

# Secrets That Build Parent Involvement

*Savvy tips and tricks to get parents more interested in volunteering, and get more out of them when they do.*

## 1. Focus on New Families

The PTA at Flint Hill Elementary in Vienna, Va., has a position called the new family ambassador who is responsible for tracking and then contacting new families. The ambassador emails families weekly about school and community events.

“Many times I simply repeat the information on the PTA’s website,” says Stephanie Schubring, the new family ambassador. “You can never hear things enough when you are new and overwhelmed. I encourage new families to either email me or call me whenever they have a question so they don’t get frustrated trying to figure out who to ask.” She also distributes welcome packets and organizes four get-togethers each year for new families.

*Ideas:* Host a dinner for new families and have current families strategically sit with them. Make a link on your website just for new parents (or K-2) who have the most questions

## 2. Tap Into Parents’ Expertise

One of the most effective approaches in recruiting parents is to find ways to apply their talents and interests. At Peirce School in Arlington, Mass., a “time and talents” list filled out by parents provides a starting point. Word-of-mouth communication helps expand the pool of those with a particular interest or skill. Then comes the personal approach. “I’ll go up to someone and say ‘I heard you’re an excellent baker; would you be willing to make a loaf of bread for the bake sale?’” says PTO copresident Susan Goetcheus. “Sometimes people don’t realize what they know, or they don’t realize it would be something useful to bring to the school.”

## 3. Offer a Variety of Ways and Times to Volunteer

If you can offer multiple ways to become involved, parents will be more likely to volunteer. Since most parents aren’t available during school hours, they would be more likely to take on tasks they can do from home or from work, during the evening or on the weekend. Allowing parents to identify the extent to which they can be involved gives them control of their time and lets them know they won’t be bombarded with requests they’ll have to refuse.

After hearing from working moms who felt bad that they didn’t have time to volunteer during the day, Flint Hill parent leaders created a volunteer pool, similar to a temp service. Parents who have signed up to be part of the pool can be called on for short-term or last-minute needs to pitch in if they can. They might be asked to help during crunch time before the school’s annual 5K and Fun Run by stuffing race bags and organizing T-shirts on a Tuesday night for two hours. Or they might be called upon if someone drops out of helping with the school’s Thanksgiving lunch or staffing the new family table at back-to-school night.

*Idea:* On your volunteer sign-up forms, ask parents to specify a commitment level they’re comfortable with. Parents sign up for one-time events or make monthly or weekly commitments.

#### 4. Ask, Then Ask Again

A direct, personal request to get involved is best. Even if someone says no, they still might be responsive if you ask again with a slightly different proposal. “Last year I approached one mom I thought would do a good job as a vice president,” says Stetzenbach. “She said no, that she was intimidated to be a VP. I ended up calling her back when I found someone to be a co-VP. Sometimes people do need a little push.”

But if a parent’s circumstances make volunteering impossible, accept the refusal graciously. One way to do this is to ask them to recommend someone else. Then thank them for the recommendation. The person will feel good to have been of help, and those good feelings might translate into a desire to volunteer when the person is able.

#### 5. Support Your Volunteers and Their Ideas

Once someone has volunteered, it’s vital to support them, especially if they have stepped into a leadership role. That means allowing them the freedom to run an event the way they want to, even if that’s not how it was done before. “When people decide to chair, they deserve to have artistic license to run it the way they choose as long as they follow school rules,” Hodgson says. “It’s their show; you shouldn’t micromanage.”

*Idea:* Have your volunteer come with you to pitch an idea to the principal

#### 6. Think Like a Parent

Offer activities that will make life easier for busy parents, such as dinner or talks on topics of interest. The Flint Hill PTA holds short meetings followed by speakers such as a police officer addressing cyberbullying and a professional tutor. Parents also appreciate opportunities to get to know other parents.

In addition, don’t focus on attendance at PTO meetings as a sign of involvement. “I have a lot of people who say they can’t go to a PTO meeting,” Hodgson says. “I say, ‘I can help you. I can give your report at the meeting. You can do the flyer at home or recruit volunteers. That’s a great obstacle breaker. I’m surprised by how many parents want to help but can’t get out of the house at night or be at meetings during the day. We have to be creative in ways to help them volunteer.’”

*Idea:* Wear name tags so people get to know as a leader and display your contact info broadly.

#### 7. Say Thanks

Sometimes there’s such a focus on completing a project that individual thank-yous get overlooked. But everyone likes to feel appreciated, so make sure that you express your gratitude to everyone who volunteered. “We can’t say thank you enough,” Stetzenbach says. “When we see parents we’ll say, ‘That display case looks great’ or ‘You did a great job with Family Fun Day.’” Hodgson makes those thank-yous a part of every communication. “Every time I send an email to a chair or a volunteer, no matter what it is, I thank them for their effort or idea or hard work,” she says. “It’s the easiest, smallest thing.”

*Idea:* Host a thank you note writing party to hand-write notes to staff, volunteers, parents.