



# Setting up a Family Centre

Creating a welcoming environment in your school is an important way to create partnerships with students' families. One of the ways this can be done is by setting up a space just for families of students. This space can help parents feel comfortable and confident coming into the school and opens up opportunities for parents to build connections with each other and with the school.

Having an open, welcoming space for parents is even more important for school communities with families of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This is especially true for newcomers to Canada who may be unfamiliar with western education systems. By setting up a Family Centre in your school you can provide all families with access to information and resources to help them be involved in their children's education.

## Designate a Space:

The first step is to find a physical space in your school that can be designated specifically to be used as for your Family Centre. This could be a corner in the library, a spare classroom or portable, or a lobby area.

## Arrange a Committee:

Assemble a committee of dedicated individuals who will oversee the development and upkeep of the centre. The committee should include both educators and families, and should represent a diversity of social and cultural perspectives.

## Setting up your Family Centre:

The programs and services offered at your Family Centre will be unique to your school since the centre is meant to respond to the specific needs of families in your school community. Here are some ideas you might consider as you decide what will be offered in your school's Family Centre:

- ✓ A lending library of various different types of resources that can be signed out:
  - Books for both parents and children
  - Magazines, newspapers, brochures
  - Parenting information (articles, tip sheets, etc.)
  - Games, puzzles, educational activities
- ✓ A comfortable sitting area
- ✓ Computers with access to the Internet
- ✓ A telephone that is available for use
- ✓ Wireless Internet access
- ✓ Small play area for young children visiting the centre
- ✓ Light refreshments
- ✓ Various informational resources, including
- ✓ Information about your school and other resources you offer
- ✓ Local job postings and volunteer opportunities
- ✓ Route maps for local bus services
- ✓ Pamphlets or flyers from local family serving agencies and licensed child care centres

The research is overwhelmingly clear:  
when parents play a positive role in their  
children's education, students do better in  
school



The Family Centre can also serve as a meeting space for activities and sessions that you may offer as part of your family engagement strategy. This space can be used to host school orientations, parent group meetings, or an [S4 Family Session](#).

### **Funding the Centre:**

Finding the funding to develop and maintain your Family Centre may be one of the biggest challenges to overcome. Many school centres rely on donations through fundraisers and from local businesses and community agencies. Donations from businesses and community members can assist in collecting books, technology equipment, and other supplies, while volunteer time from family and community members can support the staffing and maintenance of the centre.

### **More ideas for setting up a Family Centre and creating a welcoming environment:**

*It's really important to have parents involved throughout the planning process of setting up the centre so they feel ownership. This will lead to increased buy-in and support for the activities held for families at the school.*

- ✓ **Open house:** When you have a date that you know the centre will be ready for use, invite parents to a “Family Centre Open House” with refreshments and activities, so families can find out more about what the centre has to offer them and feel more confident in using it.
- ✓ **Signage:** Set up easy-to-follow signs from the front of the school directing new parents to the Family Centre. You can even have school maps available at the front desk to help feel comfortable navigating through the rest of the school. You may wish to have the signs and maps translated into other languages used by families at your school.
- ✓ **Send out Invitations:** Person-to-person communication will be the most effective way of inviting parents to come visit the centre. Send parents personal invitations to visit the centre to help them feel comfortable stepping in for the first time. Once they have made it past that first visit, they will be more likely to return. Invitations could be made in the form of an email, a handwritten note in students’ agendas, or a phone call.
- ✓ **Advertise:** Keep a spot in your school’s monthly newsletter to remind parents about the centre and invite them to come.
- ✓ **Name tags:** Have staff and volunteers wear name tags so parents know who to approach if they need help or have questions.
- ✓ **Sign-in:** Ask parents to sign in and provide contact information so you can easily communicate with parents to let them know about updates or special events going on at the centre.
- ✓ **Broad hours:** Keep the parent centre open in the evening as well as during the day so that parents who work in the day can still access the centre.
- ✓ **Bulletin board:** Include an interactive bulletin board where community members can leave information about local events and announcements. You can use this board to provide information about school events, community-based resources, or relevant articles about parenting and education. Be sure to include postings



that represent the diversity of cultures represented in your school community. Post flyers for local cultural centres and events.

- **Diverse Materials:** Make sure to provide resources and written material that are sensitive to a variety of different literacy levels. You may wish to have materials that come in the native languages of dominant cultural groups in your school community.
- **Stay Up-to-Date:** Keep the centre clean and maintained to show parents that the space is an important part of your school and that their presence is valued. You can show that the space is kept up to date by keeping a table or bulletin board decorated for the month or season.
- **Community Agencies:** Connect with family support agencies in your community to find out how they might be able to get involved with your centre as well. These organizations may be able to offer informational materials for your centre's resource collection, and can use the centre as a way to connect with parents who may benefit from their services. ([visual directory](#))
- **Evaluation:** In order to keep your centre relevant and beneficial to families, you can conduct an ongoing evaluation of the Family Centre. Create a short survey that parents can fill out when they visit the centre. Use this survey to find out what the centre is doing well and what kinds of services could be added. The evaluation should be ongoing to ensure constant development and improvement of the centre that is responsive to families' needs.

*The most important thing to keep in mind is that creating a welcoming environment is all about attitude. Just having someone smile and say hi to a new parent walking through the door for the first time can make a big difference in creating a welcoming atmosphere in your school.*

## References and Further Reading

- Carter, S. (2003). *Educating our children together: A sourcebook for effective family-school-community partnerships*. Eugene, Oregon: Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE).
- National PTA. (2000). *Building successful partnerships: A guide for developing parent and family involvement programs*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.