportation and providing it might be required
- Offer a parenting skills course for all parents and another for those whose homes are violent or abusive. Include information on conflict resolution, problem solving, and anger management
- Develop lists of social service agencies in the community that can help families surmount a variety of problems and assist parents whose home life is abusive or violent. Share the lists with parents who need help
- Develop a public relations campaign whose message involves accepting children as they are and expressing support for them even when they exhibit negative behavior

Suggestion 3: Help Education Employees to Become More Aware of Parents' Roles in Educating Children

It is important for the community and schools to support training for education employees. Education employees will be better able to contribute to violence reduction if they receive training in the following areas:

- Identifying children whose behavior indicates a need for an intervention by a family member and/or representative of a social agency

- Reporting incidents of potential violence against children in the home and concerns about children who seem troubled, without violating their rights
- Being an advocate for children who have experienced or witnessed violence in the home, and helping others in the class and school to understand those children's experiences
- Being prepared to interact helpfully and realistically with potentially violent parents
- Working with all students' families so that they are purposefully involved in the education of their children
- Using "teachable moments" to raise students' awareness about violence in the home and its consequences

