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## WORKING WITH PARENTS IN FRENCH IMMERSION



Parents play a crucial role in the success of their children at school. This involvement starts at a very early age and continues through the child's school years. The key to parental involvement is interacting with the child in a positive and supportive manner and exposing him or her to a variety of rich learning experiences. Children must feel that they are capable of new learning. Because learning requires risk-taking, children must be willing to take risks. Those children who feel confident and capable are the ones who tend to take the risks inherent in all new learning. Talking with children, asking their opinions, taking an interest in their interests, congratulating their successes are simple but powerful examples of strategies parents use to support learning at home and at school. Early literacy experiences before children begin school can have a huge impact on the success of children at school. Reading, talking, listening and writing with children are fundamental to language development. Research has shown that rich language exposure correlates with language development and cognitive development (Hart & Risley, 1995). Although the kind of support parents offer to their children changes as children become teens, it is imperative that parents keep connected to their child's needs and interests. Not only are early literacy experiences important to the child's success, but ongoing family involvement during the school years improves student achievement and attitudes towards learning (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Parents of French immersion students are often concerned they will not be able to help their children because they, the parents, do not understand French. Parents must be reassured that what is key in their involvement is providing a rich and supportive environment in the child's first language. The teachers will capitalise on the skills and attitudes developed in the first language and use those strengths to help develop competency in French. (See Chapter 1.)

The role of parents as partners in education and in promoting successful student learning has long been recognized in Manitoba as important. From its outset, the strong role of parents in promoting, establishing and supporting immersion programs has been critical to the extraordinary success of the French Immersion Program. Parents are valued partners in education. They have a right and a responsibility to be involved in their children's education. Enrolling a child in school in a language one doesn't speak is a challenge. Parents need to be kept well informed of their children's progress and of immersion research findings relative

to their grade level. Administrators need to encourage parental involvement to the benefit of the students and the school community.

Working with schools, families and communities is one of the key priorities of the K-12 Agenda for Education in Manitoba. (See Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth [MECY] document *Working Together: A Guide to Positive Problem Solving for Schools, Families, and Communities*, 2004.) Parents and educators need to work together to ensure that children have a positive French immersion educational experience.

For more information on the role of the family in children’s education, please visit the Harvard Family Research Project (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/index.html>). The following links are found at that site:

For early childhood:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/earlychildhood.html>

For elementary:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/elementary.html>

For adolescent:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/adolescent.html>



## Parental Involvement at Home

As mentioned in the previous section, parents must be reassured that what is vital in their involvement is providing a rich and supportive environment in the child’s first language.

There are many ways parents can help their children develop literacy:

- Talk with your child. Ask the child to explain things, to justify an opinion. Ask open-ended questions. Encourage curiosity with questions such as “I wonder why...”
- Read to your child. Choose books beyond the child’s reading level to develop both oral and written language and to share the joys of reading. Choose books at the child’s reading level to encourage independent reading. Don’t forget, memorising a book is the first step in reading. Preview the book, read the book, talk about the book, reread the same books. Follow the text with your finger as you read.
- Read with your child. Read in unison with expression so your child can develop reading vocabulary and develop fluency. Try not to correct your child when errors occur unless it fundamentally changes the meaning of the text. You want to develop fluency and risk-taking. If you decide the error should be corrected, repeat the sentence with the error and ask the child if it makes sense. Encourage

the child to reread the sentence, ask what would make sense in the sentence, look for small words, and as a last resort, look at the letters.

- Write for your child. Have your child dictate a meaningful sentence or list (for example, a note for the tooth fairy, Santa, a thank you card, etc.) and write the words with the child. Learning how to connect sounds to letters is best achieved through listening to someone read or experimenting with writing. Encourage your child to write words and don't correct every error. You want to encourage fluency and risk-taking.
- Validate the importance of reading and writing. Take the opportunity to underline the role reading and writing has in the child's life. (Example: "It is a good thing you know how to write because Santa knew to bring you that car." "It is a good thing we can read because now we know what time the birthday party starts.") Let your child see you reading. Give positive feedback often. Success in reading is related to self confidence. Believe in your child and share that belief.

Curiosity is a key element in the learning process. Students need to learn to question the world around them. Parents can support their child's learning by interacting with them in a myriad of experiences through daily authentic activities such as:

- drawing, painting, dancing, playing music and role playing;
- measuring in recipes, managing an allowance, budgeting for a trip, playing cards;
- gardening, collecting insects, fishing, hiking;
- playing their sports, watching their sports, listening to their music, talking to their friends, asking about their day.

While a parent may have no personal knowledge of the French language, it is important that they demonstrate to their child the value of language learning. This can be done by providing resources in French or by accompanying the child in activities in French. Some suggestions for parental involvement in French may include:

- watching a television show or movie;
- listening to taped books, music or the radio;
- engaging in cultural activities such as the Festival du Voyageur;
- going to a French restaurant;
- facilitating trips to the library to borrow French resources;
- enrolling in a learn-to-speak French class;
- arranging a family trip to a French-speaking destination;
- providing information on exchange programs, work programs, bursaries or summer camps which are offered in French (see Chapters 3, 10, and 11).

In supporting families who have a first language other than English, administrators should encourage these parents to speak this language at home to foster strong language development in their first language. This will provide the students with a solid foundation on which to build second and third language skills, thus enlarging

their linguistic experience. Children only spend 11% of their time at school. They will have plenty of time to master the English language in English Language Arts classes, in the community, through the media such as television and radio, and in daily communication with their peers. Parents should be reminded to expose their children to their own traditions, folklore and stories to value their personal and cultural identity. Such actions increase knowledge and understanding of other cultures.

Parents can help a child to develop good study habits by setting aside some time every day for independent reading, doing homework assignments, and studying. French immersion parents can help with homework too. Many parents either have a limited background in French or do not speak the language. Regardless of the language, the purpose of homework is to reinforce learning or to extend learning that has begun in the classroom. The most important factor is the encouragement and the positive support a parent is able to give a child. Parents influence the attitude of their child to homework. Here are some practical suggestions for parents:

- Discuss with the teacher and the child the reason for homework. Ask what to expect and how much.
- Be informed about your child's assignments and tests.
- Provide a quiet, well-lighted place to work, away from distractions.
- Treat homework as the child's responsibility, with yourself as advisor or consultant.
- Set a regular period of homework time and if necessary, help the child organise his or her schedule.
- Follow up with your child. Ask how particular assignments or tests went.
- Develop with the child a system for remembering assignments and test dates so you can both know what is in the future.

Your child's progress and success is greatly influenced by the collaborative efforts of you, the parent, the teacher and your child. Continuous communication will maintain a good relationship.



## Parental Involvement at the School and Divisional Levels

Parents can be involved at the school level by attending events organised by the school or by volunteering. They should be encouraged to attend school events such as Meet the Teacher evenings, school concerts, spring barbecues, performances, Parent Teacher Conferences or Student-led Conferences and assemblies. It is important that communication between the school and the home be open, ongoing and reciprocal in order to ensure that parents are well-informed.

Volunteering at the school is another way to be involved and to show support for learning. There are many opportunities for parental involvement which may include assisting the teacher with preparation of classroom resources, reading with children, helping in the library, helping with lunch activities, participating on a field trip, or

making a presentation to a class. In immersion classes and on school outings, it is important that the language be respected. Parents' attempts to use their limited French will demonstrate a positive attitude toward the new language and will encourage the children. It is, of course, acceptable to speak English in situations in which there is danger to be avoided or an immediate need to ensure understanding.

Most schools have School Partnership Councils such as Parent Advisory Councils on School Leadership, Parent Councils or other structures in which parents can have an active voice in school affairs. It is important that immersion parents are adequately represented on these committees.

The school board is the local political body responsible for making decisions at the divisional level. A parent can be actively involved either by being a board member or by presenting informational briefs to the school board to create awareness and knowledge about the French Immersion Program.

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## Communicating with Parents



This chapter has stressed the crucial role of parental involvement in the education of their children. It has provided a variety of strategies to involve parents both at home and at the school or divisional level. Communication is key to the success of parental involvement. Parents who are informed are more aware of their child's emotional, physical and academic well-being. They are able to develop a stronger parent/child relationship. Parents who are involved have more opportunities to voice opinions and to participate in decisions. They take ownership of decisions because they have a shared vision. As a result, they tend to be more confident.

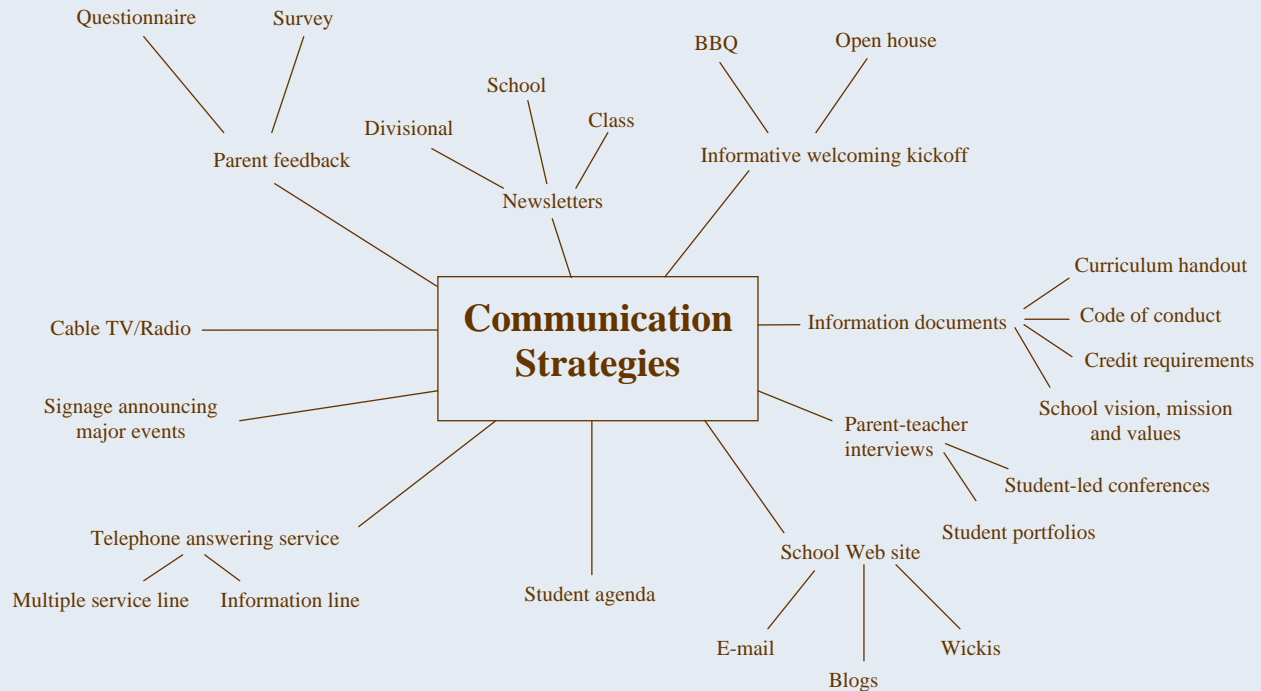
Administrators can foster parental involvement by inviting parents to be involved through written communication such as regular newsletters. Communicating school policies in writing reinforces the importance of parental involvement. Newsletters should also contain parenting tips, input from the Parent Council and recent French immersion research findings. Information forums and meetings around particular issues to get advice from the community can be very worthwhile. Providing meeting space, assisting with duplication and distribution of parent communication, and ensuring that the community receives immersion success stories can greatly enhance the program. Providing opportunities for students to share their successes with parents, both while in school and after graduation, can be very effective in promoting the French Immersion Program. Maintaining a parent resource library with useful information for parents and recent research about French immersion programming is another important way of communicating information to parents.

Parents should be kept well informed of their children's progress. Frequent communication, including regular report cards, newsletters, written communication to be signed and returned, and phone calls or e-mails to discuss progress should be routine. Positive notes to commend behaviour and academic achievement can go a

long way toward developing and maintaining parental support. Immersion parents want to know that their children are learning to communicate in French and that they are succeeding in the immersion environment.

Following is an array of suggestions intended to promote communication between families and schools.

### Communication Strategies in a School Community



For more information, see MECY, *School Partnerships: A Guide for Parents, Schools and Communities*, 2005.



## Other Useful Resources for Parents

### French Immersion Program

[http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/fr\\_imm\\_pr.html](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/fr_imm_pr.html)

This site links you to all pertinent documents regarding the French Immersion Program in Manitoba.

### Curriculum Information for Parents

[http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/parents/fr\\_imm/index.html](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/parents/fr_imm/index.html)

This site provides information to parents about what children learn by grade level and subject area from Kindergarten to Grade 8. It also provides links to other areas of interest for parents.

### **Parents, Families and Communities Reports**

[http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/parent\\_reports.html](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/parent_reports.html)

This site is a one stop window to all the information published by Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth intended for a parent and/or community audience.

### **Canadian Parents for French**

National – <http://www.cpf.ca>

Provincial – <http://www.cpfmb.com>

CPF is a national volunteer organization that provides information services for parents about French Second Language learning in Canada. Each province has their own branch which supports parents locally.

### **French for Life**

<http://www.frenchforlife.ca>

This site provides information for students, parents, teachers, and trustees/administrators to promote French Second Language education (FSL).

### **Healthy Child Manitoba**

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild>

This site outlines the Early Childhood Development Continuum to support families and communities in helping children get the best possible start in life.

### **The Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC)**

<http://www.mapc.mb.ca>

The Manitoba Association of Parent Councils is an organization of over 275 member groups throughout Manitoba. The goal of this association is to support, promote, and enhance meaningful involvement and participation of parents in order to improve the education and well-being of children in Manitoba.

### **Safe Schools Manitoba**

<http://www.safeschoolsmanitoba.ca>

Safe Schools Manitoba is a partnership initiative of organizations committed to working together to enhance the safety of Manitoba's schools and communities. On this Web site, you will find many resources to help you understand, prevent and address problems that threaten the safety of young people.

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