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### School Staff Perceptions of Parental Involvement

**Source:** Taliaferro, J. D., DeCuir-Gunby, J., & Allen-Eckard, K. (2009). 'I can see parents being reluctant': Perceptions of parental involvement using child and family teams in schools. *Child & Family Social Work, 14*, 278-288.

Child and family teams (CFTs) are one way to meet the mental health needs of children and families involved in child-serving systems such as child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice. CFTs are made up of family members and other adults in order to develop goals and strategies to support child success; they should be family-centered and recognize family strengths and capacities. In order for a CFT to ensure this philosophical approach, all team members need to believe in the ability of parents to contribute to their child's well-being. This study examines the attitudes of school staff regarding parental involvement in schools in preparation for the implementation of CFTs in the school setting.

#### Method

This study was conducted within a rural county in North Carolina. This county is 58% African-American, and the median income is \$29,890 – substantially lower than the national median household income of \$48,201. Educational achievement on average was low, with two-thirds of adults completing high school. The participating high school has a student population of 600.

This study was qualitative and designed to identify attitudes and perspectives of school personnel regarding parental involvement. Sample participants were recruited purposefully from a training designed to support a pending CFT implementation. Of the 20 training attendees, 13 consented to participate in this study, and 11 actually participated. Participants included teachers, nurses, social workers, and community members.

Participants provided information through in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews

lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each. Interview questions focused on participants' perceptions on the role of parents in schools, the current levels of parental involvement, and parent attitudes and barriers to school involvement. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes.

#### Results

Three main themes emerged from the data: the definition of parental involvement, parental work and life circumstances, and parental involvement and position within the schools.

Parental involvement was most often perceived as activities performed on school campus and included Parent-Teacher Association membership, volunteering at school events, and meeting with teachers. However, about half of participants recognized that parental involvement extends beyond visibility on the school grounds to include activities such as getting children to school on time and helping with homework.

Discussion of parental work and life circumstances highlighted the complexity of participants' attitudes regarding parent involvement in their children's schooling. On the one hand, participants recognized that parents – especially these parents who were experiencing high rates of poverty and challenging work schedules – often have difficulties juggling their own obligations in order to set aside time to attend school functions. However, participants ultimately placed the blame of student underachievement (and the praise of achievement), "squarely on the shoulders of parents. They lamented that parents simply 'don't care' or that parents were so downtrodden by the 'cares of life' that they could not given their

children the necessary attention to promote achievement” (p. 283).

Another barrier to parent-school staff relationships uncovered during the interviews were conflicting attitudes about parental involvement within the school. Some participants suggested that parents should not be proactively involved in the school, instead believing they should “come to the school when asked, don’t get angry, don’t come to the school unannounced” (p. 284); this was stated despite the fact that the school has an “open door” policy. According to the researchers, other participants seemed offended when talking about instances when parents would take the side of their children or question a teacher’s assessment. Despite these responses, some participants were sympathetic to parent aversion to coming to the school. Interviewees mentioned that some parents had their own negative experiences in school, and thus felt intimidated going on campus to support their children.

### Conclusions

It is generally perceived that parental involvement influences a child’s academic achievement, and therefore parents are often considered integral members of the school community. However, parents have complex reasons for their respective levels of school involvement that appear to be simultaneously understood and critiqued by the school staff interviewed for this study. According to the authors of this study, understanding the complexity of these attitudes is essential when creating a CFT that includes school personnel, given CFT’s emphasis on family and natural community supports.

“To truly partner with families in planning for youth, schools must change practices so that information can be shared with a socially just approach. Schools must...meet families where they are, rather than embracing misperceptions and stereotypes that perpetuate ambiguity” (p. 285).

According to the authors, social workers should take the lead in reconstructing notions of parental involvement to make it more inclusive of parents’ day-to-day activities. For example, social workers can help others on a CFT see the many ways parents can be involved in their children’s academics that do not necessarily involve going on school campus during working hours. More specifically, when thinking about how parents are involved in their children’s schooling, activities outside the school campus such as homework support and encouraging the importance of education should be considered. In addition, it is important to address parents’ work and life circumstances, as well as their own past schooling experiences when determining their ability to be involved in their children’s education.

Although this study only examined the attitudes of school staff in one rural school in the United States, it points to the importance of understanding the attitudes and perceptions of all members of a CFT in order to anticipate barriers to providing a safe environment for all team members. Creating this safe space will increase the effectiveness of the team and ultimately provide the best support for the child.



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