

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Fostering Connectedness Between Families

THINKING ABOUT THE PAST YEAR and our hopes for the future, I am reminded of all the beautiful examples of community feeling at our school that happen between families. A few months ago, when some parents heard that a family's house had burned down, they eagerly offered to support in any way they could. At other times, people have taken turns making dinners when a parent was ill.

Several years ago, when one mother discovered that some children couldn't afford to make the fifth grade field trip to Washington, D.C., she collaborated with other parents to create a fund-raising spaghetti dinner for the whole school, which helped raise money for all the families. The willingness of families to reach out to each other in times of need, even if it's just offering car-pooling or childcare, is just one of the positive outcomes of exploring ways to create connectedness between families.

One mother began organizing events for families her in son's class when he was young where all the children would be included—yes, even those with special needs, behavioral issues, and bumpy personalities. The parents and children in that class transformed into an extended family and continued getting together even after their children graduated. The mother says, "The students and the parents would feel so bad if even one person couldn't come to an event."

The hallmark of community is fostering a sense of belonging. Our school is based on principles of unity and inclusion, and we are blessed with a wealth of diversity—families with non-traditional structures and a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, children with a wide range of personalities and varying patterns of development. Our school is also full of creative, accomplished parents who want to find ways to connect with other parents. On the other hand, some people's lives are so full that just getting time as a family is the priority.

If you are interested in reaching out to others, here are some ideas:

Learn about your child's class. If you want to develop more feeling for your child's class as a group, start by looking at the class picture. Who just moved to the area and needs welcoming? Who might miss out on birthday parties? Who speaks two languages? Who has two moms or two dads?

Try a playdate at the park with the family of a student your child finds difficult. One of the best ways to understand and influence relationships between children in positive ways, even as they grow into adolescence, is to get to know their families.

Don't be afraid to use your class directory. If you want to get to know other people, call them up and suggest getting together at a park or even meeting on one of the school playgrounds on a weekend.

Think about inexpensive group gatherings. One preschool class met at the park. Another took a trip to the zoo. Some classes have had potluck dinners together.

If you want to brainstorm ideas for parent get-togethers, contact me at susie@springtide.org or Ellen Evans at ellen@meherschools.org.

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