

Room at the table: Parent engagement in Head Start

by Shanna Grefsrud

Eight parents are clustered around a kidney-shaped table, shoulders hunched and legs askew as each sits perched on a 14-inch chair. They lean in closely as they listen to a mother share her story. It's the first she's spoken all night. There has been lots of sharing and laughter as everyone tells tales of bedtime woes and sibling wars. "But I want to do better by my kids," she says, "I've learned a lot, and it's not easy, but I'm trying to do what I have to do to be a good mom."

To the Head Start teacher sitting in this circle of grown-ups, it's familiar. It's the moment that parent engagement becomes real. It's the moment the parent's heart speaks, and her peers nod and give her affirmation.

You've read of the magic of the kitchen table. The Head Start model of home visits and relationship-based work is a powerful tool for parent engagement.

Equally important, but sometimes overlooked, is the group process. Head Start Performance Standards require monthly Parent Center Committee meetings and shared decision making with a Policy Council comprised of parent representatives elected by their peers. This is no easy task. Parents appear to be very busy with work, school, appointments, and other obligations. Head Start parents are a diverse group; language barriers, a lack of understanding of cultural norms, and perception of education as "the teacher's job" make group work feel pretty one-sided.

Head Start programs try many different formats and strategies to get parents to monthly meetings and other group events. Unfortunately, parent-only business meetings can become gripe sessions and scare off many parents. Parent-child events are fun, making memories and messes, but with little meaning. Staff send home cheery flyers, provide suppers, and have the best of intentions, only to wind up spending the evening with two or three parents out of a classroom of 17 children. It's more exhausting than a field trip to the fire station!

After 48 years, how does Head Start continue to make room at the table for parents? Are the Performance Standards

archaic and unattainable? How do we fill those chairs? Where is everybody?

In their book, *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century*, psychiatrists Jaqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz (2009) assert that although people are busier than ever and even more connected by technology, they are also lonelier. Olds and Schwartz cite data from a General Social Survey (GSS) which found that between 1985 and 2004, the number of people with whom the average American discussed 'important matters' dropped from three to two. Shockingly, the number of people who said there was no one with whom they discussed important matters tripled to nearly a quarter of those surveyed. This is not surprising to Head Start staff. It is not uncommon for some parents to struggle to identify a single contact to put on their child's emergency card.

Social isolation and poverty are not strangers, and most Head Start parents live at or below the federal poverty level. When a parent feels lonely, the usual 'cures' like going shopping, driving around, or 'going out' are not an option. And it's pretty hard to phone a friend when the minutes are gone and there's no money to pay the cell phone bill.

'Flopping' is a term Olds and Schwartz use to describe the phenomenon of being busy all day and coming home and flopping on the couch to watch television or DVDs. Children are parented by 'remote control' as mom or dad begs the children to 'get to bed' without getting up off the couch.

Too much time alone can cause a parent to lose perspective. Lonely parents are more likely to fear that a blip on the screen of their child's developmental path has to be something serious and intervention or at least medication is



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needed. There's no one to reassure them that "this too shall pass" or that all preschoolers can be a little quirky sometimes.

If lonely parents are flopping and not engaging, then it's going to take more than a flyer sent home in a backpack to get them to the table. "If you aren't too busy, we'd love to have you come to our Parent Meeting on Tuesday," and other polite invitations are easily passed over by lonely parents. If staff accept busyness as both a reality and a façade, we can change our message to, "I know you're busy, but I know your child is important to you, and I need you to come."

Head Start staff are not above using children as motivators to get their parents to monthly meetings. If a child goes home and tells his parent he can't miss the eruption of the "World's Largest Volcano," she may just take time to bring him back for the fun and to attend the Parent Meeting. Yes, child care for meetings can be expensive, but a box of baking soda and a jug of vinegar are cheap.

Whether a parent is incredibly busy or incredibly lonely, time has a way of slipping by. Dates on a calendar are easily missed, but a colorful sticker on a child's shirt can be a great reminder that there is an important event at Head Start that evening. Everyone feels the need to belong. Both children and parents need to be supported in their social and emotional growth.

Although Head Start staff often have dual roles, many feel less comfortable working with parents than with children. The parallel process can help staff think about their interactions with parents in a less threatening way. A parent venturing out to his first parent meeting and hovering near the doorway can feel much like a preschooler on the first day of school. How often do teachers immediately drop to their knees to greet the child without even giving the parent eye contact? A caring teacher will draw the parent in, show him where to sit, and introduce him to his peers.

'Old School' parent education — holding a meeting for parents and speaking at them for an hour about a parenting topic — can leave teachers frustrated and uncomfortable, and parents bored and restless and not likely to return next month.

In her new book, *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*, Ellen Galinsky (2010) writes about how life today can be "complex, distracting, fast moving, 24-7, and stressful." She believes the prefrontal

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cortex of the brain is key to "managing our attention, our emotions, and our behavior" in the 21st Century. Focus and self-control, perspective-taking, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, taking on

challenges, and self-directed, engaged learning are all critical skills for children AND their parents.

Adult learning theory tells us that adults learn best from each other and when their emotions are engaged. Galinsky would agree that when parents are paying attention and listening and learning from one another, they are able to build the connections in their brain and with each other to take on the challenge of parenting their children and self-directing their lives.

The use of metaphors can prime the pump of emotion and get parents' attention. Staff can talk to parents at length about child or family development, but when they use props such as bungee cords, sponges, and other concrete objects, abstract concepts become meaningful. The way a child 'soaks' up knowledge is real to every parent, in every language, in every home.

Hands-on activities give parents with rusty social skills practice in non-threatening ways. Family collages with photos or magazine cut-outs help parents share who they are and who they want to be. Making home routine charts and making homemade toys and games brings out hidden talents and a shared sense of purpose.

Several Minnesota Head Start programs have started holding annual events called "Families Doing Good Together," a concept started by Jenny Friedman of Minneapolis. The events involve gathering parents and children together to tie fleece blankets, make greeting cards, assemble lunches, etc., to donate to homeless shelters, nursing homes — anywhere they are needed. It has been fascinating to see how much parents with low incomes are motivated by giving back to others.

When parents begin to share their experiences and feel comfortable with each other, it is inevitable that they begin to try to help each other. While parents can Google for information, it is seldom as meaningful as listening to someone who has "been there, done that." Professionals may have the knowledge, but seldom the context. We know kids need to get to bed on time, but how do you do it with three kids in a two-bedroom apartment when you are single, work the late shift, and haven't seen your children all day?

Head Start Policy Council gives parents an opportunity to practice essential life skills and engage in the business of Head Start. Representatives share decision making with staff on hiring, enrollment criteria, grant goals, and the budget. Just as a classroom takes time to develop relationships, rules, and routines, so does a council. At the beginning of the year parents are intimidated, sometimes a little antagonistic, and often concerned only about their own child. By the end of the program year, the group has become a collective, can easily reach consensus, and sees the big picture. Former Policy Council members continue their engagement by mentoring other Head Start parents as they transition to their public school's parent-teacher organization.

Some Head Start parent representatives are also elected to serve on state, regional, and national Head Start association boards. Almost all of them have a story to tell about a time when they felt alone, with no voice. Now these parents crave opportunities to gather with other parents to share what they have learned. At a Minnesota Head Start Association Parent Leadership Retreat this fall one father said, "It was so good to be with other people who were going through the same things. I had time to think about the kind of parent I really want to be. And since I've been home, even my four-year-old son talks about how I've changed."

To move parents from flopping to flourishing requires critical thinking and creativity. Head Start staff and other early childhood professionals must pull up their own social-emotional skill set. It is not enough to schedule events, send home flyers, and hope for the best. Invitations must be genuine and the table must be set for all parents. Parent groups must be engaging and not just educational. The focus must be on the dynamic and not on the decorations. When parents are welcomed to the table, they feel less lonely and more alive. Emotions are engaged, conversation flows. Everyone belongs, everyone grows.

References

Galinsky, E. (2010). *Mind in the making: The seven essential life skills every child needs*. New York: HarperCollins.

Olds, J., & Schwartz, R. S. (2009). *The lonely American: Drifting apart in the Twenty-first Century*. Boston: Beacon Press.

For more information on the "Families Doing Good Together" project see www.doinggoodtogether.org.

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