

Make New Families Feel Welcome

Holding out a helping hand when families first arrive at the school pays off in increased involvement and a stronger parent group later on.



Every September, new families gather at campuses all across America. What are we doing to make them feel welcome and to instill an excitement about being involved at their new school?

Holding a casual back-to-school event is a great way to connect with parents. It establishes your group as fun and family-friendly. And it gives you, as a leader, a chance to connect in a personal way with people who are new to the school. Those newcomers can be a terrific source of volunteers, but first impressions are **key**.

General Outreach

You'll have the most success if you reach out to newcomers as soon as they arrive. That's when they will be most in need of information and school connections. Frame all of your contact in terms of what you can offer them, not what they can do for your group. You'll have plenty of time for that later, and if you lay the groundwork, you'll have a much more receptive audience.

Provide information about your parent involvement opportunities in the registration packet for new families. A single sheet with contact information, some key dates, and a short list of your accomplishments will do. Be sure to state clearly that your school is friendly and welcoming to everyone. And don't include fundraising on your list of accomplishments; say "purchased six computers for the computer lab" rather than "raised \$12,000."

Establish a welcome committee. A simple phone call to newcomers offering information about the school and community can make a big impression. Don't try to sell the person on getting involved; simply let her know that you're calling to give contact information in case he/she has any questions. Give this task to someone who is naturally friendly and outgoing.

Reach out to new families as soon as they appear on your radar screen, whether it's at the pool over the summer or at the pediatrician's office.

Become a source of information about the school, such as pickup and drop-off points, paying for school lunches, and any other information new parents need. Make good information the first thing you offer new parents.

Touch base with new families as the school year progresses to see whether they have questions or concerns that you can help with. Even if the questions are more teacher- or administration-related, you can steer them in the right direction to find answers.

Remind your kids to make an extra effort to reach out to new students. Encourage them to invite new classmates to your home, which gives you an inside track to get to know their parents.

Don't assume that your school is welcoming just because you are a close-knit community. Sometimes it can be harder for a new family to feel comfortable in a small school family than a big school that gets flooded with newcomers. Make an extra effort to assure families that your school is open to everyone.

Around School How a school building looks, the procedures for visitors, and the attitude toward visitors can all have a strong effect on newcomers. That initial impression can determine whether a parent feels comfortable enough to return or decides to avoid the school whenever possible.

Make your foyer as warm and welcoming as possible by painting a mural, hanging a sign, or brightening the area with plants. Have a welcome sign.

Post signs to show newcomers how to get to the office to sign in. Make sure wording is welcoming rather than offensive.

Wear a nametag at events to help new parents get to know the staff. Have everyone, event parent and student volunteers, wear them.

Stop what you're doing and introduce yourself when you see a new face. This is critical to establishing a culture of caring.

Offer a nametag when a visitor signs in.

On the first day of school and at registration, staff the school with parent volunteers to help new parents find their children's classrooms.

Post notices about parent meetings and events around the school where parents are most likely to see them. Grocery store, post office, churches, etc.

Be blunt—hang a sign on the first day of school that reads “we welcome our new families.”

Events and Activities Family events represent the first level of involvement. People who come to your events and enjoy themselves are your most likely prospects to take the next step and volunteer. It's important to hold family events to help parents get connected to the school, and it's especially helpful to hold one or two activities specifically for new parents.

Organize a get-together for parents of incoming students the spring before. Give out information about the school and parent organization, and provide a casual setting where they can get to know each other.

Hold a casual welcome event just before school starts. Make it a family event so the first introduction people have to your group isn't about fundraising.

Sponsor an event for kindergarten parents on the first day of school, such as a coffee or breakfast. This is an emotional time, and giving parents a place to gather and chat can help reduce the anxiety. If your school has half-day kindergarten, include parents of 1st graders who are attending for a full day for the first time.

Stay on top of development within your school zone. If a new apartment complex or subdivision opens, host a meet-and-greet in the new community's development.

Appoint someone to be a greeter at all events, to say hello to new faces and make sure everyone is participating and having a good time. This should be a specific job; the people organizing and running the event are going to be too busy managing the details to worry about welcoming individuals.

Call new parents prior to a significant event and invite them personally. Tell them what to expect, especially if the event is a big tradition at your school.

Meetings A parent who attends a meeting for the first time is showing real interest in your group. Unfortunately, meetings are probably the least interesting thing you do—especially to outsiders. Meetings can also feel very clique-like. It's important to make sure new people feel included rather than left out.

Have a greeter who helps new people know what to expect, meet others, and feel comfortable. Never let anyone come and go from a meeting without being spoken to.

Ask everyone to wear a nametag at meetings. The old-timers know each other, but new people often feel excluded because they don't know any names. This simple device makes it much easier for newcomers to fit in.

Have speakers state their name when they speak at meetings. It may feel awkward at first, but it will seem natural after a few times.

Avoid insider talk such as acronyms or shorthand references that will only be understood by people who have been highly involved. Explain issues for newcomers.

Encourage input from new people by asking how they handled issues or events at their previous school.

Let parents know about volunteer opportunities, but don't heap responsibilities on them at first. Give them time to find their niche.

Being a new kid at school is tough, but being a new parent can be difficult, as well. No matter how great your school's reputation for test scores, **you want it to have an equally great reputation for parent involvement.** Your efforts to welcome families will be directly reflected in your success at building involvement. By focusing on creating a welcoming atmosphere, you can make sure your school is one where new families feel comfortable and want to participate.