

Beth Bruno, school psychologist and freelance writer, just released the book *Wild Tulips*, a collection of entertaining stories about raising and reaching children, told from her perspectives as mother, stepmother and educator. For autographed copies of *Wild Tulips*, send email to: bbruno@snet.net.

Are Dad's Welcome in Our Schools?
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QUESTION: The principal of our local elementary school is a woman; all of the teachers are female. Few fathers attend Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. Playground and classroom volunteers are mostly women, too. I see dads with their kids everywhere else: at the mall, at library story hours, in restaurants, on the athletic fields and on family vacations. Why aren't there more men in our schools - most noticeably absent in early childhood and elementary schools?

ANSWER: Good question. I have worked in early childhood and elementary education for years and notice the same thing - few male teachers and steadily more female administrators (a distinct change from the previous pattern of mostly male administrators at all levels). But this professional phenomenon certainly has nothing to do with the fact that too few fathers are actively involved in schools their children attend. Now that more dads stay at home as primary caregivers these days, and more businesses promote active parenting with liberal family leave policies, why aren't dads more visible in the schools?

Maybe dads don't feel welcome in our schools.

Consider the following situation. In January a fifth grade boy (let's call him Sam) transferred to a K-5 school where I worked as a school psychologist. Fist fights, rebelliousness, poor academic performance, suspensions and detentions dotted Sam's record. We decided to place him with an experienced male teacher (there were actually two male fifth grade teachers at the school) who had been successful working with angry, aggressive students.

After Sam had spent a week or so in class getting acclimated and meeting everyone, we invited his parents to spend a few hours at the school, observing in class for part of the day and meeting with teachers and support staff. His parents had been divorced for several years and asked to come in on different days. The mother came in first. Sam took her on a tour of the school and introduced her to the teacher and some of his classmates. She also spent some time in class with him. She then met with the principal, Sam's classroom teacher and me while the children were at lunch and recess. She told us that Sam came home with good reports, saying he liked his new school. However,

that was his pattern, she said. He seemed to start every year doing well but soon got himself into trouble by mouthing off to teachers and getting into fights with peers.

The following day Sam's father came in and followed the same routine. During our meeting with him, he gave his impressions of the school and we told him about the curriculum and homework expectations. After about ten minutes of conversation, the father pushed away from the table, folded his arms across his chest and looked intently at each one of us before saying, "OK, what's the real reason you asked me to come here? What kind of trouble is Sam in now?"

We were surprised to find out that Sam's father, the non-custodial parent but one who spent weekends with his son, had never been personally invited to any school unless Sam was in trouble. The mom was always invited to school functions, conferences and field trips. She was called about problem behaviors, too, but the dad always got the calls for disciplinary action and nothing else. His sense of outrage and lack of trust were palpable.

Sam was still the same boy with a short fuse and hot temper, but he never got into serious trouble while attending that school. I think our outreach to both parents made the difference. We changed a stereotype that day and made a point thereafter to involve dads in other ways.

To make your school more father-friendly:

Address every piece of correspondence to each parent by name. If parents live in separate residences, send separate invitations to each of them. If the correspondence is a memo about daily homework or upcoming events, a memo addressed to both mom and dad makes a big difference to every father who reads it. If there is another person deeply involved in the child's education, such as a nanny, grandparent, aunt, uncle or neighbor, personalize messages to include those people, with the permission of the parents.

Start a regular "fathers day" at the school, or a "fathers afternoon" and ask dads to write it into their schedules and come in for as many of those afternoons (or mornings) as possible. Plan lessons around their participation. Give them specific responsibilities, so they don't simply stand around and watch, feeling awkward. In one school where I worked, every Wednesday afternoon was "open house" for parents, both fathers and mothers. Parents were an integral part of the school and felt welcome, because they knew they could drop in on any Wednesday afternoon and be part of their child's program. We planned science labs and other 'hands-on' projects for those afternoons, so the helping hands of parents were always welcome. It was a natural time to schedule parent conferences, school plays and other special events. The whole community knew about Wednesday parent afternoons, so it was part of the fabric of life there.

Dads whose schedules don't allow for visits during the school day may agree to help with late afternoon, evening or weekend events. My son-in-law, an entrepreneur who works long hours in a start-up business, is a fantastic salesman. When his son's school needed help to raise funds for new playground equipment, he worked the phones and the community business network, successfully raising thousands of dollars to build a new playground.

There are dozens of ways to welcome parents into the school community and encourage their participation in their child's education. The outreach needs to come from the teachers, support staff and administrators in the schools. As a parent myself, I wanted to be involved but didn't want to be seen as a nosy, overprotective or "difficult" parent. So I frequently offered to help out but wasn't pushy about it. I always appreciated direct invitations from teachers who valued my contributions and made me feel welcome and part of their overall program and educational plan for my children. Let's make that special effort to involve the dads and keep it going through middle school and high school.