

Envisioning the School Year

How a Team Approach Can Make the Difference

• BY JOE BRUZZESE

*Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.*

— Henry Ford

According to the United States Census Bureau, today's generation of school-age children spend the majority of their waking hours in the care of someone other than their parents. Given the influence that teachers, coaches, mentors, and extended family members have on a child's development, the necessity for building a relationship with this group of people has never been greater. But, for parents, creating a team of focused and motivated individuals who will continually support the ongoing growth of your child requires a new set of skills.

The first skill is to be able to envision the sort of success you want for your child in the school year. Once you have this vision, you need to clearly identify the extended support team. Do you know who is on *your* team — and how you can work with them all in the interest of your child's success in school?

Five Steps to Building Your Support Team

Create a roster. Who will impact your child's life this year? Begin by creating a list of the adults who will connect with your child during the first month of school. Teachers, school administrators, coaches, mentors, and extended family members are common additions to most team rosters.

Position the players. With a completed roster in place, identify when and where your child will see these critical people. Teachers and school personnel typically fall within a specified seven-hour time block on a regular Monday-through-Friday schedule. However, the after-school hours are equally important. Identifying who will supervise your child beyond the conclusion of the school day creates an accurate picture of your child's life and the role that each adult will play this year.

Connect. The beginning of a school year marks the start to many new and inspiring relationships. During the first few weeks of school, take two minutes to communicate with each person on your roster. Send a written note, e-mail message, or share a quick conversation in person.

The message to convey is short yet sincere, "Hi, I just wanted you to know how excited I am to have you in my child's life this year." This quick introduction sends a powerful message to everyone on your team about the importance of each person's role in your child's life.

Check in. Don't wait until a problem arises to initiate a conversation. Every two to three weeks, check in with each of the people on your roster. Start the conversation with, "How are you?" and then let the discussion flow from there. Beginning with an open-ended question that allows the conversation about your child to evolve naturally. Leading questions like, "How was her behavior today?" or "Were there any problems?" bring immediate focus to a potentially negative set of comments that result in creating greater distance between parents and key adults in their child's life. The opportunity to share positive comments or questions is lost amidst the negativity.

Celebrate. Reaching milestones and achieving goals is cause for celebration. Placing a quick call to your child's teacher after the conclusion of a long-term project or class play shows acknowledgement and appreciation — two characteristics of supportive teams. The more often team members celebrate together, the stronger the relationship grows. As a teacher and a mom, Dee Moran knows the importance of celebrating achievement. "Our six-year-old likes being recognized for his achievements," she says. "The simplest words of praise and acknowledgment leave him proud for days. Julie, our 13-year-old, typically opts for a more subtle approach to celebration, preferring to spend a night out with friends at the movies after bringing a successful semester to a close. Celebrating achievements both small and large keeps everyone moving forward."

Bringing the valued members of your team together, both at home and in the community, allows your vision to become a reality. Celebrating the fulfillment of a vision inspires motivation for continued success. Enjoy the year ahead with your family.

Joe Bruzzese, is a leading expert for the middle school years, author of A Parent's Guide to the Middle School Years and co-founder of Thinking-Forward.com, the online resource for families during the middle school years. He can be reached at joe@Thinking-ForwardTV.com.