

Introduction

At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the positive involvement of parents.

—Jane D. Hull

Imagine this: a student brings home an assignment on using area models to solve some computational problems. The first problem is 13×6 . The child has forgotten what they did in class that day and asks their parent for help. “What the heck is an area model?” asks the guardian. The child tries their best to explain: “It is a box, and you put numbers inside it for multiplication.” The parent immediately responds, “That’s not how I learned how to do it.” The child tries to show what they remember from class, yet the process is taking far too long for the busy parent. The parent grabs a piece of paper and says, “Just do it this way: 3 times 6 is 18. The 8 goes here and you carry the 1; 6 times 1 is 6 plus 1 is 7. The answer is 78. See?” Phrases like “Ugh, this is why I hate math” and “Why aren’t they learning it how we learned it?” are muttered by all the family members. How did it come to this?

This story, which happens often, has become an accepted “norm” among many families. Stories like these have been portrayed as typical homelife “woes” and broadcast as scenes in movies and television shows. And while it is easy for us educators to experience frustration when we hear these stories, we cannot blame parents for their lack of knowledge about mathematics instruction or for their attitudes and outlook on why we are teaching math the way we are today. So, what is the real issue behind this opening story? For us, it is about *who* is taking responsibility for educating the parents.

Ultimately, the current reality is that many students have been positioned (inadvertently) as chiefly responsible for parents’ education about math instruction when it must be the school’s job to do this. By not deliberately enacting a plan for educators to take on this leadership position, we have effectively relegated the responsibility to students. It is our role as educators and school leaders to empower parents and engage them in their child’s mathematics learning journey to help move our goals forward.

WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

In 2019, we published *Adding Parents to the Equation: Understanding Your Child’s Elementary School Math*, a book geared for parents and caregivers of elementary-aged children meant to help them better understand why the way we teach mathematics today differs from how they learned it. It helps parents and caregivers learn to speak our (the educators’)

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mathematical language and offers resources and suggestions for how parents can help their learners at home.

The response from parents was overwhelmingly positive, but more impressive was the response from teachers and school leaders. Many found the book a helpful resource for better understanding the content themselves and determining suggestions they might offer families for fun ways to incorporate mathematics at home. Our attempt at repairing the home-to-school connection had certainly begun. While there are some suggestions in that book that teachers and school leaders could use when working with parents, we believe there needs to be an entirely *separate* book for teachers and leaders that solely focuses on the “how-to” of family engagement in mathematics at the elementary level.

Communicating with parents is more than simply telling them how to do the math we teach today. It also means informing them about why we have shifted our instruction, what their child(ren) will be learning in math, how they can support their children’s learning, and much more. To effectively involve parents as key stakeholders and partners, teachers and school leaders must be equipped with resources, tools, and strategies. This book is written to offer suggestions, exemplars, and structures that elementary school educators and leaders can use to educate and engage families in supporting their child’s mathematics journey.

Note: Throughout the book, we use the term *parents*. This term includes guardians, caregivers, and anyone who supports mathematics learning at home and/or outside of school.

We all know that parental involvement is critical for our children. Study after study shows us that there is a strong relationship between parental involvement and children’s self-efficacy in mathematics and ultimately improvement in their mathematical achievement (Chiu & Xihua, 2008; Fan & Williams, 2010). Yet for some reason, we (the education field at large) have failed to properly address parents and families as the important stakeholders they are. While our teaching practices have adapted and leaders and teachers together have spent an abundance of time, money, and support learning about and implementing new standards, we haven’t put nearly as much effort into helping parents understand these shifts. As a result, a large majority of parents of elementary-aged children are left feeling unable to help their children in math or are inadvertently passing on their own math anxieties to their children.

Lessons Learned From the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) began to spread throughout the Eastern Hemisphere. Little did we know in early 2020 that a global pandemic was around the corner and would cause nearly all schools throughout the world to close with no time to prepare. Ultimately, most schools were forced to enact a distance learning model, which showcased the vast inequities that exist within our school systems—especially within the United States.

At this time of crisis, every stakeholder was unprepared for this event. Parents, in particular, had to quickly become their child’s teacher. New memes and social media posts started to pop up highlighting parents’ misunderstanding or lack of understanding about mathematics instruction today. We observed many parents undoing many of the strategies developed during the year, sometimes deliberately and sometimes without even knowing it. In fact, one parent told us, “I skipped through all of the nonsense and went right to showing my son the shortcut methods.” We can only wonder whether comments like this parent’s would have been different if proper structures had been in place prior to the pandemic.

As the pandemic unfolded, more and more parents began teaching their children procedurally to help them “catch up,” and some teachers and school leaders were backpedaling to communicate with parents to offer better support. We couldn’t help but wonder: *What if we had better prepared parents? What if proactive communication practices were already in place? What if many of the structures we will discuss in this book had been previously established?* It is critical that we partner with parents from the beginning of the school year, and throughout it, so that we are better prepared for any eventuality.

EXAMINING YOUR CORE BELIEFS

In order to partner with parents, you must first believe that *all* parents are assets to you. Take a moment and consider whether you truly believe a child’s family is essential to the child’s success. Do you honestly recognize the strengths, knowledge, and skills that *all* families bring? Or are there some families you believe are obstacles to

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a child's success? Do you see weakness, lack of knowledge, and lack of skills that ultimately have you writing off some families as helpful?

According to Henderson and colleagues, your core beliefs about families can impact your ability to build successful partnerships with them (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Mapp, Carver, & Lander, 2017). Henderson et al. (2007) determined that there are essential core beliefs that all school leaders, teachers, and other educators should adopt.

Core Beliefs About Families

1. All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
2. All families have the capacity to support their children's learning.
3. Families and school staff are equal partners.
4. The responsibility for cultivating and sustaining partnerships among school, home, and community rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

How many of these core beliefs do you share? It is critical that you examine your own beliefs and identify ways to view *all* families as partners if you don't currently share that view.

WHAT ROLE HAVE YOU PLAYED?

Take a moment and think about what you and your colleagues have done in the past (or currently do) to inform parents about the ways in which we instruct mathematics today.

Hopefully these guiding questions have made you think of all the ways you already support parents in math. The first step is acknowledging all that you already do well. We often get so trapped in thinking about what we don't do or could do better that we sometimes forget all that we are already doing.

Now, take some time to reflect and document what you personally have done to inform parents about how math is taught today. Then, document what others in your school or district have done, perhaps those who hold other roles or even those who share the same roles.

Think About the Following

- What have you done to make sure parents understand the math you or your teachers teach?
- How do you communicate with parents about mathematics?
 - How often do you communicate with parents specifically about mathematics?
 - How consistent and equitable is your communication about mathematics with your colleagues' communication?
- In what ways have parents been supported in understanding the modern language of mathematics?
- What math games, books, and resources have you or your teachers offered parents?
- What events have you held (in person or virtual) that help parents connect with each other, their children, or the staff about math?
 - What is the average attendance at these events?
 - How do you make the event accessible?
 - What have you done to increase attendance rates?



Reflect

| | Ways We Inform Parents About the Mathematics |
|-----------------------------|--|
| What I do or have done | |
| What others do or have done | |

Reflect icon source: Vladislav Popov/iStock.com.

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Take a moment and think about things that might be missing from your list. Refer back to the guiding questions we asked you before to see if you can identify gaps or holes in your offerings or communications to parents. Are there events you or your colleagues could have hosted, but didn't? Are there other modes of communication that you or your colleagues have yet to attempt? Are *all* parents included? If not, how can you be sure that *all* parents have equitable access to this critical information?

In reflecting, you might have come up with some ideas of ways in which you or your colleagues could improve in your outreach to parents. Use the following space to jot down any ideas that have come to mind on what you or your colleagues can do more of or differently.



Reflect

| | How We Can Better Inform Parents About the Mathematics |
|--------------------|--|
| What I can do | |
| What others can do | |

Keep your list handy, as you can return to this chart when you are done reading this book and add to it any other ideas that are sparked as a result of reading.

Reflect icon source: Vladislav Popov/iStock.com.

WHAT IS A PARENT'S ROLE IN THEIR CHILD'S MATHEMATICS LEARNING?

The role of a parent is vast and critical in a child's mathematical learning. Despite knowing the importance, we have found that many parents do not feel their schools or districts have adequately explained exactly *what* their role should be. What exactly do schools *want* from parents? How do we convey that to parents? And how do we include parent voices in determining their role?

Many parents have told us they feel like they need to play the role of teacher when supporting their children with mathematics at home. They see their children struggling, specifically in math, and don't know what else to do. Yet when we reflect on what school leaders and educators have told us they actually want, having parents assume the role of a teacher is not it. Other parents see their role as the disciplinarian—the homework authoritarian who forces basic fact memorization through flashcards and drill and kill. These parents mean well and many say they are doing what the school has asked (i.e., supporting basic fact fluency at home), but that is also not the ideal role of a parent. As you will see in Chapter 3, there are several other ways parents view their roles at home. Ultimately, we believe that parents should play the role of coach or mentor, not teacher.

A coach is positive, enthusiastic, supportive, trusting, focused, goal oriented, knowledgeable, observant, respectful, and patient. Our role as educators is to partner with parents to help them exude these qualities when they are supporting their children with mathematics. To do this, we must provide parents with resources and opportunities to develop these skills so they can feel confident in *coaching* their child to mathematical success. This will only strengthen and help to repair much of the current disconnect between families and schools regarding mathematical instruction.

A parent's role as a "math coach" includes being the child's motivator and role model. Parents should maintain a lifelong learning attitude and help their child see that math is everywhere and that everyone can learn to be a mathematical thinker. They should also help their child see that adults use math in everyday life, which makes studying and learning it worthwhile. If available, parents should monitor their child by watching for signs of frustration and providing guidance, not answers. If they are unavailable for that level of support, parents should set up expectations for their child about how to handle frustration and what to do when they do not understand a math assignment. Overall, parents should keep a positive mindset around school and math and encourage their youngster to persevere through challenges.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is meant to help you reflect on your current practices and then identify new approaches you could take to improve your work with parents with regard to mathematics education. It includes excerpts from interviews we have conducted with administrators, teachers, curriculum coordinators, and parents to be able to learn from others who have found successful ways to involve families in better understanding 21st century mathematics instruction.

Some parts of the book may be more helpful than others given your particular context. What may work well in a suburban school might not apply in an urban or rural setting, and vice versa. We acknowledge that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, but you may find ideas you can adapt to your setting.

This book is meant to be useful, applicable, and immediately relevant within whatever context you work. We hope to get your “wheels turning” and inspire you to try something new or find a way to provide more accessibility to what you’re already doing. Whatever you can take from this book, we hope you share it. Feel free to dog-ear or mark up the pages or sticky note and tab the book.

This is your resource.

THE GOALS AND STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The goals of this book are to:

- **Comprehend** the parent perspective with regard to their child’s mathematics learning,
- **Understand** *what* to communicate mathematically,
- **Explore** *how* to communicate mathematically, and
- **Learn** how to shift the current parent mathematics narrative.

When we engage in conversations with district administrators and teachers about how to work with parents, we often find ourselves discussing many of the same themes. The chapters in this book are based on the frequently asked questions we receive. For your convenience, we now provide a short annotation of each chapter.



Chapter 1: Stepping Into Parents' Shoes

Before we can offer suggestions, we must acknowledge the problem. This chapter highlights exactly what the issues are and helps you see from a varying perspective how many parents feel. As educators, we are biased in that we live and breathe educational jargon and know (or are beginning to know) elementary mathematics content well. Even if we are parents ourselves, our lens is still tainted. This chapter helps us step into the parents' shoes and see the world from their point of view.



Chapter 2: Understanding *What Parents Need to Know About Today's Math*

This chapter focuses on what exactly parents both want and need to know about the shifts in mathematics education. Here, we build on our book, *Adding Parents to the Equation: Understanding Your Child's Elementary School Math* (2019), and discuss how our globalized society has caused a need to shift our instruction. In addition, we discuss *what* parents want and need to know. We also offer our top three facts parents need to know that you might find helpful to communicate with them at the beginning of the year.



Chapter 3: Planning Effective Schoolwide Mathematics Communication

In this chapter, we walk through important schoolwide structures that need to exist, and function, in order to reach *all* parents. You will reflect on the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders and then consider what must be in place to ensure consistent messaging around homework and report cards. We also provide tips for teachers who work in schools that have not yet achieved schoolwide agreement.

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Chapter 4: Exploring *How* to Communicate With Parents About Math

Communication is key—if we do it right. How do you know that what you communicate is done in a way that a parent can and will receive it? What tools or modes of communication do you use? How streamlined is the communication parents receive at both the classroom and school levels? This chapter focuses on how to make your communication more effective and what tools you can use to support communication.



Chapter 5: Exploring *What* to Communicate to Parents About Math

Knowing *how* to communicate with parents will help as you decide *what* to communicate. In this chapter, we look at three levels of communication—schoolwide, classwide, and individual—and offer examples of how at each of these levels you can communicate with parents about mathematics.



Chapter 6: Hosting Parent Events

Part of communicating is offering learning opportunities for parents, too. In this chapter, we will explore various ways to engage parents in their own learning both within and outside of the constructs of the school day. You will engage in stories from the field to learn from other teachers and school leaders about what has worked for them.

Conclusion: Shifting the Narrative

How will you apply and use what you have learned in this book to empower parents and change the paradigm? How will engaging with parents more productively help you? This chapter will allow you a space to reflect and think about how to best use and apply what you have learned throughout this book. We end the book with insights from the field—advice, suggestions, and lessons learned.

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APPLY IT! TEACHER ACTIVITIES

Look back at the Table of Contents and pick one area of focus that you believe will be most impactful on your practice. As you read, we encourage you to identify ideas and strategies that resonate with you and then set a priority list for implementation. To help you prioritize your efforts, consider the following questions:

1. Why are you reading this book? What do you hope to learn about?
2. What is one thing you wish to convey to parents?
3. What is one way parents could support their children at home that you would find helpful?
4. Think of all the ways that you currently communicate with parents. Are your current methods effective? How do you know?



Available for download at resources.corwin.com/partneringwithparents/elementary



APPLY IT! SCHOOL LEADER ACTIVITIES

We advise you to first look at the Apply It! Teacher Activities feature and reflect on your purpose for reading this book before thinking about how you can lead change in your school about parental involvement in mathematics. Once you have reflected, consider making it a school initiative to focus on parental involvement. To do this, in the beginning of the year, host a staff meeting where you have staff both reflect on their current practices for involving parents in better understanding math as it's taught today and discuss ways in which all stakeholders in the school could be better at actively involving families in this matter. Here's how it could look:

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Apply It! icon source: PeterSnow/iStock.com.

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1. State the goals and objectives of the meeting.
2. Ask staff to reflect on what they currently do to help parents better understand the way in which we teach math today. Provide sticky notes so staff can write one idea on each note. Consider using the guiding questions from this chapter as the reflection questions.
3. Post chart paper around the room with various headings, such as **Written Communication, In-Person Communication, Digital Communication, Events**, and any other general category. Make sure the headings are very general and broad, so as to capture anticipated responses within the topic.
4. Ask staff to place their sticky notes under the most closely aligned heading.
5. Step back and look as a faculty. Use the following guiding questions for support.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- a. What are we doing well? How can we improve what we already do well?
 - b. Which area or category is lacking? What is the cause?
 - c. What is missing that should be there?
 - d. Which areas can we improve?
 - e. What is holding us back?
 - f. What obstacles are in our way? How do we remove them or work around or through them?
6. Choose one of those broad headings as your initial starting ground for improving family engagement around math.



Available for download at resources.corwin.com/partneringwithparents/elementary