Parents reveal how they feel about becoming involved when their child enters secondary school. Their responses may help you understand your parent participation.

**Parents and Secondary Schools**

Unfortunately, saying it doesn’t make it so. If we want parents to help us educate young people, we must define what parental involvement should look like and construct a model of parental involvement that best fits the parents of secondary students.

We often have a mental picture of parental involvement that may be useful during the elementary years of the child’s life but that is inappropriate for the older, secondary years. When asked to describe parental involvement, many people would include such activities as visiting the school, helping with homework, knowing the teachers, and volunteering for school events. But for various reasons—such as the greater traveling distance to the secondary school; the complexity of the secondary subject matter; the challenge of dealing with many teachers; and most of all, the ever-changing nature of the parent-child relationship—this picture of elementary school parental involvement is not valid for secondary schools.

**Parental Roles in Secondary Schools**

The scarcity of research on secondary parental involvement, in contrast to the amount of research on elementary involvement, is a clue that secondary school parental involvement is a much less-frequent phenomenon.
However, parental involvement in the child’s school life—usually his or her main social world—is important during the secondary years. The attitudes that students form during these years will probably determine much of their success in life. Further, because school environments are often where the temptation to experiment sexually and misuse drugs may appear, it is easy to understand the need for parents or guardians to play a significant role in a student’s life, both in and out of school.

Fortunately, we are moving toward a better appreciation that teens welcome their parents’ intervention in their lives. This wish may be hidden by their outward exhibitions of protest against any parental intrusions. Recently, a series of TV ads creatively portrayed the contrast between a girl’s outward reaction to her parent’s questions about her plans and her inner reaction toward this parental show of interest (see figure 1). If this contrast reflects reality, parents are well advised to avoid being deterred by the protestations of the young, no matter how vociferous. In fact, teens usually welcome their parents’ help as they navigate the challenges of secondary school.

But although the need is great, parents are often at a loss when it comes to identifying effective ways to help their teens with these school challenges. If the familiar elementary model of parental involvement does not fit these years, what model will? One of the more detailed attempts to contrast elementary and secondary parental involvement was suggested by a pair of researchers, Gotts and Purnell (1987).

Examining the Validity of Gotts-Purnell Models
Two strong contrasts exist between the Gotts-Purnell elementary and secondary models (see figure 2). In the elementary model, parents are attracted to the school by its
was so low that school personnel should not expect much involvement from parents. Many parents were unaware of the parent groups associated with the school; some parents said they were discouraged from participation in school groups because their presence at school embarrassed their child. Some parents also mentioned that because they trusted their older children more, they felt less need to be involved. Therefore, the parents admitted a lack of involvement in secondary group activities and expressed little prospect of increasing their involvement.

Monitoring School Programs
This characteristic has extensive implications for school personnel. The interviews showed that parents monitored school programs in two primary ways: through the school newsletter and through teacher-parent conferences held on specified days each semester. Most parents read the newsletter and found the information valuable, especially when it focused on teaching strategies and openly discussed school problems that the parents may have heard about initially through the grapevine. Parents appreciated the days set aside for teacher-parent conferences because teachers were free to spend time with the parents and because many parents would be at the school, students would not be embarrassed by their parents' attendance. As one mother said, “Because of the conferences, parents feel invited to come. Otherwise, you feel like you're intruding on the teachers if you come during a normal school day.”

Parents said that the information on a report card is limited and that “by talking to the teacher you can learn more.” Parents also wanted to know what kind of people surround their child and their attitudes toward their child. By scheduling full-day or evening conferences, schools take the lead and make a strong statement about their commitment to inviting the parents to become partners in education.

Teacher Contacts
In addition to the conference days, parents of secondary students wanted to maintain close contact with school personnel through telephone calls. Calls from teachers,
counselors, or administrators that alert parents to a possible problem—whether of an academic or social nature—were especially appreciated. When parents became aware of problems, they often initiated this phone contact. Parents also appreciated hearing about problems they were unaware of or hearing information that reinforced their suspicions about their child’s behavior outside of school. I have known teachers who make short introductory calls to the homes of all their students at the beginning of each school year. These teachers report that parents are very appreciative of these calls and are more cooperative if the teacher should need to call later in the year with a problem.

**Academic Focus**
The responses regarding this characteristic were the most divergent from the Gotts-Purnell secondary model. The parents were much more involved with ongoing grade reports and monitored homework much more closely. Although they admitted that they often felt inadequate to assist their children with the homework, they did check...
with both the student and the teacher to ensure that homework was being done. Many parents minimized the school’s responsibility to help students explore careers, but they did expect the school to help “with the mechanics of getting into college and securing scholarships.”

**Conduct and Discipline**

The parents’ responses to questions about student conduct and discipline were the most surprising to me. Many parents insisted that they do not expect the schools to handle serious discipline problems. Rather, they asked the school to inform them of problems so they could work with their children to eliminate the problems. For many years, I have heard teachers and administrators assume that the burden of handling discipline problems was solely the school’s responsibility and that we could not expect much help from home. In contrast, the interviews with parents showed that parents realize that the options available to schools to solve discipline problems are limited and that parents had more leverage in effecting a behavioral change.

In addition, parents expressed concern that teenagers behaving inappropriately in the classroom may demand the resources and cooperation of a variety of people. These responses indicated that a team approach involving parent, teacher, student, counselor, or other psychological resources, with each having equal input into the solution, may be necessary. The parents’ loudest appeal was for schools to be active partners in their child’s education; for many parents having the school communicate with them at the early signs of a problem was a priority issue.

**School Events and Outcomes**

Parents consistently said that when their child is performing in a school event, they might attend the activity. But a few parents said they did not attend these events because of the travel distance or because the child requested that they not attend. The survey responses showed that if a student does not participate in any of these events, the parents did not attend any school events other than the teacher-parent conferences. Therefore, the responses suggest that attempting to increase parental involvement in school events may bring about only minimal results.

**Attendance Focus**

Parents had high praise for the school’s job of informing them of attendance irregularities. In addition to providing attendance information in the student’s report card, parents also said that the school had been faithful in calling them when their children were absent and many parents reported that individual teachers had called about student absences. It is clear that if a school wants parents to assist with attendance, it must institute a procedure to give the parents timely information about any attendance irregularities. The data gathered in these interviews led me to revise the Gotts-Purnell Secondary Model of Parent Involvement (see figure 3).

**Policy Implications for Secondary Schools**

Parental involvement is often invisible in secondary schools. The physical absence of parents from the school is not a reliable indication of the extent to which parents are involved in their child’s education. Parents who said they never came to the school often reported being very active in monitoring the child’s progress. School can assist parents in the less visible forms of involvement by communicating with them by phone, suggesting ways that parents can help with and monitor homework, quickly reporting any changes in student behavior, and frequently notifying parents of attendance irregularities.

Parents do not find either general-purpose parent groups or special-purpose groups very valuable. School personnel should consider whether efforts to increase parent attendance at group meetings is the most efficient and effective use of school resources to increase parental involvement.

The mid-semester conference day is an important and valued opportunity for parents to communicate with teachers and become involved in their child’s education. Even parents who had not regularly attended these conferences voiced their support of this practice. Many parents mentioned that they are uncomfortable attempting to communicate with teachers at another unscheduled time. Any secondary school that does not schedule opportunities for parents to confer with teachers outside of the regular school day fails to provide an opportunity that many parents value.

Parents want discipline to be a three-way process, which includes the involvement of the student. Parents also want quick notification of behavior problems and changes in behavior. Schools that exclude the parent in working with a student discipline problem or wait until the problem becomes too serious neglect a potentially valuable resource.

Many parents find frequent telephone contact very helpful. Parents find the calls they get from teachers and counselors—about both positive and negative aspects of their child’s school performance—to be valuable.
## Figure 3

### A New Secondary School Model of Parent Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Characteristics</th>
<th>Relations occur at a distance with parent monitoring work; involvement is staying informed, often by phone.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group Involvement</td>
<td>Parents find this involvement unimportant and, at best, will support special groups in which the child participates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring School Program</td>
<td>Parents find the newsletter helpful; believe visits are a very valuable way to communicate; visit the school when the school invites parents to talk to the teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Contact</td>
<td>Parents want telephone and mail contact with the teachers and they will initiate this contact when there is a particular need or to assess student performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Focus</td>
<td>Parents check report cards and monitor student homework; some parental interest in college-prep programs and postsecondary preparation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct and Discipline</td>
<td>Parents want to be quickly informed of any inappropriate behavior; believe it is the parents’ job to handle serious discipline problems; believe problems require a team approach to find a solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Events and Outcomes</td>
<td>Parents attend sport, musical, or other events when their child is involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Focus</td>
<td>Parents rely on the school to report on attendance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### Conclusion

The responses of the parents in this study, the suggested model of secondary school parental involvement, and the study’s policy implications give substance to the oft-repeated phrase parental involvement. This is no longer just a buzzword; it now includes a plan for achieving the goal of increased parental involvement.

### References