

WHY FAMILIES MATTER!

A paper presented to the SAASSO Conference in Reynella

on

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by

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***Families Matter – a resource for families and schools
working in partnership to support the well-being of
young people.***

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Families Matter! Yes of course they do, and always have – a self evident proposition that everybody immediately accepts and connects with through their own life experiences. Everybody intuitively knows that families matter in a whole range of ways.

Like all self-evident propositions, it is worth returning to and working more carefully and systematically through, to gain a better informed understanding of how the dynamics of this powerful concept can assist us in the learning and development of young people in a changing society and a turbulent world.

The importance of parents and families was recognised as a fundamental "given" concept in the 1999 "Adelaide Declaration"- National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century", acknowledging the primary role of parents and families as the first and continuing educators of their children. (1)

As noted in a US study, "parental involvement seems like the least controversial concept in education reform – just try to find someone who admits to being against it" (2). The dynamics, characteristics and benefits of effective parent and family partnerships with their schools in supporting their children's personal and academic development, has been the focus of much attention, much research and many recent publications. These seek to explore issues around: how does it work, how should it work, and how can we help it work better.

Parents and Families

Before we move to the research and the writings, it is worth setting out in particular what we mean by "Families". In this context, we intend this to include "All the various arrangements that people make to ensure our young people and others are nurtured and cared for". This includes carer relationships, extended families and blended families in addition to nuclear families. (3). In all societies and at all times, families have operated with a variety of structures – and so it is in Australia. If you feel that you are a family, that's fine for our discussion purposes.

In much of the literature, these terms are used interchangeably. So do we – in our "Literacy – Parents Make the World of Difference" we also talk about the important role of grandparents and other family members in assisting with children's development. In most cases, the context confirms that "parents" includes "Families"

What Makes a Good School

In 2004, Professor Geoff Masters reviewed the research to distil the factors which underpin a "good school". He sought to identify the "characteristics of outstanding schools". This suggested that highly effective schools – schools that achieve high standards regardless of gender, family background or socioeconomic status, have a number of features in common. One of these is a high level of parent, family and community involvement. In these schools, parents and families are encouraged "to take an active role in discussing, monitoring and supporting their children's learning. Parents are involved in setting goals for the school and in developing school policies." (4)

Families Working in Partnerships with Schools

The central importance in education of building partnership links between families and schools has been strongly emphasised by researchers worldwide. A study by Professor Kevin Marjoribanks, head of the University of Adelaide's Graduate School of Education indicates that if schools are going to help overcome educational inequities they have to form strong and meaningful partnerships with parents from all social backgrounds. They have to develop that partnership from two points of view: (1) what parents do educationally for the child inside the family; and (2) how the family relates to the school. Schools need to develop supportive interactions with families, with special efforts being made for those parents who find it difficult to engage with schools. In his overview comments to his research he sets out the broad proposition thus:

“It is generally agreed that if parents are involved positively in activities associated with children's learning then the school outcomes for their children are likely to be enhanced. As a result, education practices that address inequalities in school attainments are designed more and more to involve parents in the learning experiences of their children, at home and at school... (and) ...teachers are being encouraged or directed to recognise the importance of parents as partners. It is an expectation that such partnerships will be associated with the formation of more enriched learning environments, which in turn will be related to more positive school attitudes and associated with improvements in children's academic performance.” (Marjoribanks 2002, p.1) (5).

Reinforcements from Harvard

In a recent (December 2004) Family, School and Community Connections Symposium, a range of researchers explored the blockers and drivers of family interaction. One major study demonstrated that building effective partnership engagement is not always easy:

“We began to discover that the local community and especially the parents in community based organisations indicated to us that they felt a powerlessness about making any changes or accessing the system at the local level.... There are real challenges as well as real opportunities.” (6)

Another researcher, Karen Mapp (7), confirms that taking the challenge is worth it. “We found when we looked at this research that there is a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and better physical as well as improved academic achievement.

Importantly and reassuringly:

“This relationship rolls across families of all economic levels, racial, ethnic and educational backgrounds. And for students of all ages. This is not just a (primary) school phenomenon. We see that when parents of middle schoolers and of high schoolers are involved in education, there are positive effects.”

Even more reassuringly:

“Guess what the students told us when we asked how important it is how families engage at High School level. They told us that family involvement is more important – **more important** – at the high school level than at any other time in their lives.... There are so many other influences on them, families have to be engaged!”

That research demonstrates two closely interlinked main aspects of family-school partnerships:

- Family situation in the home supports and reinforces the importance of academic and personal learning and development and there is a mutual understanding of what is important, and a shared focus and commitment to the personal and academic development of the student. Home values and home learnings are fully consistent with and supportive of school learnings and objectives.
- Families go the next step and become directly involved in provision and operation of school resources and programs to improve teaching, curriculum and extra-curricular activities. This is consistent with the findings of Geoff Masters noted above. When family and community are engaged in these partnerships, research indicates that “macro” level improvements and positive impacts are achieved in school system operations and effectiveness.

Partnerships about What?

Effective partnerships are always about achieving some mutually desired purpose or outcome. At first glance, the overall purpose of family-school partnerships could be seen as generically about ensuring kids make the grades, pass the tests, keep ahead of the work, achieve results in fields of maths, science, sports, arts or whatever area can open up career opportunities. And that more “academic” learning and development aspect is a partnership focus area. But even more fundamentally, the “Families Matter” initiative recognises the other point noted by the US researcher: “.... There are so many other influences on them, families have to be engaged”. “Families Matter” seeks to engage families, in partnership with their school in respect of student social and emotional development, to support young people’s well-being and their ability to cope in the face of the negative experiences that everyone confronts sooner or later.

Well-being and resilience

So the focus of Families Matter is on supporting well-being and resilience. This aspect includes a positive sense of our own worth and the worth of others, and a positive sense of purpose in life that enables us to cope with disappointment, grief, pain and sadness. It is important to help young people feel connected to family, school and community, to feel OK about themselves, as the essential basis for both their personal and academic development.

The Research on Who’s Not OK

While Australian research indicates that most kids feel OK most of the time, the research also highlights a whole range of other well-being risk factors affecting young people in Australia – as graphically illustrated in findings tabled by Geoff Master of the Australian Educational Research Council at their national Conference in Adelaide last October (8):

- **29% of Boys and 22% of Girls aged 12-15 said they took illicit drugs, in a recent survey**
- **35% of 14-17 year olds and 64% of 18-24 year olds drink at levels that risk harm in the short term**

- **26% of boys and 21% of girls aged 12-14 consume alcohol**
- **Tobacco smoking affects:**
 - 6% of 12 year olds
 - 13% of 13 year olds
 - 22% of 14 year olds
- **15% of boys and 14% of girls experience emotional and behavioural problems**
- **In 2000-2001 43,500 young people were hospitalised with mental and behavioural disorders**
- **Of these, 6264 young people 12-24 were hospitalised for depression**
- **15,000 young people are infected with sexually transmitted diseases**
- **30% of deaths in young people 12-24 are by suicide. 80% of these are male; 20% are female.**
- **Indigenous young people 12-24 are 4 times more likely to die from intentional self-harm.**

Richard Eckersley in his recent book “Well & Good: How we Feel and Why it Matters” (9) considers these and other evidences of problems affecting young people, from increasingly early ages.

He notes (p. 169) we can visualise these issues through two powerful metaphors. Are troubled youth “an island of misery in an ocean” of happy kids? Or are these problems “the tip of an iceberg of hidden, widespread suffering”. He considers the different implications of each of these views, noting that:

- “If we adopt the ‘island of misery’ hypothesis, and accept that increasing rates of problems for young people are a price we pay for progress, at a cost to a small minority, then the focus is necessarily on preventive and remedial approaches for the minority of people at risk.
- But if we adopt the “tip of the iceberg” view, that a growing proportion of young people are being harmed by a failure of our society to meet basic human needs for belonging, meaning and identity, then we additionally need a broader effort to reform or transform out society.

Are we demolishing and dispersing that whole village that famously is needed to raise a child? And what can we do about it in terms of strengthening those dwindling community links and support networks?

Eckersley notes that “for children and adolescents, these reforms mean encouraging the things they need if they are to achieve their potential:

- Families who love and care for them
- Friends who cherish and stand by them
- Communities that respect and include them
- Schools that nurture and educate them
- Governments that support them
- A world that makes sense to them; and
- A future that offers them hope.’

Challengingly, they also need the freedom, encouragement and developing confidence

- ‘to explore their world
- to take risks
- to set their own pace, and
- to be themselves.’

The “Families Matter” Initiative

All this background is directly relevant to the development, intended purpose and operating processes of “Families Matter” the national initiative – **“A resource for parents and families working in partnership with schools to support the well-being of young people”**.

“Families Matter” is a process rather than a product, and still less is it a program. It is a process that sets out to be flexible and adaptable to the context and needs of any school community. And like most good ideas, it is in concept and practice, extraordinarily simple.

“Families Matter” seeks to provide the starting elements for a conversation between parents and families, about the issues around their children’s development that are important to them, aspects of possible concern, and ways they can work together with the school and its programs and initiatives, to provide a stronger and more positive home and community support framework.

Its particular feature is that the process is led by parents who are trained as presenters and mentors, and leaders of workshops and discussion groups for other parents and families in their school community.

Funded from secondary schooling support resources by the Department of Health, “Families Matter” was trialled and initially launched in 2004. Nearly 450 schools with secondary enrolments have signed up to try out the process in their community: some 190 parent presenter teams were trained last year; another 200 are being trained this year. The initiative is funded through 2005: and we are starting to develop proposals for the continuation and extension of Families Matter through 2006 and beyond. We are encouraged in this by the positive comments coming back to us from so many of the schools which find “Families Matter” really seems to be achieving positive results in their community, and are keen to continue and expand its operation.

That Families Matter is on the right track, was highlighted in a radio program in December 2004 – you can check a full transcription on the Families Matter Website (10). Dr Elizabeth Murphy was reviewing the pressures and negative impacts that can affect the learning and personal development of young people: and the need for building better communications and stronger family and community support. A Principal of a school in NSW rang in and said with great enthusiasm:

“We are trying a great new strategy in our school. There is a government sponsored program called ‘Families Matter’ designed to build teenagers’ resilience to cope with life’s problems. It’s a beautiful system where parents of the school, whom we pick, go away to do training with professional facilitators, then come back to run forums for other parents to learn more about how to help their teenagers. This initiative really seems to be working well in our school community!”

Dr M responded : Fantastic point. That's one of the things that is really important. We have early childhood parents groups because we know how important it is that parents continue to meet after their children are no longer babies, and yet it doesn't seem to be there in the teenage years where parents need it probably more than any other time. Anything that facilitates parents getting together – a problem shared is a problem that is not as great. And also there is resource from one parent to another that could really help you with your child. A structured program like this one is excellent, but it could happen informally as well.Referring back to the caller who spoke so eloquently about the “Families Matter” initiative for bringing parents together to talk through the issues around the social and emotional development of young people, the best strategy for parents is to form active communication and support networks with other parents in their school community.

That is pretty much just what we are seeking to bring about in school communities right across the country with “Families Matter”

Notes:

- (1) *The Adelaide Declaration on the National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century* (1999) at <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/nationalgoals/index.htm>
- (2) Public Agenda Online. *Playing their Parts: What Parents and Teachers Really Mean by Parental Involvement*. Special Edition 1999
- (3) Families Matter Handbook p.3. Adapted from article by Lois O'Donoghue in Institute of Family Studies Journal “Family Matters” No. 35, August 1993 pp 14 - 15
- (4) Masters, G (2004):*Beyond political rhetoric: the research on what makes a good school*. Online Opinion, at: <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=2100>
- (5) Marjoribanks, K (2002). *Family and School Capital, Towards a Context Theory of Students' School Outcomes*. Dordrecht, Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publishers
- (6) Fege, A. (2004) *Voices from the Field*. Family, School and Community Connections symposium: New Directions for Research, Practice and Evaluation at <http://sedl.org/symposium2004/resources.html>
- (7) Mapp, K (2004) *Supporting Student Achievement: Family and Community Connections with Schools*. Family, School and Community Connections symposium: New Directions for Research, Practice and Evaluation at <http://sedl.org/symposium2004/resources.html>
- (8) Masters, G (2004): Opening Presentation: ACER Research Conference 2004 *Supporting Student Wellbeing: what does the research tell us about social and emotional development of young people?* At <http://www.acer.edu.au/workshops/documents/Mastersopening.pdf>
- (9) Eckersley, R (2004) *Well & Good: How we Feel and Why it Matters*. Text Publishing, Melbourne
- (10) Interview with child health expert Dr Liz Murphy on Sydney-based ABC Radio 702 broadcast on 1 December 2004 at <http://www.familiesmatter.org.au/media.htm>