III. PROMOTING FAMILY PARTICIPATION

Philosophy

Young children are dependent on their families:

- For their physical well-being, including food, shelter, clothing, and health care.
- For their emotional well-being, including love, encouragement, and consistent and gentle reminders of what is right and wrong.
- For their developmental well-being, including communication, opportunities to crawl, walk, run, climb, play, and new experiences to share.

It is important that professionals acknowledge the primary role of family as first teacher. By the time preschool starts, families have taught children a vast array of things, ranging from how to drink from a cup or to throw a ball to the pleasure of listening to stories. Preschool builds on this primary relationship between child and family by providing opportunities for families to participate in all aspects of the program.

The Step by Step Program is founded on the belief that family involvement is essential to reinforce and expand the classroom learning and to build on the interests and learning that occur at home. This reciprocity between learning environments — home and school — reflects the respect and sharing that the program promotes. One of the strongest arguments for parent involvement in early childhood programs was articulated by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1975), who asserted that ". . . programs that place major emphasis on involving the parent *directly* in activities fostering the child's development are likely to have constructive impact at any age, but the earlier such activities are begun, and the longer they are continued, the greater the benefit to the child." (p. 465).

The influence of the family on early childhood development cannot be overstated. Children are brought up in their families and are influenced by events that occur within them. Families are the ongoing caring, teaching, and decision-making people in the lives of their children. "Early childhood educators need to recognize, encourage, and enhance the primary attachment between parents and children." (Johnston, 1982, p. 51).

Families are diverse. They may be small, nuclear families or large, extended families. There may be many brothers and sisters or an only child. The child may be adopted or living with a relative. Acknowledging that children often have important relationships with adults other than their parents, such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, close family friends, and others, allows the program to communicate with those who have an influence upon their lives. The Step by Step Program works with all adults who have close relationships with the children enrolled in the program.

Although families play a central role in the lives of their children, they depend on supports and resources from programs and the community. "Families are the critical element in the rearing of healthy, competent, and caring children. We suggest, however, that families — all families — cannot perform this function as well as they might unless they are supported by a caring and strong community, for it is community (support) that provides the informal and formal supplements to families own resources." (Hobbs et al, 1984, p. 46). For Step by Step Programs to promote growth and change, they must be aware of the priorities, interests, and concerns of the children they serve, their families, and their communities.

The Benefits of Family Participation

Involvement in preschool activities benefits the child, family, and program. The following describes how participation in an activity can provide emotional and physical benefits for everyone.

Emotional involvement allows us to feel:

- Good about ourselves
- Productive
- Energetic
- Renewed and ready to face life again
- Happy and playful
- Like we have contributed to something or someone
- Like we belong to a group

Physical involvement allows us to:

- Develop new skills
- Forget our worries
- Have fun and laugh
- Relax
- Get to know another person
- Manage stress

Attitudes

Both teachers and family members have had experiences during their own school years that will influence the way they react to families' presence and active involvement in the program. In many cultures, the role of family and that of school have been kept separate. Parents leave their children at the school door and have little knowledge of what occurs inside those doors. Teachers are accustomed to assuming responsibility for children during school hours and do not expect to interact with families. For cultures where this is typical practice, the concept of active family participation may be totally unfamiliar. Neither teachers nor family members know how to share information, plan jointly, and work together in the classroom. They feel uncomfortable with these new role requirements. It may be difficult, in these circumstances, to demonstrate the value of family involvement to teachers and families.

Even in programs where there is some experience with family participation, teachers may feel threatened by having parents in their classroom. They may feel that they have to be "perfect" and may worry about making a mistake or having a bad day. Parents may have had a negative experience with teachers during their own schooling and feel uncomfortable in the classroom. They may not easily express their concerns or questions. Others, by contrast, may have been in very supportive situations and feel at ease helping with preschool activities.

Mutual Responsibility

Teachers and parents share the responsibility of working together to develop a collaborative relationship. Communication, respect, accepting differences, and the best interests of the child form the basis for a good relationship. It is not always sufficient to change staff and family attitudes — often professionals and parents must also develop new skills and practices in order to establish quality interactions.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Family members are provided with many different ways and opportunities to be involved in the program. Visits to the home which are planned at times convenient to the family, provide an opportunity for teachers to get to know the children and families in their own environment. Families are encouraged to visit the classroom at any time. They are invited to share a special interest or skill with the children, such as woodworking or stitchery. They are asked to comment on the student notebooks that are sent home by the teachers. When families notify teachers about special events in their lives, such as birthdays, new jobs, visiting relatives, or trips, it helps teachers understand any changes in children's behaviors and provides opportunities for discussion among the children.

The frequency and variety of opportunities for family members and teachers to work together, to communicate, and to share depends on family preferences. For instance, working parents may have limited time to participate frequently in the preschool program. Creative ways to facilitate communication will be suggested, such as a quarterly Saturday breakfasts for families at school. In addition, the teacher may send home weekly notes telling parents about some favorite activities. In one family, a grandfather may care for the children while their parents work. He finds delight in participating in a weekly cooking activity in the classroom. This allows the child to have a family member share in his world; at the same time, the grandfather is able to provide insight and information to the rest of the family and to learn about the child's school activities.

Communication

Communicating with families is a critical part of the teaching team's responsibilities. All families are concerned about their children and want them to be successful and happy learners. Preschool may be the child's first experience away from his or her family, and family members will want to know about the child's progress. The teaching team will want to discuss the child's home and school activities, strengths, weaknesses, and areas of concern.

Developing open and trusting communication takes time. Some parents may have had negative experiences during their own schooling and may feel intimidated by teachers. Others may have been taught that teachers "know what's best" and hesitate to question them. Teachers may also have had negative experiences; perhaps parents may have told them how to teach. These attitudes or feelings can get in the way of good communication. It is important for the teaching team to talk with families from the very beginning of the program and explain what information they want from the families. Good listening skills are vital. Asking open-ended questions such as, "What does Ivan like to do at home?" or, "What does Eva tell you about what we do in school?" offers the family members opportunities to tell you about their children. Teachers should always use clear language that is understandable to the family and offer opportunities for them to ask questions.

Guidelines for Communication with Families

- Allow time, create opportunities, and encourage families to express their ideas, joys, goals, and concerns.

- Offer places to speak privately and always regard the information as confidential.

- Families share very personal information with teachers and it is important that the information be kept confidential. Step by Step Programs should have a policy on confidentiality and all staff and families must adhere to it.

In the preschool years, it is important that families and the school communicate freely about children and their experiences. School and home are linked closely, and the better the communication between the two places, the more support children can receive to make their early learning experiences positive. When teachers consider communication essential for children's success, it becomes part of the everyday activities.

Expectations

Many preschool programs have discovered that there can be differences in the expectations or goals of the school and teaching team and those of the family. It is important to discuss the program philosophy with families during enrollment and to continue the communication throughout the year. Differing views or expectations can cause misunderstanding or gaps in communication. It is also important to ask families what their expectations are for the child and what they want the child to gain from preschool. Have parents share what "success" means to them. Clarifying these issues early in the school year assists in later communication.

Strategies for Communicating with Families

This section presents examples of formal and informal communication strategies. A variety of communication strategies will best meet the needs of diverse families.

Informal Communication Strategies

Drop-Off and Pick-Up Times

Busy schedules often leave families with little extra time. Taking advantage of natural, informal occasions to talk with the family can help build the communication between the home and school.

For example, many teachers report that they talk with families in the morning when the children are dropped off and in the afternoon when the children are picked up. This is a good time to report on the day's activities, tell families about successes, and remind families of meetings or events. This informal time allows families to talk with other parents, ask the staff questions, request a meeting, play with their children or read to a group of children. It is not a good time to discuss concerns or problems, since the children are present. Set up a special meeting for that purpose.

To accommodate informal time with families, the classroom schedule must be flexible, building in relaxed beginning and ending activities. To ensure that families don't just leave the children at the door, the policy must clearly state that families must bring children inside and help them get organized for the day.

The first and last half hour of the day should be free time, during which children and their families can play and work together in the classroom. This time should be written into the daily schedule and become a regular part of the school day. Invite families into the classroom and offer coffee or snacks. Be sure that one member of the teaching staff is available to talk. Make sure all family members are greeted and offered an opportunity to share and receive information about the program and their child. As families become more comfortable in the program, you can encourage them to stay and help, to work in the Family Room, to bring in snacks, and to fix toys, or do other things that need to be done.

Notes and Notebooks

Sending a short, informal note home with a child facilitates communication. The notes should address a specific accomplishment, new skill, or behavior. They might also thank families for something they did for the program. Families can be encouraged to send notes back to the teaching team. This is particularly effective if the teachers are working on a specific goal with the child and the family is reinforcing it at home.

For ongoing communication, notebooks that circulate between the school and home are effective. This is an especially good idea if family members have limited time or do not have phones. These can be simple loose-leaf notebooks decorated by the child and carried back and forth by the child or family member. For a child with specific needs or problems, notebooks ensure continuous communication and can alert both the teaching staff or family members to successes or changes in status. This technique is most successful if used at least once a week, and works best for families who are comfortable putting their thoughts and ideas in writing. Other systems may work better for those families who are not comfortable with this technique.

Bulletin Boards

Bulletin boards are another way to communicate informally to families. Information on bulletin boards can be directed specifically to parents and can include notices of meetings, flyers on child development, nutrition, or other relevant issues. Bulletin boards can also show families what activities are going on at school. Boards display children's art, stories about field trips or photographs of children's family members. The schedule for the day, sign-up sheets, and instructions for volunteers can also be posted. Information on the bulletin boards may repeat or reinforce information mentioned in other forms of communication like newsletters or notes sent home.

It is important to make the bulletin boards bright and cheerful and to change them frequently. If they are filled with old information or look sloppy, families will not look at them. Changing the bulletin boards can be a revolving job assignment for the teaching staff. It is easier and more fun to create bulletin boards with another person. Be creative; let the bulletin board communicate the atmosphere and activities of the classroom.

Ask families to contribute to the bulletin boards. For example, if a father is a good artist, ask him to come to the classroom and draw or paint with the children, then post the group artwork on the bulletin board.

Tips for Using Bulletin Boards

- Place information at an average adult's eye level.
- Change at least some of the information on the board.
- Remember that everyone likes to see pictures and names of themselves and their children.
- Display children's work.
- Keep information brief.
- Ask families to contribute to the bulletin board.
- Post personal messages that acknowledge family accomplishments, such as a "thank you" sign to a parent who has helped on a project.
- Assign two people to create bulletin boards. It's easier and more fun.

Newsletters

Newsletters or news sheets are another good way to communicate with families. A biweekly or monthly newsletter helps assure that all the families in the program receive consistent information. The intent and topics of the newsletters may vary. Some programs prefer a general format and use the newsletter to describe the events and activities that are happening in school and suggest ways to reinforce those activities at home. Others use a theme approach and discuss only activities and ideas that pertain to that theme. Some newsletters have different sections that feature current events, things to remember, and an article on child development.

Items to include in a newsletter:

- Announcements of a meeting, event, or community trip
- Requests for materials or help with a project
- Community information
- Discussion about the current focus of the classroom
- Suggestions for at-home activities
- Thank you notes to volunteers or requests for volunteers

Newsletters should be short and easy to read. It is more effective to send out brief newsletters regularly than long ones infrequently. Newsletter writers should include names of children in the program and family members as often as appropriate, making sure everyone is mentioned over time.

Formal Communication Strategies

There are times when formal, scheduled communication with families is desired. Formal methods of communication, which include parent-teacher conferences and written reports, are covered in Chapter V: Observing, Recording and Reporting On Children's Development.

Home Visits

Visiting children and their families at home is a practice used by many preschool programs. Home visits typically are made twice during the year,

usually at the beginning and end of the year. The chief purpose of the visits is to get acquainted with the children and their families. Visits are a good way to establish communication and meet family members.

Sometimes both the teachers and families feel intimidated by the suggestion of a home visit. If the home visit is approached as a visit to an acquaintance's home and the manners and behavior associated with visiting someone in their home are observed, it will go smoothly. The children are usually so excited to have their teacher in their home that time should allow for a visit to the child's room and introduction to pets or toys. You may want to bring a new toy for the child to play with while you talk with the family.

Always schedule the visit at a convenient time for the family. If possible, try to schedule it when the father is home. Describe the purpose of the visit and how long it will last. Families may worry that a visit means bad news; be clear that the purpose is to get better acquainted and learn more about the child and family. Bringing a child's art or math work from school provides an opportunity for you to discuss the curriculum with family members.

At the beginning of the visit, review the purpose for the visit. Always start by discussing positives, even if the purpose of the visit may be to discuss concerns. If there is specific information for the family, write it down so they can review it after the visit. Don't do all the talking, always leave time for families to talk about the children and their ideas, concerns, and interests. Do not talk about the child in front of the child unless it is honest praise or other positive feedback.

Home visits can be rewarding for both the teaching team and families. The teacher can learn more about the family's culture, style of interaction, and special skills or talents. The family gets the personal attention of the teacher and sees how the teacher and child interact. The family can discuss any concerns, misunderstandings, or specific goals that they have for their child. The teacher can talk about the child's progress. If both the family and the teacher are clear about the purpose and intent of the visit, home visits can

establish and continue to maintain good communication, which will enhance the child's and family's experience in the program.

Families in the Classroom

Making families feel welcome in the classroom requires more than a written notice or a one-time invitation. During the first home visit with the child and family, emphasize that the program's success is based on collaboration between the teaching team and families. Help family members understand that their participation is very much wanted through asking them to complete a written needs assessment (an example is located at the end of this chapter) and an explanation of the many opportunities for families to participate in the program. Ask about the family members' interests and skills and suggest ways in which they can participate in the program.

Creating an atmosphere of trust requires mutual respect, which occurs over time. There are many benefits to family participation in an early childhood program.

Benefits for Families

Family members who visit the classroom, participate in and lead activities, will:

- Develop a personal sense of ownership for the program.
- Learn to view their child in relationship to others.
- Understand more about child development.
- Grow to know and respect the teaching team.
- Learn activities that are fun to do at home.
- Meet their children's friends.
- Develop long-lasting friendships with other parents.
- Be able to reinforce learning at home.

Benefits for the Teaching Team

With the parents in the classroom, teachers will:

- Spend more time with individual children or have the opportunity to work in smaller groups.
- Learn how parents motivate their children.
- See how family members help their children solve problems.
- Learn more about diverse cultural practices.
- Learn about special skills and hobbies that family members share with children, such as cooking or playing musical instruments.

As teachers encourage family members to ask questions or express their concerns, a climate of joint planning and problem solving develops. Parents and teachers better understand a child's behaviors. The children realize that the presence of more adults can help individualize activities and enrich the classroom. Ongoing contact and communication form the basis for a collaborative relationship that helps overcome barriers and builds bridges between home and school.

Family Room

A space dedicated to families says, "Welcome, we want you here." Whether this is shared space or a room unto itself, an attractive area for families opens many options for family involvement. The room should have a rug and a sofa or comfortable chairs. If possible, simple snack food should be available as well as coffee or tea. Children's drawings and other art projects should adorn the walls. A box filled with toys provides entertainment for younger brothers and sisters. If this is also the place for group events such as parent meetings, folding chairs should be available to

accommodate participants.
If the room also serves as an office for staff, it may be necessary to schedule times during the day when the room is closed. It is important that the Family Room be available for parents at regular times each day — at a minimum for two hours in the morning and an hour or two every afternoon. Other times might be more flexible, depending on the needs of the staff and the schedules of the families. Update the schedule for the room weekly and make it available to all families.

Lending Library

Books and toys should be available for parents to borrow for use at home. The toys can be kept in the Family Room. Use a sign-up sheet or cards to record who has borrowed a toy and when they should return it. A two or three week loan period generally works well. Families should be able to borrow toys as often as they wish.

Children's books provide a special time between parent and child, and reading at home promotes a love of literature that can last a lifetime. A similar sign-out process can be developed for books. The Family Room also should have books on child development and parenting available for families to borrow or read in the room. If there are no such books available, teachers should write simple information on child development for parents to read. Family members may choose to use a parent meeting to share information on child rearing, and some of their ideas can be written down for others to read.

Family members can organize and maintain lending libraries by arranging the toys and books, checking the sign-out sheets, and sending reminders to families who may have forgotten to return an item.

It is important for families to feel comfortable borrowing toys and books, so assure them that normal use can sometimes result in a toy breaking or a book tearing. It is clear that families need to care for materials, but it is understandable that accidents happen. Remove broken toys from use because they can be dangerous. Broken toys and torn books should be mended if possible. Parents are often very good at fixing things, and that may be one way they can contribute to the program.

Welcoming Families to the Classroom

The Step by Step Program recognizes families as experts about their children

and as active participants in their child's learning. Making families feel welcome starts with their first encounter with the teaching team. All communications must convey this attitude. Respect and open communication regarding the program policies, procedures, goals, and activities help to make everyone feel part of the program.

Families sometimes feel intimidated in the classroom or think that it is the teacher's "domain." They may feel reluctant because:

- They may not be sure the teaching team really wants their help.
- They are afraid they may make a mistake.
- They do not know what to do and don't want to cause confusion.
- They don't feel they have anything to offer.
- The rules of the classroom are unclear.

It is the responsibility of the staff to encourage families to come to the classroom. At the beginning of preschool, it is important to explain that families are welcome to join the classroom activities any time they would like. Many programs have sign-up sheets on bulletin boards so families can sign up to participate for a certain time that fits their schedule.

There is no set amount of time that families need to sign up for. If a parent can come to help out during lunch or on the way to work, that's fine. Others may want to help a few hours each week. Some may come every day. Any amount of involvement is acceptable.

Introduction to the Classroom

Many programs hold the first family meeting in the classroom. The families go through the entire day's schedule as if they were children. They work with materials and play games, create an art activity, play outside, listen to music, and have a snack. It is a shortened version of the day, but the families experience what it is like for their children to be part of the program. Each activity center is clearly marked with a short explanation of what children learn in this area for families to read (see the following description of Dramatic Play Center).

This initial exploration helps families become comfortable with the classroom setting and the learning that occurs in different areas. This first meeting also allows teachers to explain different ways parents can assist in the classroom.

It is also very important for families to know the rules and specific procedures of the program. The teaching team can give a written copy of classroom rules to families at the beginning of the year and also post them on the bulletin board. Information can include techniques for discipline, clean up, and toileting.

Explanation of a Preschool Dramatic Play Center

Hello to Our Families –

Welcome to the Dramatic Play Center. This center is lots of fun and we have a great time here.

In this activity center we practice how to be big people and try new roles for ourselves. We practice cooking, cleaning, and wearing different clothes. We also learn how to get along with each other and practice our speech and language. We make friends and learn how to keep them. Sometimes the teachers add new materials to this area and we learn about bandaging the baby, combing hair, being a community helper or postal clerk.

We learn about life here, and we often imitate you here, because you are our role models. When you see us "dressing up at home," you will know that we are practicing our new skills.

Have fun here! We look forward to your visit and hope we can have "tea" together. Be sure and clean up. We must, too!

Love from the children.

Adapted from: "Motivating Parents" Workshop handouts developed by Barbara Wolfe

Instructions for Activities

Hundreds of activities go on daily in a preschool classroom. Families who work with the children are not expected to know exactly what to do. Emphasize that when they help in the classroom, they can always interrupt you if they are uncomfortable or do not know how to handle a situation. If families are coming in on a certain day and time, give them directions about what will be helpful that day. A note with the person's name and instructions can be posted on a bulletin board. (See Note for a Participating Family Member.) The specificity of the instructions will depend on the comfort and skill of the family member coming to the classroom and the activity they will help with.

It is a good idea to display general information on ongoing activities in specific areas at all times. For example in the manipulative/table toy activity center, instructions on puzzles or games will be helpful. A sign by the puzzles might say:

Hello!

Thank you for helping us with the puzzles. Puzzles help us to learn spatial relationships, increase our problem-solving abilities, and work the small muscles in our fingers. Some of our puzzles have only a few pieces, and some have several. If we ask you for help, don't put the piece in for us. Just give a clue like, "Turn the piece around" or "You may want to try and put the piece here."

Sometimes we pick puzzles that are too hard for us, and we do need extra help. If we are completely frustrated, help us put some in and then let us finish it, or suggest that we pick a puzzle with fewer pieces. At clean-up time, help us put all the pieces in the box and put the puzzles back in the rack. When working with us, ask us about the colors, shapes, names of things in the puzzle.

Thank you. We like having you here.

Note for a Participating Family Member

Good Morning Mrs. _____

When the children arrive, greet the children by name and talk to them about their morning. Help them take off their coats and put them away. Don't do it for them, but help them as they need it.

Today, we are working on identifying colors. Please take these children one at a time (give list of names) and work with them on matching colors using the lotto game. Show the child a color and ask him or her to find another one that looks like it. Praise them for the colors they can match. If they cannot match the color after a few attempts, show them which ones match and then ask them to try again.

Please help us set the table for snack by giving the snack helper the bowls and glasses to put on the table. Sit with the children at snack and talk to them. Ask them questions about what they did today.

Thanks for helping us today. We appreciate it.

(Adapted from: "Motivating Parents" workshop handouts developed by Barbara Wolfe.)

General guidelines for working in the classroom include information on storing materials, rules for handling disciplinary problems, a copy of the daily schedule, and information on how to interact with children in the different activity centers. This written information will help families feel more confident and encourage them to return to the classroom. (See General Information for Families in the Classrooms.) Some families will not be able to come to the classroom or are not interested in helping in that way. Remember, there are many other ways of participating in the program. Sending materials, attending meetings, helping to build equipment or clean up the outdoor area, or bringing in a book for the children to read are all valuable ways of contributing. If people are uncomfortable coming alone, arrange for them to work with a parent who feels more comfortable or has more experience. Linking families with other families is a valuable way to introduce new parents to the program.

For those children whose families cannot participate in the classroom but are involved in other aspects of the program, it is important to let the children know this. You don't want to make some children feel left out.

Showing Appreciation

Everyone likes to feel appreciated, and the families who come to help in the program are no different. They are using their valuable time to contribute to the program and deserve thanks and recognition. Always thank family members for coming and ask them if they have any questions. Also ask them if there is anything that would make their experience better the next time they come.
(See Showing Appreciation to Family Members for examples).

General Information for Families in the Classroom

= Participate in group activities. Sit with the children.

= Encourage children to take off their coats, scarves, hats, mittens, or boots without help. Assist them only if needed.

= Do not interpret children's art work, block building or wood work by giving it a title. Ask children what they call it. Have them explain it to you.

= Ask the teaching team questions at appropriate times.

= Wear comfortable clothes so you can sit on the floor or go outside with the children.

= Do not discuss the individual children with other adults, their parents, or other family members. If you have comments, concerns, or questions, ask the teaching team or director.

= Tell your ideas and suggestions to the staff so they can use them in the classroom.

= If you have a special skill or talent, let the teaching team know.

= Learn the discipline policy before you start working in the classroom. Ask the staff to explain what you should do if children get into fights with one another or have behavior problems.

= Do not discuss children's behavior in front of them.

= Give children enough time to do things for themselves before you offer to help or solve a problem.

Showing Appreciation to Family Members

= Thank family members individually for helping.

= Address them by name and remember to mention their child's name as well.

= Plan meaningful activities for the families to do. Show them what you expect them to do and ask if they have any questions. Also ask them what they would like to do. Give them choices.

= Be prepared to invest time training parents in the classroom. Show helpers around, explain things, introduce them to the staff, and indicate where they will work.

= Arrange for a place for helpers to sit and relax and store their personal belongings.

= Supply enough food so the helpers can eat with the children.

= Designate a bulletin board for helpers.

= Make teaching staff available to answer family members' questions and give them directions when they arrive.

= Create a section in the newsletter that highlights family members' activities.

= Send notes home talking about families who have come to the center or contributed to the program.

= Award plaques or certificates of recognition.

= Hold celebrations or parties to honor everyone who made the program successful.

Be supportive of parents' efforts. Thank them and thank them again. Encourage them to come with a friend. Encourage them to bring their spouses. Include activities that fathers may feel more comfortable with (building outdoor equipment, playing in the block area). Specifically invite them. Grandparents may also be willing to help. Ask them what they would like to do or what talents they have.

Getting Men Involved

Initial contacts are often with mothers, and fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and male friends are unintentionally left out. Every effort should be made to include and welcome the men who are in the children's lives.

From the beginning of the program, schedule home visits, parent meetings, conferences, and other activities at times when fathers can participate. Include the men in all discussions. Ask them questions about the child. Address notes and invitations to both fathers and mothers. If reports need to be signed, ask for both signatures. This says to the father, "You are important to us."

To involve fathers you can:

- Plan special events oriented towards men. Invite children and their father or other important men, to an event or activity just for them.
- Ask the men how they would like to contribute to the program.
- Encourage two fathers to come together to meetings or the classroom so they can support each other.
- Plan "men-only" social events where fathers can exchange ideas and talk about their children.
- Offer parenting classes just for men, led by a man. Emphasize activities men can enjoy with their children. These types of classes often form support groups and are very beneficial.
- Sponsor family nights and events that encourage both parents to participate.
- Designate a morning when fathers and other men are invited to the classroom before they go to work. Encourage men who are dropping off their children to stay for a while. This can become a special time for both the children and the men.
- Sponsor family evenings, weekend events, and "share" suppers that encourage participation of both fathers and mothers as well as other family members.

Family Meetings and Gatherings

Family meetings and gatherings are an important part of the Step by Step Program. Some preschool programs have a parent meeting once a month. The families, teachers and administrators decide the topics and the types of meetings to be held. There are several types of family meetings including instructional, advisory, informal, and support.

An **instructional meeting** is an informative workshop. An outside speaker usually is invited to the meeting to discuss a certain topic with the families.

Adult learners need to be part of the decision-making process and participate in the workshops. Staff should use an interest survey or hold discussions with families to identify topics of interest to them. Certain topics, such as child growth and development, may be presented more formally. Others are participatory and give families a chance to practice new skills such as communication techniques.

A formal **family advisory committee meeting** is also recommended. The purpose of this committee, convened by the proper administrator and held quarterly, is to solicit information and ideas from families. Families are encouraged to share their ideas for program improvement or fund-raising strategies. Topics commonly addressed include encouraging family participation, parent-teacher conferences, community involvement, and social events. An advisory committee empowers parents to be active participants in all important aspects of the program — from planning to implementation. Parents learn skills such as meeting planning and facilitating, running for and holding office, fund raising, committee work, and strategic planning. Teachers and administrators must be responsive to the recommendations of the board or have sound reason for suggestions that are not taken. The

program administrator works closely with the officers of the advisory committee, and as a team they solve problems and generate new initiatives.

Informal meetings are times when families gather to have fun, share experiences, talk with other families, and feel part of the program. Families plan these events with the staff. These gatherings may take the form of morning coffees, informal chats in the Family Room, field or community trips, picnics, family dinners, holiday parties, and game nights.

Support groups usually form out of a common need for several families to discuss an issue. In the course of an instructional meeting, several parents may find they want to discuss issues or get more information. Families with a specific interest or need can get together and offer each other suggestions, resources, and support. These groups may be for fathers, single parents, parents of children who have a disability, new parents, or mothers.

Informal support groups that meet in the Family Room and discuss their issues. Staff should support these efforts as much as possible by providing coffee, chairs, and space.

Discover Family Interests

Involving families in a meaningful way takes time, planning, and knowledge about the interests and limits of the family members. One way to find out how the family may want to help is to develop a checklist or inventory of ways to participate. To encourage broad participation, this inventory can be presented and explained at one of the first parent meetings. (See Family Interest Form).

Family Interest Form

Parent's name(s)_____
Child's name _____
Program attending_____

Dear Mr. and Mrs. _____

We are delighted that your child will be enrolled in the Step By Step Program this year. We look forward to working with you. As you know, we encourage families to be involved in our program as much as possible. To give us an idea of ways you would like to help, please check off your areas of interest below. Thank you. We look forward to seeing you soon.

FAMILY INTEREST SURVEY

Areas I am able/interested in helping with:

____ Attending monthly parent meetings.

____ Working in the classroom. If checked, are there any activities you particularly would enjoy doing with the children? (__ reading , __ art, __ puzzles, __ music).

____ Building or making materials (__ outdoor equipment, __ doll clothes).

____ Helping with community trips.

____ Planning special events (birthdays, holidays).

____ Working with the teaching team to develop ideas for the classroom.

____ Sending in materials from home.

____ Attending events for parents.

____ Attending a support group.

The purpose of the interest survey is to inform families of how they can use their individual interests, talents and time to contribute to the program. Each family's contribution is valuable; however, all families will not participate to the same extent.

Involving families in the program takes time and dedication on the part of the staff. However, the effort is worth it because families grow and learn together. By involving them in the program, you offer them the opportunity to learn more about how to support their child's growth and development.

Choosing Topics for Family Meetings

Many programs use a checklist to ask families what topics they want presented at the monthly meetings. Families check off the topics they are interested in and prioritize their interests; the topics that receive the most votes are then selected for parent meetings. Ideas for topics include:

- Child growth and development
- Managing difficult behavior
- Childhood nutrition
- Childhood diseases
- Learning through play
- Building self-esteem
- Developing language
- Physical development
- Toy selection
- An overview of the program
- Community resources.

In developing an interest checklist, give specific information about the workshop contents. A specific description gives families an opportunity to decide if the topic interests them and helps ensure they will attend the session. Examples include:

Techniques for Managing Behaviors
This workshop will focus on techniques to use when your child says "no" to you or engages in unruly conduct such as kicking or biting.

Childhood Nutrition
This workshop will look at the nutritional requirements of children ages three to five years and discuss foods that children of this age usually like.

As you develop or review the format for discovering families' interests, make sure that the activities meet the following criteria. If you answer "no" to any of the questions that follow, consider revising your survey format.

Determining Family Interests: Staff Review Sheet

Does the process –

- Ask family members how they would like to be involved? _____yes _____no
- Allow parents to be interviewed rather than just to fill out another form? _____yes _____no
- Ask families to describe their talents and interests? _____yes _____no
- Continue to solicit input and remain flexible? _____yes _____no
- Respect culture and customs? _____yes _____no
- Include interesting activities? (Show families a picture album of last year's activities or ask parents who have participated in past years to talk about their experiences.) _____yes _____no
- Include families' ideas. (Ask family members from previous classes to help design the process.) _____yes _____no

Discovering the needs and interests of families continues throughout the year as relationships grow stronger. This relationship enables staff to elicit additional information on parents' needs, interests, and talents and thus plan more relevant topics for meetings. It is up to the program staff to plan useful activities and to point out the ways that new skills can be transferred into other settings.

Planning Informal Events or Gatherings

Since parents are asked to give up their spare time to attend meetings and participate in the program, the needs-assessment process should include information about what they enjoy doing in their free time. Once this

information is obtained, creative ideas are incorporated into the program planning process.

Questions that elicit this information include:

- What do you do in your free time?
- How do you and your family have fun?
- What activities would you like to do that you never have time for?
- What activities would you like to do that you never have done before?

A checklist format also works for these questions. Ask the parents to check the activities they enjoy doing in their spare time using a format such as the following:

What do you like to do in your spare time?

____ Spend time with my family
____ Play cards
____ Cook
____ Walk in the park
____ Spend time alone
____ Read
____ Visit with friends
____ Spend time outside

Which activities do you do most with your child?

____ Play games
____ Enjoy the outdoors
____ Take them to church
____ Tell stories
____ Take them to the park
____ Visit with relatives

Scheduling

Families lead busy lives, and to accommodate the most people, times for events must be flexible. Fathers may be available for a support group in the evening, whereas informal meetings can be held on weekends or late afternoons. If the meeting is held at a convenient time, is well organized, allows people to participate, has a social element, and is fun, families will attend.

Activities to Promote Family Participation

Outside Activities

Hiking – a hike in a nature area can be a wonderful learning experience.

Sing-alongs – singing, traditional or cultural games, and story telling involve everyone.

Ice skating and roller skating – If no one is very good, it doesn't matter. You will laugh a lot.

Fishing – children and adults both like to fish and getting wet is part of the fun.

Building or improving the playground – everyone can help. This is a good way to involve fathers.

Gardening – the children can learn about how food grows, and parents can produce fresh food.

Kite festival – have children and parents make kites together. Invite other classes, too.

Clubs or Classes. Groups of various types provide parents with friendship and support systems.

Sewing, art, exercise classes – ask a local person to lead a class for the family and staff.

Fix-it club – families help each other repair cars, equipment, clothes, etc.

Secret pals – assign each parent to another parent. During the year, the parents will do nice things for their assigned person (sending notes, making small gifts, etc.). At the end of the year, these people are acknowledged.

Big Brother/Big Sister – ask family members who were in the program last year to serve as Big Brother or Big Sister to new parents. They answer questions and encourage parents to attend meetings. Parents who have already participated in the program are the best promoters of Step by Step.

Food and Fun

Food festivals are an excellent way to acknowledge various cultures. Encourage families to bring prepared foods or ingredients to the center. Have a group of parents and children assist preparing the meal. Offer music and dancing. Have children contribute their art work or stories.

As an alternative, hold "*favorite food night*." Have parents talk to their children about their favorite food, prepare it together, and bring it to an event.

These are only a few ideas for involving families in pleasurable, active ways. With all the information gathered from the checklists and your informal discussions with the parents, you can design innovative activities. Start small, and expand your ideas with each success. Watch the parents have fun and learn at the same time.

How to Hold a Successful Meeting

To promote comfort and a relaxed atmosphere, use different methods of introduction. For example, have participants introduce themselves by giving their middle name, their favorite food, or the last thing their child said to them before they left the house. Teaching team staff, family members, the site manager, and people from the community may lead the meetings or the workshops.

- Encourage active discussion. This can be done by asking open-ended questions or by dividing participants into pairs or small groups to make speaking less intimidating.
- Hold the meeting in a comfortable, friendly environment.
- Provide baby-sitting services.
- Place chairs in a circle so everyone feels included.
- Use visual aids, media, handouts, games, or activities to reinforce messages.
- If you are discussing child development, use audiotapes or photographs of the children in the program.
- Send personal invitations and follow up with a conversation.

- Always allow time for families to talk with one another.
- Pair an involved parent with one who is not involved. Perhaps they could meet or talk beforehand.
- Keep presentations short. Adults have short attention spans, particularly after a long day.
- Include playfulness in the presentations. Laughter is good for everyone!

If families are unable to attend the meeting, you can send a note home saying what was discussed and express your hope they will be able to come to the next meeting.

Evaluating Family Meetings

Since family meetings are such an important part of the program, evaluate them to see if they address families' needs and interests. A checklist can be used for this purpose.

Family Meeting Evaluation Checklist

	Yes	No
Were families encouraged to share opinions and experiences?	__	__
Was everyone physically comfortable?	__	__
Were the topics relevant to families' interests?	__	__
Was some part of the meeting fun?	__	__
Did the presenter use more than one medium to present the information? (handouts, activities)	__	__
Would you have attended the meeting if it were not your job?	__	__
Were child care and transportation provided?	__	__
Were family members introduced to each other?	__	__

Confidentiality

Confidentiality can be defined as preserving information that was received in confidence from a family member and disclosing information only to professionals for the benefit of the family.

In the Step By Step Program, staff encourage an atmosphere of open discussion and provide opportunities for families to talk about issues that concern them. Parents may sometimes give the staff sensitive information regarding their children or a troubling family situation.

All efforts to build a supportive program can be undone if anyone discovers that confidential information has been divulged about children, parents, or staff. All those who are associated with the program, staff and parents alike, must be aware of the necessity to learn to treat both conversations and records in a confidential manner. Keep records in a locked file and create a check-out system for a few key staff who have permission to use the records. Check-out forms should include the child's name, the staff member's name, the date of check out, and the date of return.

The program staff have the responsibility to protect all private information that is shared, whether it is obtained orally or in writing. The written permission of the family is required before the program can disclose information to others. Families must know how and what information may be shared. They must also be aware that they have the right to review their personal/data file at any time.

Staff should have training at least once a year on confidentiality procedures. Reminders about not sharing information learned through conversations and parent groups should be provided frequently. Information written by staff must be factual, objective, and useful. Hearsay and rumors are usually not objective or useful. Reporting and recording only factual, objective information is the key for ensuring that staff will provide appropriate services to each family and child.

All programs should develop a written confidentiality policy. The policy should contain the following:

- The process for releasing information to community agencies or individuals

- How the program will use confidential information

- Training and procedures for ensuring objective recording and reporting of information
- Parent's rights
- Procedures for getting staff the information they need
- Disciplinary action that will be taken for violations
- Procedures for staff and parent training

The confidentiality policy should state that staff members must not discuss families or children in the program with anyone outside the agency, including their own families and friends.

The policy should also state that all staff will not convey confidential information to visitors or family members who are working in the classroom. This includes information from conversations, parent meetings, or discussions with families. If others request information regarding the address of the family or other personal information, the family must consent any information released.

(Information in this section was adapted from: Mental Health in Head Start: It's Everybody's Business, The Head Start Social Services Training Guide and ACF Region VII memo on Client Confidentiality for Head Start Programs.)

Suggested Guidelines for Maintaining Confidentiality

Families have the right to be assured that any personal information they reveal, whether orally or in writing, will be held in confidence by staff. The following principles should be kept in mind:

1. Parents should be the primary source of information about themselves, and information sought from them should be limited to that which is essential for service.

2. Parents and other volunteers are prohibited from reviewing records other than those of their own children.

3. Children's records and family records are open only to staff and special consultants on a "need to know" basis (only to the extent necessary to provide services).

4. Families are told about information that will be shared with other staff and the reasons why. (For example, a signed consent form that includes how information is shared and with whom, could be helpful.) When in doubt about releasing information, obtain permission from a family member.

5. Do not release information to anyone outside the program without written consent from the family, except in reporting suspected child abuse and neglect.

6. Consult with other agencies and individuals only with the family's consent and within the limits of that consent.

7. On a yearly basis, with input from parents and staff, decide what information will be collected, how it will be shared, and with whom.

8. Include information on how forms will be used and how information will be released as a part of the agency's plan or policy for confidentiality.

9. Record only that information and maintain only those records that are essential to provide service; and determine the use of records by agency function and with the consent of the family.

(Source: Head Start, Social Services Training Guide)

Suggested Opportunities for Family Participation

Home Visits
Early fall - September and October Spring - April and May

Reports
December - in writing using checklist with comments
May - in writing to send on to the next teacher

Conferences
November - with all families
March - with all families

Written Communication
Communication notebooks - sent home weekly
Newsletters
Monthly calendars
Special notes - as warranted
Samples of children's work - frequently

Visits in the Classroom
Morning and afternoon visiting times - always available
Special occasions - birthdays, holidays
Working with children - planned in advance to help with an activity - cooking, reading, woodworking
Spending time with a child

Parent Meetings
Explaining the Step by Step Program and curriculum - September
Child development meetings - to discuss areas of development and parenting concerns - as often as interest and time allow
Special speakers and topics - to discuss appropriate issues, for example, nutrition, health and safety, or music.

BUILDING COMMUNITY