

ENGAGING PARENTS

Hello, Friends,

When we are working with schools, one of the questions we get a lot is, “how do we engage parents in the work that we’re doing?” The transition to being a trauma-informed school community is really about a change in mindset that is fundamental to providing environments for students that are safe and healing. When this change begins to happen in a school system or district, there can be some confusion among parents and guardians about the reasons behind the changes and what they can do at

home to help support their children as they grow past traumatic experiences. In our experience working with schools and districts, these are some keys to engaging parents in the work of being trauma-informed.

1. Begin to strengthen the sense of community. It’s vitally important to view the network of care surrounding students as exactly that-- a net-

work of interlocking supports that work together to support students. Schools and districts are already part of an existing community and should work to establish partnerships and a sense of community. Schools and districts can do this through hosting events and activi-



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ties outside of school hours that are designed to provide opportunities to connect with the school in an

informal, nonacademic way. Invite all families, but spend some time reaching out to specific families that you’d like to strengthen the communication with. Some examples of events could be movie nights, game nights, and book fairs.

2. Assess parents’ needs. One thing that is often forgotten when thinking of ways to engage parents is that parents already have needs that the school system can help meet. Creating opportunities to assess parents’ existing needs can help schools and districts proactively

design programs and policies that better support parent engagement. Creating a simple survey (one that can be easily accessed on phones and computers, and can also be done on paper) that allows parents to request specific types of support that they would like can go a long way to bridging communication.

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Placing some of the school's/district's current ideas for support on this survey and having parents express interest can also help in terms of identifying what will work.

3. Bulk up on resources. A lot of parents are overwhelmed with work and family responsibilities and may not have time to engage in a lot of school or community activities. Being able to provide these parents with short, informative resources about things that are important to the school and community can allow these parents opportunities to develop an understanding of the trauma-informed approach without having to consume a large amount of material. Informing parents of changes that are being made, but also the reasons behind these changes, can help expand the understanding of the mindset and make parents feel that they are part of the change.

The number one thing to remember when trying to engage parents and guardians is that the stronger the partnership between families and schools, the stronger the support network will be for students. While not every parent or guardian will ultimately be supportive of everything that happens within the school, keeping the pathways of communication as open as possible can go a long way in strengthening and maintaining the relationship.

WHEN A PARENT IS ABSENT

Sadly, a lot of times in schools, we see students whose parent is absent for one reason or another.

Children can temporarily lose parents to incarceration, rehabilitation, relocation, addiction, or a volatile divorce, as well as losing parents completely due to death or total absence. When this happens, how we respond as a school or district can either assist or hinder a student's healing process. We want to be on the side of healing, at all times, and ensure that we are able to provide an environment where students are able to process their loss.

■ **FIRST**, we want to ensure that students are able to process when feelings related to the loss arise. Not everyone in a school system is trained in mental health, but allowing students to express their feelings through journaling, drawing, or going to speak to a counselor or social worker can make them feel like their feelings are acknowledged, valued, and able to be expressed. If those of you that are not trained in mental health find anything the student writes, draws, or expresses to be concerning, link the student to clinical services within the school.



■ **SECOND**, we want to be especially conscious of classroom activities that can be triggering for these students. While it is usually impossible to avoid all triggers, we want to make a conscious effort, especially immediately after a major loss, not to have classroom activities, like family trees, that require students to directly confront the reality of a parental loss. Prior to giving out assignments, quickly review them with your students in mind, not just considering if they are academically appropriate, but if the content may hit too close to home for any students.

■ **THIRD**, though we will feel a great deal of empathy for students who have lost a parent, we don't want to consistently treat this student as though we are feeling sympathy for them. While acknowledging students' sadness or anger in moments that those feelings arise, we also want to give them as many positive, affirming opportunities to engage in happy, fun activities. These students, like all students, want to be able to laugh and feel like things are safe and normal.

Alexandra Murtaugh, EdD, NeuroLogic Specialist