

Today's Young Families: Successful Strategies for Engaging Millennial Parents

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Parent/teacher conferences Monthly newsletters Parent education meetings

Are these traditional family engagement activities outdated with today's young families? As the "millennial" generation reaches adulthood and becomes parents, is it time to re-evaluate the effectiveness of familiar strategies like these? Much has been written about the characteristics of millennials (born after 1980 and the first generation to reach adulthood in the new millennium), but little attention has been given to the implications of these characteristics for family engagement practices.

Digital Natives

The most common characteristic of today's young parents, ages 18-33, is their use of technology. This is the first generation of "digital natives," adults who have always had computers in their lives. They are technology multi-taskers, comfortable with reading e-books on their tablets while texting or snapping photos on their Smart phones, which they upload to an online photo album on their laptops. The typical millennial uses five or more technologies and sends or receives 20 texts a day (Mr Youth and Repnation Media, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2010). This generation is electronically sophisticated and likely to be connected to the internet wirelessly from both home and work.

The biggest implication of this characteristic for educators working with young parents relates to communication. Print "hard copy" communication is often disregarded by millennial parents in favor of emails, texts, or tweets. As one parent of three young children said, "I like when teachers communicate with me in the ways that I communicate, like texting, email, or Facebook. I don't like getting all those paper newsletters stuffed in backpacks that I forget to go through. I like when their information comes straight to my computer or phone." Communication through technology seems to appeal to busy parents who like to receive brief information quickly. While there remains a need for print information for families who do not have internet access, connecting with this new generation of parents requires a major shift toward digital communication. Some suggestions include:

- Weekly class email news updates; regular individual email or text communication
- Twitter announcements of upcoming school events
- Classroom websites, password protected, with photos and video clips of class activities, field trips, links to resources, home learning activities
- School Facebook page and YouTube site for updates of student and school accomplishments and videos

of school activities

- Parent/teacher conferences done via Skype, Facetime, or Google Hangouts.

Socially Oriented

Related to the millennials' use of technology is their use of social networking sites. Seventy-five percent (75%) of millennials have created a profile on a social networking site, and 51% of millennial mothers report a near addiction, visiting their site "many times a day" (Mr Youth and Repnation Media, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2010). Described as the "masters of overshare," they share every detail of their lives and their children's lives by posting photos, videos, anecdotes, and blogs online (Mr Youth and Repnation Media, 2009). The advantages of this openness, such as getting advice or learning from others' experiences, appear to outweigh any concerns for privacy (Anderson & Raine, 2010).

However, social networking is about more than using the latest technology. It reflects the social and group-oriented nature of millennials. Today's young parents seek community; in particular, millennial mothers use online communities, websites, and blogs to get parenting advice or recommendations on products and services. Employing "crowdsourced decision making," millennials look to their peers for help in making decisions, such as what kind of car to buy, what movie to see, or which

school to choose for their child. Peer pressure has an impact on millennial parents, and they report that advice or recommendations from friends (personal or from an online community) are “highly influential” in their decision making (Mr Youth and Reption Media, 2009).

Understanding this group orientation is important for effective family engagement practices. Some implications are:

- As an alternative to traditional parent education meetings, create a classroom online community where parents can connect with one another and post questions, parenting tips, and recommendations for family activities
- Fifty-seven percent of millennials reported volunteering in the last year (Pew Research Center, 2010); this interest in helping others, and their social orientation, can be used to organize groups for school improvement projects
- Identify family members who have a strong social influence and use them in positive leadership positions, such as a principal’s advisory committee.

Protected, Special, and Stressed

The millennials were highly protected as children. Theirs is the generation of car seat laws, increased toy safety regulations, and supervised play activities. In their childhood, they witnessed the rise of 24-hour news coverage of events like the Middle East wars, 9/11 and the age of terrorism, and school shootings. In some cases, protective parents became “helicopter parents,” so named because they hover closely over their children, meeting their every need and solving their problems. Millennials typically have good relationships with their parents and are used to having them intervene on their behalf. As parents themselves, they may turn to their own parents for support in raising their children.

Millennials are also the most

affirmed generation in history. Generally, they grew up being told they were special, receiving trophies for everything, even participation. This has led to a need for continued praise, and high expectations for achievement and success. Unfortunately, millennials are reaching adulthood and becoming parents during an economically difficult time. A sense of importance conflicts with difficulties finding a job, leading to a high level of stress among today’s 20- and 30-somethings. Fifty-two percent (52%) of millennials reported being unable to sleep due to stress. The top sources of stress were work, money, relationships, and family responsibilities. Also, while today’s millennial parents are the most educated generation, they are entering the weak job market saddled with large student loans (Loehrke & Snider, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2010). Millennial parents may still be dependent upon their own parents for financial support, possibly living with their parents as a subfamily.

What do these characteristics mean for teachers? Some suggestions include:

- Millennials want mentors and coaching; look for ways to partner them with veteran parents
- Include grandparents in school events and volunteer opportunities
- Invite parents who tend to be over-involved to volunteer in areas outside the classroom, such as the library or office; encourage them to take leadership roles in parent teacher organizations
- Stay in frequent communication with anxious parents, send regular emails and photos, and keep the classroom website up-to-date
- Be explicit about school safety procedures and assure families about efforts to keep children safe
- Validate parents’ efforts in family engagement with public recognition
- Include positive comments about both children and families in communication
- Avoid adding to the stress of young parents as they navigate the pressures

of building careers, raising children, and becoming financially stable.

Marriage and Family

Marriage is less important to the millennial generation than to previous ones. Only about 60% of millennials were raised by both parents, and 44% of today’s millennials think marriage is “obsolete” (Pew Research Center, 2010). Millennials are getting married later and are more likely to live with a partner before marriage. Consistent with these views on marriage, 53% of millennial mothers are unmarried (Wang & Taylor, 2011). While millennial parents may not value marriage as much as previous generations, over half of 18- to 29-year-olds said being a good parent was one of their priorities in life (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Millennials are more ethnically and racially diverse than previous generations and more tolerant of these differences. Their acceptance of same-sex, bi-racial, and other diverse family types reflects the tolerant views of the millennial generation. They are also more likely to be gender-neutral in family roles than previous generations. Seventy-two percent (72%) of millennials describe the most satisfying family life as one in which both partners have jobs and both take care of the children and household tasks (Wang & Taylor, 2011).

As teachers partner with millennial families, it is important to consider these points:

- School forms and other communication methods should be open-ended to fit any family type, such as single parent, same sex, or grandparent-headed families
- School events should include invitations to all family members and appeal to both mothers and fathers
- Avoid exclusive events that focus on specific family members, like a “Mother’s Day Tea” or “Breakfast With Dads,” and instead have “Family and Friend” events

- Share children's literature that reflects diverse family types.

Final Recommendations

It is important to note that these suggestions for working with millennial parents are based upon general characteristics of a population and are not meant to be stereotypical. There is much individual variation among parents who fall within this age range, including cultural differences. For example, the Pew Research Center (2010) found that Hispanic millennials are less likely to be online than Whites and Blacks. Of course, there are also differences among individuals within a culture. It is also important to remember that not all family members who are raising today's young children are in their 20s and 30s. Conventional family engagement practices are still

needed, and accomplished teachers know the importance of having a variety of family engagement strategies. Teachers who understand these significant differences may find great success in engaging young families in their child's education.

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Special Publications

Lynn Kirkland, Editor

PRESERVICE SCIENCE TEACHERS' CONCEPTION OF STUDENTS' PRIOR KNOWLEDGE.

Ballard, M. Washington, DC: Afterschool Alliance, 2012. With a constructivist theoretical foundation, preservice teachers are recognizing the importance of student misconceptions and how those misconceptions frame curriculum and instruction. Fourteen secondary science teachers were followed throughout their teacher education program to document how their beliefs about children's learning, and specifically their misconceptions, change over time. These science preservice teachers held multiple views about the value of students' ideas as content coverage, barriers to construction of new knowledge, motivation for student engagement, components of an inquiry-based classroom environment, and/or basic information for learning. Each viewpoint of the preservice teachers could be correlated to their

understanding of curriculum along a continuum from teacher-centered to student-centered.

Because some teacher education programs might promote a teacher-centered pedagogy, in-service teachers should be cognizant that teaching experience and focused professional development may help them move to a more student-centered approach. Teacher education programs should begin to teach the importance of student misconceptions and how understanding of the misconceptions can be used to generate curriculum.

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WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY THE BENEFITS OF DISCUSSION IN MATHEMATICS CLASS ARE?

Cirillo, M. Reston, VA: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2013. A move from recitation to discussion is occurring in classroom mathematics instruction. This change

targets children's understanding of conceptual knowledge, rather than rote memorization of algorithms or facts. It also supports Common Core Standards implementation. Teachers recognize that participatory collaboration in common problem solving is a motivator to students for learning mathematics. The role of the teacher changes to one of skillful questioner and facilitator, basing questions on conceptual information from children's thinking and providing formative assessment information.

Classrooms where purposeful discourse occurs regularly is a result of careful planning and orchestration. Building on the concept of a community of learners, children learn to listen to others' ideas and perspectives and feel confident sharing their own thinking with others in a non-threatening environment.

Three studies are used to frame this research brief. The brief is one of the most informative and intriguing briefs