Teaming with Technology:
Providing Library Services to Parents

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School libraries can provide valuable services to parents and develop meaningful partnerships with them in order to help children succeed, particularly with the new computer technology. School librarians should analyze parental resources and needs and match these factors with the library's mission. They also need to be sensitive to possible barriers to service and find ways to overcome these obstacles. Parental involvement occurs at different levels: family obligation, school involvement, home education, advocacy, and community collaboration. Therefore, school librarians must ascertain which services are most appropriate; several ideas are suggested for each level. General guidelines for collaboration conclude the article.

Introduction
No matter the culture, parents are generally considered the first teachers of their children. Therefore, it behooves the school community to work with these parents to optimize student achievement. Indeed, Eileen Faucette (2000) and I (Farmer, 1999) discovered that collaboration by librarians with parents had an impact on student achievement. To facilitate such collaboration, it makes sense to use those means of communication with which parents are comfortable. Although for some people this continues to be face-to-face oral communication, others have easy access to a variety of technological means: from radio to telecommunications, from broadcast television to home VCRs. Because technology allows users to accomplish tasks not easily done without it, or optimizes the effect of some efforts, librarians should examine these media carefully to determine what role technology can play in providing connections with the parent community. This article helps school librarians to identify potential technology in their community and to leverage that technology to foster collaboration with families with the aim of providing optimal library service. I have worked extensively with parents in suburban California settings where the potential impact of technology is high. In addition, I have worked in Tunisia, where technology options were not as plentiful. The underlying concepts of using different communication channels effectively hold true no matter what technologies are available. The key element is teaming, and the means should follow availability and capability.
The sight of parents bringing their children to the public library delights librarians. They see parents as the first models of lifelong learning. When children first scribble their names on a library card, librarians smile—and hope that library habits blossom. Yet too often, parents do not hold their children’s hands to walk them to the school library. In some areas of the United States, children may not even see a school library until high school. Even with a good school library, most parents think that school is not the same open space as a public library. Indeed, some schools do not encourage parent involvement. How sad! For with proper guidelines and training, parents can serve as strong educational partners. And for those parents who frequent other types of libraries, the school library can reinforce and expand the library’s role as cultural preserver and educational haven for the community. Particularly with the advent of computer technology, school libraries can provide valuable services to parents and guardians (in this article, the term parents is used to describe both parents and guardians) as well as develop meaningful partnerships with them in order to help children succeed.

Who is this Population?
From teenagers to baby boomers, from single moms to extended families, from foster caregivers to stand-in grandparents, from Mayflower descendants to newly arrived green card holders, from illiterates to honorary doctors, from the homeless to empire builders, the parents or guardians of today’s students represent a vast spectrum of skills and experiences. They differ in socioeconomic background and the resources they have on hand, whether material, psychological, or time-related. Further complicating the picture is technology. Some parents run technology-based businesses, whereas others are technophobic or hostile about technology. Issues of equity loom large because some geographic areas do not support high-speed lines and some family incomes preclude computer ownership. Families vary in their perceptions about the importance of technology in general or along lines of gender, activity, or age.

Yet, regardless of their differences, parents have certain knowledge, needs, and expectations in common. Parents bring their intimate knowledge of and emotional connection to their children to the learning table. As they encourage and support their children, parents provide examples of good teaching. Because they know how their children learn, parents can optimize instructional strategies. Parents themselves need to feel needed and secure. Many wish to improve themselves, and all wish to be recognized for their efforts for the family or for themselves. For their part, children share certain expectations about their parents. According to Galinsky’s (2001) research, children want their parents to enjoy their jobs, but also to have time for the family. Youngsters need to be heard and nurtured by both mothers and fathers. As school librarians recognize the needs of families and the potential
benefits of working with them, all parties can learn from each other and contribute to student success.

The Role of the School Library
The school library can play a unique role in helping and supporting parents and can make good use of their involvement in education. The school library serves the entire school community. It is the information center across the curriculum, and it provides recreational reading and viewing for all. Yet school libraries may not be the first place that parents consider as a source of school services. The traditional relationship in schools is between teacher and student: teachers communicate with their students daily and in depth, and they tend to link with parents only as needed in relation to students’ work. School librarians tend to play a sustained role over time; they may have little contact with parents—or may have a close professional relationship with them even after their children graduate.

To make the most of parental involvement in school libraries, librarians need to ascertain the needs of both students and parents and what library services fit those needs. Moreover, they need to be proactive and enter the parents’ world, be it through PTAs, community organizations, or local business. One of the tasks for librarians is to identify the key social structures where parents tend to congregate and get information in general. Fortunately, outreach is made easier by technology such as desktop publishing, Internet Web pages, and community-based television broadcasting.

Barriers to Parental Service
Librarians also need to identify barriers that prevent full parental participation in schools. Parents control some of these factors; schools control others. Still other factors are controlled by outside forces. Examples of such barriers are:

• Parental personal issues: home demands, personality, negative past experiences, conflicting values, health issues, even fear of the unknown. Librarians need to ensure that the library is a safe and supportive atmosphere where parents can get needed help.

• Parental low expectations of the school, their children, or themselves. Probably the best antidote is concrete evidence of success. Thus the more librarians can document students’ reading achievement or progress in information literacy, the more parents can believe in their children and the educational system. Equally, the more librarians can train parents to help their children at home and at school, the more self-confidence parents gain and transfer into their relationships with their offspring.

• Students’ attitudes about parents: Sometimes older children might not want their parents to be highly visible or close at hand. Libraries can use parents behind the scenes on special projects and have them helping from the home. Remote access via the Internet, available at any time,
allows parents to contribute significantly to the library far from critical teenage eyes.

- Logistics: transportation, day care, lack of resources, language barriers. As much as possible, the librarian needs to work with the school to explore ways to overcome these obstacles. Car-pooling, cooperative babysitting arrangements, translators, equipment loans, and so forth can help. Potentially, parents can participate actively in a number of different areas in a school; developing school-wide solutions is an effective way to bring in parents and form coalitions across the school community itself.

**Levels of Involvement**

Most parents really do want their children to achieve in school and in life. Research demonstrates the powerful influence parents and guardians have on their children’s academic performance. However, parents may not always know the best way to help their offspring. Nor are they clear what their own relationship is to the school. Over the years, researchers (Epstein, Coates, & Salinas, 1997, in particular) have identified five major levels of parent involvement:

- **family obligation**: maintaining a healthy home environment for learning;
- **involvement at school**: as a volunteer;
- **home education**: monitoring student homework and communicating high expectations for student achievement at school;
- **decision-making and advocacy at school**: through governing bodies and associations;
- **community collaboration**: as a liaison with the school and in support of child welfare.

Each of these levels is appropriate. The question is how to ensure that parents can be supported to the extent that they wish to be involved, and how to keep parental involvement aligned with the school’s mission and the library’s program. Specific examples of library services at each of the five levels of parent involvement follow.

*Family obligation.* Librarians can suggest ways for parents to provide a reading-friendly atmosphere at home through newsletters, voicemail messages, online tips, presentations at PTAs and service groups, open house displays, and workshops. They can also show parents how to set up a workable computer corner. Librarians can help parents select good reading materials for their children and also provide good adult material (including resources on parenting) for parents to borrow and read at home, thus modeling good habits for their children. Librarians can also offer parents’ workshops on special skills such as reading aloud, storytelling, and activities to reinforce reading such as retelling stories, fingerplay, rhyme and other word games, nursery songs, word searches, and clipping newspapers. In this tech-
nological age, librarians can provide guidelines and sponsor technology fairs for choosing computer systems and Internet service providers.

Volunteering. Parents can provide volunteer service to the library in myriad ways. Some may do one project or event, whereas others may work on a weekly basis for years. Some may contribute by answering the telephone or checking in magazines, whereas others may spearhead major fundraising campaigns or network the whole library. Some may enjoy the stability of one clear-cut job, whereas others may prefer variety of jobs. Some may work at the front desk, whereas others may contribute as virtual volunteers online. The librarian’s main task is to match library services with parental interests and capabilities, always remembering to provide adequate training, supervision, and recognition.

Home education. Librarians can teach parents about information literacy through publications, videotapes, Web tutorials, workshops and presentations, and as part of volunteer training. They can display students’ work in the library or on the Internet so parents can know what level of performance to expect from their children. Librarians can also provide parents with information about library contests, such as a schoolwide “Read a Million Pages” campaign, so parents can encourage their children to participate. In some cases, parents may not understand the concept of libraries, either school or public, so librarians may need to orient them to these services and point out the library values of free and confidential access to information. School librarians might even provide library card registration service, or at least work with public librarians to facilitate this process. If parents have difficulty reading, school librarians can help them find adult literacy programs or sponsor one on site. For the technologically illiterate, hands-on workshops to develop computer comfort would be most welcome. Librarians can also help parents with Internet issues of concern and use this opportunity to make Internet use a family event rather than a protectionist campaign.

Decision-making and advocacy. Librarians should seek parental participation on library advisory boards. With telecommunications, parents can be “virtual” members and even join in discussions online. On the other hand, librarians should make sure that parents without the means to own computers can either borrow them or have equitable access to them. Librarians need to be sensitive to the relative power of home equipment: the simpler the interface and software, the better.

Community collaboration. Parents can be powerful library spokespersons. As librarians build good working relationships with parents and keep in regular communication with them through the Internet and other channels, they can call on these supporters to build the library’s case in the community and also encourage other parents to take advantage of the library’s offerings.
Working with Parents

To work successfully with parents, librarians need to acknowledge characteristics of adults as learners and educational partners. Parents have:

- a rich repertoire of experience to build on and use as input;
- strong existing habits, so a major emphasis must be facilitating change;
- self-interest, so services must appeal to parents’ interests and needs;
- limited time, so training and tasks need to be done efficiently;
- social needs, so time for interaction should be built into the schedule;
- need for results, so learning should be concrete and easily applied to daily life;
- need for self-confidence, so learning should be safe and paced for success.

Specific tips for involving parents in the school library include:

- Develop a list of possible tasks, indicating the skills needed to perform them;
- Develop a volunteer application form asking for information about skills, interests, availability, and personal references;
- Interview parents to determine their fit and to clarify expectations;
- Train for each task: provide guidance (coaching, manuals, tutorials), supervision, correction, and development;
- Communicate and evaluate regularly; build a team approach to library service;
- Recognize both effort and results; support and nurture their growth; and know when it is time for them to move on.

Some of the specific ways that parents can help include:

- clerical duties;
- technical assistance;
- storytelling and reading aloud;
- tutoring and research assistance;
- publishing and design work;
- telecommunications;
- videotaping, downloading, and duplicating;
- display and artwork;
- financial assistance.

Because the library serves as the educational technology vanguard, parents can build their own technological competence by learning and helping in the library. Some bring a strong background and learn how students respond to technology, whereas others bring a content or social knowledge that can be enhanced through technology. In a busy library, parent peer coaching should also be encouraged so that mutual support teams can flourish. Sometimes parents participate for social reasons and stay because they learn so much, and others find that they gain new friendships along with the technical skills they hoped to gain from the start.
Impact
Although at first glance it may seem that the library is going the extra mile to provide services for parents and opportunities for their involvement, such outreach actually forms a core part of the library program because it impacts positively on student achievement and supports the development of a schoolwide learning community. When parents benefit from library services, they can model positive behavior and help teach their children more effectively at home and at school. The entire family becomes empowered, and the school itself becomes a more powerful force for community development. Technology can play a significant role in facilitating this development, but in the final analysis, learning comes through personal engagement with people and ideas. And this is the mission of the library—in the digital age and any age.

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Lesley Farmer received her MS in library science from UNC Chapel Hill and her EdD in adult education from Temple University and has held professional positions in all types of libraries. Her research expertise is in school librarianship and educational technology. She has written over a dozen books on library science and hundreds of articles; she also presents frequently for professional organizations.