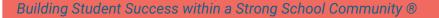






CONNECTION

Home Gatherings





Home Gatherings: Contents

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Introduction

What Are Home Gatherings?

Home gatherings are meetings held in a parent's home* with a teacher and small group of parents present. The host parent initiates the invitations, and the group discusses the roles of parents, teachers, and students in the education of students in this particular school community.

This booklet serves both as a description of home gatherings and as a training guide for parents and teachers preparing for home gatherings.

Please note that "parent" as used throughout this booklet includes any family member or guardian acting in the parental role for a student.

The Get Ready Session

Typically, a school assembles three "gathering teams" for a Get Ready Session, using the agenda and information provided in this booklet. Each gathering team consists of one teacher and three parents who agree to serve as hosts in their homes. The Get Ready Session takes about two hours.

Materials Needed for Get Ready Session

- Calendar for scheduling home gatherings
- Copy of this booklet for each person present
- Directory of family telephone numbers and/or preferred methods of contact
- 120 postcards and stamps

Common Sense Safety Tips

- 1. Know the neighborhood.
- 2. Know when to visit in pairs.
- 3. Know the best time of day to visit.
- 4. Carry a cell phone.
- 5. Be sure someone knows your schedule for the day: where you will be and when.

*Considerations

Home gatherings may also be held in alternative locations, such as the school or public library, community meeting rooms, and so on. It should still be hosted by a parent and include a teacher and other parents and adult family members.

Agenda for the Get Ready Session

✓ Welcome and introductions

♦ Each person introduces him/herself to the group.

Selection of chairperson

♦ The group selects one person to chair the proceedings.

✓ Background

♦ The chairperson guides the group through a reading and discussion of the "Home Gatherings" section of this booklet.

Preparing for the Home Gathering

- ♦ Form gathering teams: One teacher and three host parents per team.
- ♦ Establish schedule:
 - Determine date and time of each home gathering.
 - Determine time and date for Debriefing Session (2 hours) for all three gathering teams after last home gathering.
- ♦ Determine Guest List: Each gathering team selects 30 families from whom guests will be selected 10 for each host parent.
- ☑ Fill in "Staying in Touch: The Gathering Teams" section in this booklet
- Review "Jobs to Do"
 - ♦ See "Jobs to Do" section in this booklet.
- ☐ Distribute postcards and stamps: 12 of each to each host parent
- ✓ Review "Agenda for a Home Gathering"
 - ♦ See "Agenda for a Home Gathering" in this booklet
- ✓ Adjourn

An agenda for the Debriefing Session is also included in this booklet.

Home Gatherings

When we call someone by name, it is the beginning of community.

-Madeleine L'Engle

To enhance communication within the school community, schools plan "home gatherings" held in parents' homes. At each home gathering a parent invites a teacher and four or five other parents to his/her home to discuss the roles of teachers and parents in children's learning.

The Gathering Team

A gathering team consists of one teacher and three parents who serve as hosts for the home gatherings. A school begins the program with three gathering teams.

The gathering teams prepare for the gatherings at a Get Ready Session. At the conclusion of the home gatherings, the gathering teams hold a Debriefing Session. In the first round of home gatherings in a school, three teachers participate in the project, each attending three home gatherings. Nine parents serve as hosts, and a total of 45 to 54 parents attend the gatherings in each school. This initial series of home gatherings provides experience for later expansion of the concept.

Time Commitment

The Get Ready Session for the gathering teams is two hours in length. Following the Get Ready Session, host parents make telephone calls to invite guest parents, send reminder cards to those who accept the invitation, and make welcoming telephone calls just prior to the gathering. Each home gathering lasts about an hour. When all home gatherings have been held, the teams assemble for a Debriefing Session. This session requires about two hours of time.

For Teachers

Total Time Commitment	9 hours
Debriefing Session	2 hours
Preparation of Notes	2 hours
Three Home Gatherings (1 hour each)	3 hours
Get Ready Session	2 hours

For Host Parents

Total Time Commitment	10 hours
Debriefing Session	2 hours
Preparation of Notes	2 hours
Home Gathering (and preparation)	2 hours
Telephone Calls	2 hours
Get Ready Session	2 hours

Why Gatherings in Parents' Homes?

Home gatherings are a powerful tool in creating stronger alliances among parents and between parents and teachers. The net effects are:

- Parents view teachers as approachable and credible. They see parents as allies in child rearing. Parents also learn first-hand of the school community's expectations of them in supporting their children's learning.
- Teachers gain a fuller understanding of their students, enjoy the parents' personal expressions of appreciation, and acquire stronger parental support for their work.
- Children recognize by concrete example the cooperative relationships between their parents, other children's parents, and their teachers.
- The dynamics of relationships change as teachers are no longer on their own "turf," but come into the lives of their students. The teacher is now a guest. Communication is less formal and becomes more trusting than is often possible when parents and teachers meet at school. Positive relationships form and strengthen, and partnerships are created.

Purposes of the Home Gatherings

Research on home visits typically depicts such efforts as extensions of the school into the community, thus perpetuating the perception that the school and the community are separate entities. With home gatherings, however:

- 1) parents and teachers are viewed as members of the same school community,
- 2) the invitation for the visit comes from the home rather than the school, and
- 3) a group of parents meets. The discussion centers not on specific children, but on the reciprocal roles and responsibilities of parents, teachers, and students in helping children reach goals established by the school community.

The purpose for the gathering consequently shapes the preparations.

Home gatherings are planned for the purposes of:

- Strengthening triangular alliances (student, parents, teachers) focused on children's learning;
- Drawing parents and school personnel into productive relationships with one another; and
- Drawing parents into a supportive relationship with each other.

With home gatherings, members of a school community attain more intimate understandings of each other, calling each other by name.

Home Visits and Home Gatherings

In the early schools of this country, home visits were initiated by parents who invited teachers to dinner. This custom began when teachers were often unmarried, poorly paid itinerants who appreciated the hospitality of their students' families. The families felt privileged to bring teachers, personifications of culture and education in their communities, into their homes.

Today home visits are often met with apprehension. The school may lack financial resources to compensate teachers for their time, either with extra pay or by providing a substitute for them during the day. Teachers and administrators may hold the traditional view that parents must come into the school in order to be reached. Parents may consider home visits an invasion of their turf or a harsh way to deliver bad news.

Home visits are seen as time-consuming and anxiety-provoking. Some teachers feel uncomfortable entering a student's home; others feel unprepared to work with parents. Different skills are needed to communicate effectively with adults than with children. Most teachers have not been trained in these skills. In some cases, actual fear of danger in the neighborhood or ignorance about the culture of the families produces trepidation.

The language of home-visit literature paints the picture of a teacher bravely charging into foreign terrain, penetrating the barrier of the home, to intervene on behalf of the child. Susan McCallister Swap, in her book, *Developing Home-School Partnerships*, warns against this perception of home visits explaining that, "It is important that school personnel avoid embracing a deficit model and instead see themselves as empowering parents and strengthening themselves by increasing communication and trust."

Approached properly, home visits reap benefits that overshadow the obstacles. Hawthorne Faison was principal of Sussex School in Shaker Heights, Ohio, when he made visits for three years in the homes of kindergartners and fifth graders. Writing of the experience, Faison said: "In a world where norm-referenced test scores and print-out sheets have become our major information sources about students, home visits offer a perspective the standardized data cannot provide."

Perhaps the greatest benefit for teachers is the opportunity to enjoy the appreciation and respect of parents. Teacher Mary Joyce Love writes: "Principals who encourage and even require the making of home visits find that parents are more likely to become allies with the teacher and administrative staff on behalf of the child's learning experience. Parents who welcome a teacher into the home gain a more positive attitude and are more supportive of the school. In our case, a greater percentage also became volunteer aides and participated in parent-teacher organizations and school functions."

Home gatherings differ from home visits in three important ways:

- Preparation. We approach any event with less anxiety if we understand the purpose, the agenda, and the roles of the participants. All of this can be accomplished with preparation. For home gatherings, teachers as well as host parents prepare carefully for the event.
- Parent-Initiated Invitation. The invitation for a home gathering is extended by the host parent rather than the teacher. No longer can the event be perceived as an invasion of privacy or a rude extension of the school into people's personal lives. Also, the pressure on the teacher to provide the agenda and assume a "teacherly" role is removed. The host parent takes the lead, and the teacher is treated as a guest.
- Groups of Parents. Bringing several parents together builds relationships among parents, generalizes the discussion, and avoids a focus on a single child. More pointed discussions about individual children should take place at school in parent-teacher-student conferences. At home gatherings, the group discusses the school community's value-based expectations for parents, teachers, and students and arrives at a better understanding of each person's role in helping children learn.

Mindset

The attitudes of teachers and parents toward each other obviously affect the success of home gatherings. Naturally, the dichotomy of "teachers" versus "parents" is a false one; most teachers are themselves parents. Also, attitudes are not monolithic; parents have different opinions of different teachers, and teachers have different opinions of different parents. Overall, parents and teachers want the same things for the children they nurture and teach, their expectations of each other are realistic, and their inclinations are toward cooperation. Certain misconceptions, however, can be counterproductive, and it is helpful to examine them so they can be removed as obstacles to successful communication.

Misconceptions About Parents

Teachers' attitudes toward parents, both conscious and unconscious, affect how they approach the idea of parents as partners in the education of children. Certain opinions or attitudes held by teachers can be obstacles to constructive teacher-parent relationships. Typical among these counterproductive opinions are:

Opinion: "Teachers have little influence over parents, and investing teacher time in relationships with parents is a lost cause."

Answer: Children spend only 13% of their time in school, and their parents have a huge impact on their performance in school. All parents want their children to succeed in school, and nearly all parents are responsive to guidance from teachers.

Opinion: "Work with parents makes sense for young children, but not for older children."

Answer: Parents of older children often need and desire input to help their children with studying and peer influences.

Opinion: "Well-educated parents are more capable in parenting than less-educated parents."

Answer: Research on the "curriculum of the home" identifies aspects of parent-child relationships that correlate with academic learning. These correlates have little to do with the education or socioeconomic status of the parents; they have much to do with parental affection, discipline, and interest in the child's schooling.

Opinion: "Children who do not do well in school have parents who don't care."

Answer: Parents whose children do not do well in school may be very frustrated, but they certainly care. The trick is to reduce the frustration and offer concrete, realistic suggestions to help the children. Support from other parents is also vital.

Opinion: "Parents' participation in school-based activities is the best measure of their interest in their children's education."

Answer: All parents are interested in their children's education, but some lack the skills to provide necessary guidance, while others may give too little time to their children. Participation in school activities is not nearly as important as giving time and attention to children. Approaching parents from this perspective, ironically, also tends to increase their participation in school activities.

Opinion: "When parents join together, it must be to complain or to blame teachers for problems."

Answer: Most parents are respectful and supportive of teachers, but lack of contact with parents prevents teachers from realizing how much parents appreciate them. Lack of contact also feeds the occasional "behind-the-back" criticism of teachers that parents may engage in. The same lack of personal contact feeds teachers' suspicions of parents.

Most teachers know the importance of the home to their own work and are willing to invest time in developing constructive relationships with parents. Teachers gain valuable insight into the lives of their students during home visits. Home visits can identify problems as well as strengths and resources. The bonds created can have a positive effect on the entire school program.

Misconceptions About Teachers and Schools

For all the concerns of teachers, many parents have even more fears about teachers and school. In fact, their feelings about school may cloud their opinions of an individual teacher.

Parental attitudes toward school and teachers that can be obstacles to school-home relationships include:

Opinion: "Contacts with teachers always bring bad news or deal only with problems."

Answer: Some parents have had negative encounters with their child's school. They may have a child with problems and have faced repeated failures. They may feel condemned to a life sentence with the child and see no purpose in another meeting. Warm and personal contacts with teachers can help overcome this problem.

Opinion: "Schools and teachers are intimidating."

Answer: Some parents are afraid to come to the school. They may be intimidated by the position of the teacher, or they may have had negative school experiences as a child. They may still expect teachers to talk to them as children, or they may be shy. Whatever the case, getting to know teachers and other parents is the remedy.

Opinion: "My cultural background is different than that of most people in the school; they don't really understand me or my family."

Answer: Getting to know teachers and other parents will improve a parent's understanding of them and their understanding of the parent. Differences among adults should not be allowed to be impediments to children's success in school. All children are being educated for life in the broader culture, so knowing teachers and other parents is an advantage to any family.

Opinion: "The clique of "active parents" doesn't seem to want other parents intruding."

Answer: It is common for a group of people who know each other well to give the impression that others are "outsiders." But the reason to become more familiar with teachers and parents is to improve the education and guidance children receive. Cliques vanish as participation expands.

Opinion: "School people are just like welfare officers and social service caseworkers; they just want to check up on me."

Answer: Home visits may be viewed as an invasion of privacy by some families, especially if they have had negative experiences in the past with welfare, health or social service caseworkers. That is why home visits in this project are initiated by parents and participation is voluntary. This provides a good opportunity to overcome fears of some parents.

Opinion: "My children are doing fine in school, so I don't need any special contact with teachers or with other parents."

Answer: Parents of "good" students may see no need for contacts with teachers and may view efforts to reach parents as directed only at problems they don't share. Home gatherings are designed, not to address problems, but to build cooperative relationships and improve the education of all children. Parents whose children are doing well have much to offer other parents; they also can insure that their children continue to do well and have the advantage of a school community.

With proper preparation and explanation, families approach home visits with positive excitement. Children receive a psychological boost as they prepare to host a teacher in their home. Parents are pleased by the extra effort and attention the teacher is making for them.

Communication

Most barriers to effective communication are personal rather than technical. People communicate best with those they like and trust. Preconceived notions on the part of teachers or parents will affect the communication process. Communication needs to be two-way; it means listening and withholding prompt judgment. Common courtesy and respect are preconditions for the home gathering. Listening and effective communication are skills that can be developed.

Common courtesy and respect are preconditions for the home gathering.

Communication Stoppers

A few points to remember are:

- Educators are notorious for using specialized vocabulary that parents do not fully comprehend. Differences in social backgrounds, plus multiple definitions of words, can twist communication well beyond the intended meaning.
- Parents often "particularize" conversations with teachers, viewing every situation through the experience of their own children. Of course, parents care most about their own children, but in some contexts a broader perspective is helpful.
- People can feel intimidated by personality, status, or behavior. A parent's or teacher's personal experiences may create anxieties which prevent communication from being effective.
- Judgmental statements, gossip, a condescending attitude when speaking, or disrespect will kill communication.
- One-way conversations are not really conversations at all. Communication is a two-way process—speaking and listening. In a home gathering, everyone should be a part of the discussion. Interaction is the key.

Listening Skills

Listening is a difficult but necessary skill to master. A good listener asks probing, open-ended questions rather than those answered by "yes" and "no." Listening non-defensively is another important communication technique.

Listening is a skill that can be developed with practice. The keys to ACTIVE listening are:

Alert. Be attentive and alert.

Concentrate. Don't be distracted.

Talk less, listen more.

Interact. Smile, respond, nod, ask questions.

 ${f V}$ isualize. Picture in your mind what you are hearing.

Eye contact. Look the person in the eyes.

At the Get Ready Session, the following exercise is helpful in preparing teachers and host parents to be ACTIVE listeners. Try it.

Exercise: Active Listening

Assign each person to a partner. If there is an odd number of people, one group can include three people. Appoint someone to serve as "switcher." The switcher participates in the activity, but also says "Switch" every 20 seconds. When the switcher says "Go," one member of each pair begins telling his/her partner about his/her family. When the switcher says "Switch," the roles are reversed and the other partner begins telling about his/her family. Continue through several switches. Of course, the object is to practice the keys to ACTIVE listening. Eye contact, everyone!

Group Dynamics

Home gatherings present a different set of dynamics than meetings between two individuals, such as a teacher and a parent. Each group will take on characteristics of its own. The dynamics depend upon the topics discussed and the degree of diversity among the group membership. The background of the group members may differ according to education, ethnicity and culture, socioeconomic levels, previous group experiences, and familiarity among the group members.

Communication in groups is complex. Two-way communication is still possible, but everyone must work to keep an even flow of conversation, with each member of the group participating. Watching behaviors such as posture and attentiveness during the presentation can guide the host parent, who serves as discussion leader. Are the participants attentive? Do they comprehend? Are they willing to participate? The extent of the involvement of the group members during the gathering directly carries over into their later satisfaction with the gathering. Interaction makes the gathering more than a mere informational presentation. It is important that all group members play an active role.

The teacher has a unique effect upon the group process. The teacher will be perceived as both an individual and the official representative of the school. The teacher may have to present the school's policy and provide answers to complex questions. There may be criticism from the group about a school issue. The host parent, in his or her capacity as discussion leader, should see that parents do not "gang up" on the teachers or that the teacher does not dominate the discussion. Keeping the discussion on track helps prevent the gathering from degenerating into a gripe session.

Communication Tips			
Do's	Don'ts		
Begin with positive statements.	Don't argue.		
Be a good listener.			
End on a positive note.	Don't be defensive.		
Talk with, not at, each other.			
Emphasize working toward a common goal.	Don't blame.		
Draw reluctant participants into the process.			
Politely stifle domineering group members.	Don't discuss teachers, administrators, or parents who are not present.		
Stick to the agenda.			

Jobs to Do

Before the Home Gathering

Host Parent

- From the list of 10 families your team has selected for you, call or message until four or five parents have firmly committed to attend your home gathering. In some families, two parents may agree to attend; in others one will attend. You are looking for a total of four or five people. If you exhaust your list of 10 families without confirming four or five attendees, call other host parents to see if they have unused names on their list or call/message other families you know.
- Send a postcard to each parent you confirm, welcoming them and reminding them of the location (your home address), time, and date.
- The day before the home gathering, call (or text, if they prefer) each expected parent for a reminder and further welcoming.
- Obtain light refreshments to serve at the home gathering.

Teacher

- Prepare copies of Agenda for a Home Gathering to distribute to each parent at the home gathering.
- Call the host parent a few days before the home gathering to see if everything is going well.

During the Home Gathering

Host Parent

- Distribute and follow the "Agenda for a Home Gathering" provided in this booklet.
- Serve as moderator.

Teacher

Lead but do not dominate a discussion of "Everyone Has a Role."

After the Home Gathering

Host Parent

- Send a postcard to each parent who attended to thank them for attending.
- Jot down a few notes of your recollections of the gathering; take the notes to the Debriefing Session.
- Attend the Debriefing Session; bring your notes.

Teacher

- Jot down a few notes of your recollections of the gathering; take the notes to the Debriefing Session.
- Attend the Debriefing Session; bring your notes.

Agenda for a Home Gathering

✓ Host Parent

- Greeting and welcome
- Introductions
- Get to Know You: Each person in turn tells a little bit about his/her family; teacher also tells what he/she teaches.

✓ Teacher

Everyone Has a Role

Both parents and teachers have roles in helping students develop the habits and skills of studying, reading, respect (for self and others), and responsibility. Let's look at the matrix below and discuss the cells. For example, when we discuss cell #1, we will talk about the parents' role in developing skills and habits of studying (which includes homework).

	Studying	Reading	Self- Respect	Respect for Others	Responsibility
Parents	1	3	5	7	9
Teachers	2	4	6	8	10

✓ Host Parent

◆ Thanks for coming. Good bye.

Debriefing Session

The chairperson selected at the Get Ready Session also chairs the Debriefing Session.

- Oral Reports from Host Parents
 - Each host parent gives a brief oral report on his/her home gathering.
- Written Reports from Gathering Teams*
 - Gathering Teams meet, review notes, and comment.
 - Each gathering team prepares a written report using the outline that follows this agenda.
- Discuss "Expanding the Concept" section in this booklet
 - Chairperson: Add notes from this discussion to the "Home Gathering Report."
- Adjourn
- After the Debriefing Session, the chairperson compiles the three "Gathering Team Reports" into a "Home Gathering Report"
 - Submit a copy to the principal.
 - Submit copies to the faculty, PTO, SCC, LSC, school board, and other interested groups.

Gathering Team Report

Name of Teacher:
Names of Host Parents:
II. Description of Gathering #1 A. Host Parent's Name:
B. Number of Parents Expected to Attend:
C. Number of Parents Who Actually Attended: D. Description of Gathering Tone of discussion:
Issues discussed:
Comments of parents:
Impressions of Gathering Team:
E. Suggestions for Future Group Gatherings:
III. Description of Gathering #2 A. Host Parent's Name:
B. Number of Parents Expected to Attend:
C. Number of Parents Who Actually Attended:
D. Description of Gathering Tone of discussion:
Issues discussed:
Comments of parents:

	Impressions of Gathering Team:
	E. Suggestions for Future Group Gatherings:
/. De	scription of Gathering #3 A. Host Parent's Name:
	B. Number of Parents Expected to Attend:
	C. Number of Parents Who Actually Attended:
	D. Description of Gathering
	Tone of discussion:
	Issues discussed:
	Comments of parents:
	Impressions of Gathering Team:
	E. Suggestions for Future Group Gatherings:

Expanding the Concept

This booklet guides a school through a project to introduce home gatherings to the school community. Based on its experience with home gatherings, the school may wish to expand the concept. How could more home gatherings be held through the school year? What changes would you make? Who should take responsibility for organizing the home gatherings? Discuss.

Notes:

Staying in Touch: The Gathering Teams School:					
School Address:					
School Telephone: ()_					
	efing Session				
Locati	on:				
Date:			Time:		
Gathe	ring Team #1				
Teach	_				
	First Name:				
	Last Name:				
	Daytime Telephone: ()			
	Evening Telephone: ()			
Paren					
	First Name:				
	Last Name:				
	Home Address:				
	Daytime Telephone: (1			
	Evening Telephone: (
	Date of Home Gathering:				
Paren	_				
, arcin	First Name:				
	Last Name:				
	Home Address:				
	Daytime Telephone: ()			
	Evening Telephone: ()			
	Date of Home Gathering:			Time:	
Paren					
	First Name:				
	Last Name:				
	Home Address:				
	Daytime Telephone: (
	Evening Telephone: (
	Date of Home Gathering:				
Gathe	ring Team #2				
Teach	_				
	First Name:				
	Last Name:				
	Daytime Telephone: ()			
	Evening Telephone: ()			

Parent			
	First Name:		
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	Date of Home Gathering:		_Time:
Parent			
	First Name:		
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Parent			
	First Name:		
	Home Address:		
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Teache	ring Team #3		
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Parent			
3114			
	Last Name:		
	Daytime Telephone: ()	
	Evening Telephone: ()	
Parent	•		
- '-	First Name:		
	Last Name:		
	Home Address:		
	Daytime Telephone: ()	
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First Name:	
Last Name:	
Home Address:	
Daytime Telephone: ()	
Evening Telephone: ()	
Date of Home Gathering:	Time:

At the Hearth

From Snowbound

Brisk wielder of the birch and rule, The master of the district school Held at the fire his favored place, Its warm glow lit a laughing face...

Sit with me by the homestead hearth, And stretch the hands of memory forth To warm them at the wood-fire's blaze!

—John Greenleaf Whittier, 1866

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