



# CHALLENGE



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A Herff Jones IMPACT Resource for Students

## Tapping into Parent Power

In elementary school, parents are usually very involved with classroom activities. They volunteer to help with art class or computer lab, help the teacher with reading practice, and get involved with PTA activities. When they see their parents at school, elementary kids often run up for a hug, excited to see them. But by the time students reach middle school, they are less interested in having their parents be involved and more interested in establishing their independence. Parental involvement usually tapers off until parents are relegated to a small role—they cheer from the stands at games, chaperone the Homecoming dance, watch the fall play.

Savvy student leaders though realize that parents can play a more active role in supporting student activities. Getting parents involved in the planning and implementation of projects has several benefits for student leaders and their organizations:

- Working side by side with parents on a project helps build some common ground between them and helps

parents and teens see each other as valuable resources.

- Parents who are involved in student activities see their kids in a different setting and come to appreciate their skills and talents more.
- Getting parents involved in projects gives students many positive adult role models.



- Students who work with parents on projects develop valuable educational and employment contacts.
- Parents who are involved in student activities are more likely to support them when programs are considered for budget cuts.
- On a practical note, getting parents involved may help prevent parental grumbling about involved students never being at home. Involved parents understand the level

of commitment needed to make activities successful.

### Getting Started

So, how do you engage parents to become active supporters of your student organization?

**Invite parents to participate in activities.** Don't limit yourself to only asking parents to chaperone dances or show up for parent nights. Invite them to do some nitty-gritty work, too. Ask them to help collect donations for a silent auction, paint backdrops for a skit, staff tables at a blood drive, or bring food to an evening work session. Make parental participation an element in class competitions, with bonus points for classes that involve parents.

**Tap into parental talents.** Conduct a survey of students to find out what their parents are good at. Send a letter to parents asking if they would be willing to share their time and talents and give them options for doing so. Then use the information gathered to get parents to teach personal safety workshops after school, create displays for a health fair, present lunchtime seminars on

topics of interest to students, and so forth. Ask a parent who owns a floral shop to teach students how to make flower displays for prom decorations.

**Look for ways to involve parents.** Once you have assembled the information about parental talents, don't stash it away in a filing cabinet and forget about it. Consult it during planning sessions for every activity. How can involving parents make that activity more successful? Which parents have skills and access to resources that could help make planning the activity easier for student leaders? Consider appointing a parent adviser for each major committee who would be available for help and support.

**Make the involvement meaningful.** Parents—like student members—will become disenchanted with their involvement in your group if you only hit them up for monetary or material support. Those things are necessary, but keeping in mind that people tend to support what they help create, try to allow parents to feel some ownership in the activities. This is a tricky area though, as you don't want the parents to take control of the activities.

One idea for increasing meaningful involvement is to create an Activities Advisory Committee comprised of students,

parents, and faculty members. This group could meet 2–4 times per year to discuss the overall activities program and make recommendations for improving activities for all students.

**Recognize their contributions.** Thank the parents who have been involved with personal notes that specify how their contribution helped your project. Be sure you explain how their participation benefited not only their own child,

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but many other students as well. Small tokens of appreciation and recognition at PTA and other appropriate meetings are also appreciated. A “Parent of the Year” award for the most supportive parent could be awarded at the end of year banquet for your organization.

For a busy student leader, taking the time to get parents involved might seem like it's more work than it's worth. But when you stop to consider all the advantages to your organization and its members, tapping into parent power just makes sense.

## **Partnering with Adults**

Mixing youth and adult experiences and energy can be an exciting, fun way to extend your group's efforts. It takes time and flexibility to work together, especially if adults and students are not used to working together as partners. Students should keep the following tips in mind when working with adults:

**DO speak up!**

**DO** commit time and energy to the project.

**DO** take your responsibilities seriously.

**DO** invite your friends along. Community service is for everyone!

**DO** show up to meetings on time.

**DO** have confidence in your abilities. You live in the community—that makes you an expert, too!

**DON'T** be afraid to ask questions.

**DON'T** expect to have everyone agree with everything you say.

**DON'T** over-commit or promise to do things you don't have the time to do.

**DON'T** hesitate to be creative and make unique suggestions.

**DON'T** be afraid to make a mistake!

*Source: Join Hands Day Action Guide (Naperville, Ill.: Join Hands Day Action Center, 2000).*