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How to involve parents and the community

The importance of parents

The vital role of parenting in children's early development is well established and the evidence for the supportive role of parents within the health-promoting school is also accumulating. Where parents are actively involved in their children's health promotion, good outcomes are more likely. There are many positive examples of this, such as in healthy eating initiatives in schools. Where parents were involved it led to:

- more impact on pupils' behaviours in relation to food preparation;
- influencing food policies in schools through involvement in school nutrition action groups;
- co-operatives to provide healthy food for pupils in the middle of the school day.

The importance of consultation

This active involvement needs to be encouraged through consulting with parents and the wider community. This does not just mean holding meetings to inform them about the health-promoting school, but seeking their advice on what they feel is important. In particular, schools need to make special efforts to reach out to and welcome parents whose own experience of school may have been an unhappy one or who feel alienated from school. Schools need to explain their approaches to parents and achieve their active support, consult with them about the running of the school, and link the goals and culture of the school with that of the range of home backgrounds from which their pupils come. If parents are to remain engaged they need to get regular feedback about what changes as a result of their suggestions and to have opportunities to contribute to those changes.

Involving the community

The health-promoting school concept needs to be widely understood by all in the community, including those agencies which are directly concerned with the school, and embedded in their philosophy and practice. It is especially important to get support from local health and education authorities, and from formal and informal local networks and groups. Often representatives from different groups in the community can be a very useful asset, contributing to the various school boards and committees that plan activities related to health promotion, as to other aspects of school life.

If the local media are supportive of positive initiatives this can also be a very useful partnership and an excellent way of spreading good news and progress about the work of the school.

As the report from the Thessaloniki conference suggests (ENHPS, 1997), health-promoting schools are starting to see themselves as a main focus for community development and action. They may stay open well outside of normal school hours for a wide variety of educational and social local activities. They can provide education for adults returning to study, perhaps out of interest, or for new qualifications to overcome unemployment or to help them to improve their job prospects in a society

where people need to be flexible and need to retrain many times in their lives. They can become a meeting point for many disparate local groups and agencies. Community involvement and collaboration is a two way process, and schools have much to contribute as well as receive. Practical examples of supportive community initiatives include:

- facilitating safe and active routes to schools;
- restricting the sale and advertising of unhealthy products near the school entrance and within the school e.g. in vending machines;
- the provision of 'drop-in' centres for young people where they can raise issues on a confidential basis.

Case Study

In North Presentation Primary School in Cork City, Ireland, the health-promoting schools working group, (consisting of school staff, parents and students) identified promoting the health of the whole school community, particularly parents, as their action area for the school year 2003/2004. In consultation with the Health Promotion Department, the idea of a strollers walking group (parents walking while pushing their young children in prams, buggies, strollers or pushchairs) for parents was suggested and agreed upon as a result of the need for parents to get involved in physical activity while also caring for their children.

Parents and especially women often state that, before they had children, they were very active, played sports, were part of teams and exercised regularly. Child care is not the only barrier identified for women continuing an active lifestyle, but it is a significant one.

The objectives of the project were:

- to promote walking as a mother and baby-friendly form of physical activity;
- to increase the awareness of the benefits of physical activity and develop an appreciation for walking among new mothers;
- to reduce concerns associated with physical activity in the postpartum period;
- to build a support network for new mothers;
- to reduce the feelings of social isolation;
- to teach techniques for breathing and walking correctly, stretching and pelvic floor exercises.

How it was developed

Health promotion officers who had completed the Irish Heart Foundation walking leader training join with the health-promotion school coordinator in interested schools and design and lead a route, with a teacher taking the role of the sweeper (staying at the back of the walking group). After the five-week course, two members within the group were encouraged to become leaders to sustain the project.

The group of parents and children began with a 10-minute warm-up consisting of full body movements to raise the heart rate gradually and mobilize the joints before the walk. They then spent 30–60 minutes walking with a pram, pushchair or stroller at a pace suitable for each individual and all abilities. After the walk, which started and ended at the school, a parents' room was made available for the 15-minute cool down, which consisted of some gentle exercises to help to bring heart rates back to normal. Children could watch a suitable video, play with toys or sleep after all the fresh air!

Healthy snacks were made available following the cool down. This allowed parents time to talk, which helped to create social support and valuable interaction. Each week a different health topic such as smoking cessation, healthy eating, posture, breathing and toning was introduced.

The successes

The evaluation was very positive from the parents who participated. Most parents commented that the most useful part of the project was the opportunity to meet and walk with others.

The health-promoting school takes its community responsibilities seriously: pupils are likely to be found outside the school, engaged on community projects, contributing to and learning from the outside world, as well as in the classroom. Examples of ways of doing this have been:

- caring for elderly people and receiving lessons in oral history from them;
- clearing refuse and learning about recycling;
- creating havens for wildlife and learning about ecology in the process;
- creating herb gardens or health gardens

In developing action competences this is taken still further with pupils investigating what is needed in the community and taking action to bring about change. In doing this they may not only build relationships with people in the community, but may also find that their actions can have an impact on their families and communities.