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Helping teachers develop productive working relationships with families: The CORE model of family-school collaboration

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In recent years, the notion of “parent involvement” in education has evolved to the broader concept of family-school collaboration, with an emphasis on building trusting relationships between educators and parents as a basis for effective cooperation and problem-solving. However, teachers in the United States typically receive limited preparation for this kind of work. School-based mental health service providers are well-positioned to provide in-service training in this area, given their knowledge of eco-systemic theory and positive communication skills. In this paper, the CORE Model of Family-School Collaboration is described as an example of a training package that develops educators’ skills in three areas: thinking systemically, communicating effectively, and developing “family friendly” practices. One practice, the family-school conference, is outlined in detail.

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There is ample evidence that parent involvement in children’s education is associated with positive academic and social development in students (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002), especially among those from challenged families (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). For example, recent longitudinal data showed that increased school involvement by parents predicted improved child literacy. Even more importantly, when family involvement was high, children whose mothers had low levels of education were indistinguishable in their literacy level from children whose mothers had high levels of education (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006).

Unfortunately, precisely what is meant by “parent involvement” varies substantially across studies and programs (Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). It can include parental aspirations for their children, general parenting style, or parental activities at school and at home that support learning (Baker & Soden, 1997, cited in Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Increasingly, emphasis is being placed on partnership or collaborative approaches that

encompass these and other factors, such as cultural and policy influences. Collaborative approaches recognize that family-school interactions are multidimensional and need to be understood within an ecological-developmental framework (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). These approaches acknowledge the need for schools to reach out to families in culturally respectful ways. In fact, one key variable influencing parents' decisions to participate in schooling is the perception of being invited to do so (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The development of supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents also is critical in collaborative approaches (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). These relationships appear to support child engagement with academic tasks which, in turn, produces higher academic achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Supportive working relationships are complex and involve a variety of variables including bidirectional communication, respect, trust, empowerment, and commitment (e.g., Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Teachers in the United States typically receive limited training in skills that support the development of such collaborative relationships (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Instead, they are most often trained in behavior management models that focus on short-term compliance through reward and punishment, approaches seen as counter-productive to the goal of relationship-building (Nicoll, 2002). Therefore, inservice training that provides teachers tools to work more successfully with families is an important component of improving family-school collaboration (Chavkin, 2005).

Models exist for developing better family-school relationships, often involving external consultants (e.g., Doerries & Foster, 2001). However, because external consultants may not be readily available, it makes sense to build internal consultants who offer similar skills. Amatea, Daniels, Bringman and Vandiver (2004) trained one school staff in solution-oriented problem solving meetings and student-led conferences. They reported improved relationships among families and educators and more positive approaches to family-school collaboration.

School-based mental health service providers, including school psychologists, social workers, school counselors, and school-based family counselors, are a largely untapped resource for providing inservice training to teachers seeking to improve relationships with students and families. When these professionals' own training is grounded in family systems, ecological, and developmental theory, as well as an understanding of the organization and operation of schools, they are well-positioned to share this knowledge with teachers and other educators. Individuals trained specifically as school-based family counselors have the necessary skills to offer prevention programming and staff development in order to foster family-school connections (Evans & Carter, 1997).

This paper presents a model of family-school collaboration in use at the University of Delaware to train preservice and inservice educators in the skills necessary to develop collaborative working relationships with families. Training is available through two graduate courses at the University. In addition, training is offered through Delaware's Positive Behavior Supports initiative, a state-funded program charged with developing comprehensive, positive school discipline programs in schools throughout the state. Typically, both teachers and school-based mental health service providers participate in these trainings. Follow-up technical assistance is available to those who want to implement some of the strategies or who want to

train additional teachers in the model. The training sequence is outlined, with particular attention to the family-school conference as a primary vehicle for relationship-building.

The CORE Model of Collaboration

Regardless of the setting in which training is delivered, several key components are always included. Participants are challenged to 1) think differently about families and problems by taking a systems view; 2) talk differently with families and other professionals by using effective communication strategies; and 3) behave differently by developing relationship-building opportunities in their schools, including following specific formats for typical meetings (e.g., routine conferences, problem-solving meetings). The training draws from systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), active listening and communication techniques (e.g., Cormier & Hackney, 1999), solution-oriented counseling (e.g., Murphy & Duncan, 1997), family-centered intervention (e.g., Dunst & Trivette, 1987), family empowerment (Cochran & Dean, 1991), and family-school consultation and collaboration models (Carlson, Hickman, & Horton, 1992; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). The ideas and skills are summarized under the acronym “CORE.” That is, following each encounter, the goal is to have families and professionals feel more Connected, Optimistic, Respected, and Empowered than they did prior to the encounter. Each element of the model is described below (this discussion is adapted from Minke, 2000; Minke & Anderson, 2003a; Vickers, Minke, & Anderson, 2002).

Thinking differently.

Although effective family-school collaboration is supported by the use of specific communication and organizational strategies, technique alone is insufficient. Professionals’ values and beliefs about families, problems, and helping relationships also must be addressed (Walker & Singer, 1993). We approach this in three ways.

First, we introduce traditional parent involvement efforts and highlight the ways in which these differ from collaborative approaches. There is ample evidence that not all parent involvement activities are equally desirable (e.g., Lareau, 1989; Lawson, 2003). When approached from a traditional perspective, attempts to involve families may be limited to programs designed to increase parents’ presence at school, serving in ways deemed important by the school, with little attention to other ways parents support their children’s education. When families do not respond as expected, teachers may feel unappreciated, parents may feel defensive, and promising programs may be quickly abandoned. The collaborative approach, in contrast, stresses development of shared goals built from the expertise of professionals, parents, and students. Plans are necessarily individualized to the particular values, goals, and needs of each student, family, and school community. Because the voices of multiple stakeholders are part of the decision-making process, greater success is anticipated.

Second, we introduce basic systems principles. A large literature exists describing the systems-ecological (or ecosystemic) perspective and its application to family-school relationships (e.g., Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Pianta, 1999). We selected two key concepts, wholeness and patterns of interaction, as the means to introduce educators to this perspective, especially the idea that children’s behavior is inextricably linked to the contexts in which they are asked to function. “Wholeness,” the principle that every individual’s behavior both influences and is influenced by the behavior of every other member of the system, encourages

teachers to look beyond one individual’s behavior (usually the child’s) in understanding challenging situations, and to look at how the entire system (e.g., classroom, school) contributes to the maintenance of difficulties. Using examples, we demonstrate the idea that behavior patterns occur in repetitive, circular sequences, with each individual punctuating the interaction differently depending on their individual views of causation. When a problem is examined in this way, it allows educators to consider multiple perspectives, to give less attention to causation (i.e., who is to “blame”), and to increase attention to ways in which the pattern can be interrupted.

The third component in “thinking differently” involves discussion of particular beliefs consistent with a collaborative approach (Table 1). The first element, Connection, relates to the importance of developing trusting relationships between educators and families. Trust is built when individuals feel valued, listened to and understood. Here we emphasize the need to not simply allow different views to be expressed, but also to elicit and embrace these differences. By using clear and open communication, such differences can be used constructively to arrive at more workable solutions and to develop greater trust and connection. The second element, Optimism, embraces the possibility of change and assumes that all persons are doing the best that they can with the resources and skills they have available to them at the time. We emphasize that each individual’s behavior makes sense, at least to that person. Thus, the task is to understand the other’s viewpoint, rather than judge it as right or wrong. Recalling the circular view of problems, we stress that problems do not reside within individuals but rather are system problems, and that blaming someone for a problem is both irrelevant and futile. The third element, Respect, acknowledges that each person is trustworthy and caring, with the right to different values. One important component of respect is that all participants are both experts and learners. Families have important information to contribute (and receive); teachers have important information to learn (and to share). Further, students themselves are considered key participants in their own education; in the CORE model, children’s active participation in decisions that affect them is essential. However, parents’ preferences regarding children’s participation is always respected. The final element, Empowerment, facilitates feelings of competence of all participants by acknowledging each person’s particular strengths and skills. Embedded in this element is the belief that power, responsibility and decision-making should be shared, and that unidirectional advice-giving (i.e., school-to-home) is avoided.

Element	Associated Beliefs
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust develops when parties feel valued, listened to and understood
Optimism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All persons do the best they can • No one person is to blame • Problems are system problems; successes are system successes
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each person is both an expert and a learner • Children are active participants
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power, responsibility and decision-making are aspects of a shared partnership • Advice is avoided

Table 1 - CORE Model Elements and Beliefs

The CORE elements and associated beliefs are actively taught, and participants are invited to discuss and debate the ideas. These discussions tend to be spirited and it is critical that facilitators model the skill of honoring participants' points of view while still challenging them to "try on" an alternative framework. Often it is through teachers' own examples that participants begin to change their thinking.

Talking differently.

Teaching basic communication strategies is a central focus of family-school collaboration training. These skills allow educators to enact beliefs central to the CORE Model, and are applicable in every interaction school personnel have with families (and with other professionals). Therefore, a substantial portion of the training is devoted to teaching and practicing skills including attending to nonverbal communication, empathic listening and responding, reframing, blocking blame, delivering and receiving negative information, and highlighting strengths. Each skill is introduced individually, with detailed descriptions and examples. At the end of each discussion, participants practice through written activities (e.g., writing alternate responses to brief scenarios) and role-plays with partners.

Typically, some skills foster more discussion than others. For example, the concept of asking others' opinions first before offering your own often generates debate. Teachers frequently report that their role as education experts requires them to contribute their opinions. Soliciting others' opinions first challenges them to recognize that others, particularly parents, also have expertise that, when tapped, may independently generate a solution that the teacher was already thinking of suggesting. When this occurs, greater "buy in" can be expected in that participants are more likely to be invested in and execute interventions that come from their own ideas. Teachers are reminded that they can bring their own ideas into the discussion later, but by waiting and hearing what others have to say first, they are in a better position to tailor any suggestions to the specifics of the problem.

Time is also spent working on delivering and receiving negative information, as teachers seem to have a particularly keen interest in this skill set. Participants practice delivering and receiving negative information in both written and oral forms. For example, participants practice responding orally to a parent who is very worried about the child's academic progress, and they practice responding in writing to a note from an angry parent. Once all of the skills have been practiced individually, participants are then given a set of scenarios in which they practice responding using all of the skills in combination, with coaching provided by the facilitators. In many cases, participants provide scenarios from their own experience for role-plays. As with the discussion of collaboration beliefs, the most powerful examples seem to emerge here. In one training session, a teacher enthusiastically role-played her "worst angry parent." When her role-play partner limited her responses to reflections of feeling and clarifications of the issue, the "parent" reported that she physically experienced relaxation and fading of her anger, powerfully demonstrating the positive effects of good communication strategies.

Behaving differently: developing “family friendly” practices.

In this section of the training we illustrate ways in which the skills can be applied to various interactions among families and professionals in order to improve relationships. Three primary areas are explored.

First, we invite participants to consider what the physical plant of their school building communicates to families. For example, educators consider whether and how parents are welcomed to the school. Is there a welcome message printed in all languages represented in the school community? Are visitors greeted promptly and courteously? Is there physical space within the building for parents to meet with teachers, administrators, and other parents?

Second, we review two kinds of written communications: 1) formal and informal communications with all families, and 2) personal written communications between teachers and families. Typical school forms (e.g., permission to evaluate, school discipline policy, requests for volunteers) are reviewed for readability and participants rewrite these to reflect collaborative principles. Drawing from actual examples of teacher-to-parent and school psychologist-to-parent written communications, participants consider the miscommunications and relationship damage that can occur when hastily written, poorly conceived notes and emails are sent. Again, these personal notes are revised in more collaborative ways.

Third, depending on the participants, we present one or two specific formats for conducting meetings with families. When school-based mental health service providers are the primary audience, a collaborative, solution-oriented problem solving model is presented. This process is adapted primarily from Carlson, et al. (1992) and Weiss and Edwards (1992), and involves the mental health service provider as a consultant. It focuses on developing a solvable complaint and shared goal for improvement, creating experiments for change, and monitoring outcomes. In all trainings, we also present a specific format for conducting routine family-school conferences (i.e., those conferences regularly scheduled for all students throughout the school year). Although only teachers are called on to conduct these kinds of meetings as a regular part of their professional roles, school-based mental health service providers may eventually conduct inservice training for teachers in these skills.

Traditional parent-teacher conferences tend to be ritualized experiences in which both parties demonstrate their concern for the child but little information is actually exchanged (Swap, 1993). Family-school conferences differ from traditional parent-teacher conferences in the following ways: 1) teachers, parents and students prepare in advance; 2) students are active participants; 3) teachers concentrate at least as much on receiving as giving information; 4) teachers focus on family and child strengths; and 5) the conference is a conversation; teachers are not “presenters” of information (see Minke & Anderson, 2003a for more detail). Training emphasizes that routine conferences should be used primarily as vehicles for relationship development and information exchange. Only minor behavioral or academic issues can be addressed in the usual 15-20 minute timeframe allotted for these meetings. When it becomes apparent that more intensive problem solving is needed, separate collaborative problem-solving meetings should be used.

As part of the invitation to family-school conferences, parents are encouraged to bring with them any extended family or community members with a particular interest in the student's academic success. They are also asked to complete a brief preparation form that asks them to record: 1) the student's primary strengths; 2) areas in which they would like the student to improve; and 3) questions that they wish to ask during the conference. Teachers engage in similar preparation and gather work samples, test scores, and other data that they want to include. Finally, students are also prepared for the conferences. Teachers explicitly instruct the students in how to introduce their meeting participants to each other. This process sets up an expectation that students have an active role in the meeting. Students reflect on their own strengths and areas for improvement; teachers may include these as part of a writing assignment prior to the conference. It is important to note that participation is voluntary; parents choose whether or not their child will be present at the meeting.

During the meetings, teachers use the communication strategies taught to elicit information about the students' strengths and needs. They guide the conversation such that most information is introduced by the student or parents. Specifically, the student is asked first to discuss one area of strength. Teachers typically prompt and encourage the student to elaborate on this strength. Then other adults are asked to comment on this same strength, with the teacher offering his/her comments last. This "round robin" process continues through the child's self-identified strengths; students typically identify two or three strengths. Other adults (including the teacher) are given the opportunity to introduce additional strengths. Thus, the first part of the meeting is spent exploring what is going well for the student in some detail.

The process then is repeated for areas of needed improvement. That is, the student presents an idea that is thoroughly explored by others before additional ideas are presented. By the time it is the teacher's "turn" to present areas of needed improvement, most important topics have already been introduced by another participant, often the student. In this way, teachers frequently are relieved of the burden of "bearing the bad news", instead, students' self-identified concerns become the focus.

Finally, participants jointly develop a plan to support students' continued success. Teachers refrain from offering advice and suggestions, relying instead on the expertise of the student and family to generate ideas for improvement. These plans tend to be relatively simple. Follow-up often occurs by way of written communications among parents, student, and teacher.

This conference style is designed to encourage collaborative relationships between families and teachers. These relationships may serve a preventive function in that minor problems are addressed quickly. If more significant behavior problems develop, an existing working relationship should make problem solving proceed more smoothly.

Evaluation Data

We are conducting both formal and informal evaluation of the various types of training offered. Following each one-day training, participants complete an evaluation form that assesses the quality of the presenters, content, and materials. These data indicate that the training is well received. For example, participants during the 2002-03 academic year rated the quality of the workshop overall at 3.45 on a 4-point scale and the learning value of the workshop 3.41 on a 4-

point scale. Similarly, 93% of the participants in the one-day workshop in 2006 rated the workshop as “effective” or “very effective” in enhancing their understanding of family-school collaboration. Unfortunately, these evaluations cannot reveal changes, if any, in participants’ interactions with families subsequent to the workshops.

We conducted a more detailed evaluation of the summer course following the 2002 sessions (Minke & Anderson, 2003b). We assessed teachers’ general teaching efficacy, efficacy for working with parents, and parent involvement practices. The study included teachers taking the family-school collaboration course ($n = 27$) and a comparison group of teachers taking other summer courses ($n = 80$) in a pretest/posttest design. Formal analyses showed little change between the two data collection points, in part because the teachers rated themselves very high prior to taking the course. For example, the pretest rating of efficacy for involving parents (in the experimental group) was a mean of 32.8 ($sd = 6.0$) on a scale with possible scores between 5 and 45; the posttest rating showed no significant change.

It is possible that the course had limited effects on teachers’ views and behaviors. However, participants’ answers to open-ended evaluation questions suggested that the course had positive outcomes. When asked what was the most important thing learned in the course, 87% ($n = 22$) responded with at least one positive statement, many of which reflected agreement with one or more of the CORE beliefs. For example, one participant stated: “[I learned] that no one in particular is to blame for a student’s problems in school. Time should be better spent on problem solving with parents and support staff (and students) rather than placing blame. Despite what we may believe as teachers, parents want the best for their child.” Others noted the importance of the communication strategies and the routine conference procedures. One teacher wrote: “The steps to follow for a conference were beneficial. I felt less stress at my conferences this year and parents felt more involved.”

When asked what, if anything, they disagreed with during the class, the majority (74%) indicated that they had no disagreements with the material. Those who did had concerns about feasibility ($n = 3$), especially having enough time to involve families effectively, and others ($n = 4$) indicated that they did not fully accept the CORE beliefs, noting that “some parents just can’t be reached.” Importantly, 80% ($n = 24$) of participating teachers stated that they made changes in family involvement practices following the course. Teachers mentioned maintaining a non-blaming, collaborative approach; increasing contacts with families, especially with positive comments; and including students in conferences. One teacher’s comment summarized what we hope teachers gain from the course: “My students were active participants in parent conferences. I solicited information from parents prior to the meeting. All parents attended. About 95% of the students attended the conference with their parents. I plan on doing this again with every family in the spring.”

We also completed an evaluation of the family-school conference process, which involved videotape analyses of traditional and family-school conferences, as well as interviews with parents and teachers following both conference types (Minke & Anderson, 2003a). Data indicated that both teachers and parents preferred the family-school conference style, with nearly all parents indicating that they would recommend the conference style to other families (96%; $n = 81$). The family-school conferences were positive, conversational experiences in which

students were central participants. Students' active roles were supported by the videotape analyses. Students engaged in dyadic exchanges with parents and/or teachers throughout the conferences, as evidenced by the percentage of 10-second intervals in which students spoke with another participant (mean = 25.4%; range = 7% – 52%). Their participation was supported by a relatively high level of direct elicitation from teachers; 81% of teacher questions were directed at students (range: 9-57 questions per conference). Significantly, 65.5% (n = 55) of parents noted the child's active participation as the thing they liked most about the conference. Parents and teachers reported that they learned more about the child and about each other during these conferences when compared to traditional conferences.

Conclusions

Although further evaluation data are needed, preliminary evidence suggests that the CORE Model training in its various forms is well received by educators, and influences their attitudes and behaviors in ways conducive to improved family-school relationships. Future research should investigate more specifically the elements of the training that are most critical in producing behavior change. In addition, research is needed to understand whether and how the training influences parent-child interactions. For example, if family-school conferences support ongoing conversations between parents and students about school, the conferences may have particular value because such conversations have been shown to be important in supporting school success in adolescence (Stone, 2006). Finally, studies should address the ability of school-based mental health service providers to adapt the training for use in other settings.

Boethel (2003, cited in Hughes & Kwok, 2007) noted that relationship-building activities tend to be among the least used parent involvement strategies. This is unfortunate in that these relationships appear to hold great potential for supporting children's academic success. Because teachers are unlikely to receive training in relationship-building skills as part of their preservice education, ongoing professional development is needed. School-based mental health service providers can potentially provide such professional development, but this may require a shift in professional roles. As noted by Amatea et al. (2004), these professionals must "consider whether they are willing: a) to invest time in relationship development as well as treatment, b) to address the needs of all children and families as well as a few children and families, c) to work jointly with their teachers rather than work in isolation, and d) to become a leader in their school rather than merely respond to individual requests for assistance" (p. 54). One avenue toward this shift may be in conducting joint training for counselors, psychologists and other mental health service providers that models collaboration across professional lines (Nicoll, 1994).

The training described here is one example of a collaborative approach to developing productive family-school relationships. A number of similar approaches have also been described in the literature (e.g., Amatea et al., 2004; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Terry, 2002) suggesting growing recognition of the importance of these relationships in supporting children's academic and social development in schools. School-based mental health service providers, especially those with specific knowledge of family systems theory and consultation, can provide a key bridge between individual program examples and the larger education community.

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