

# Reaching Out to New Parents

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by Laura Ness

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It takes a special effort to attract parents new to the school; a good first impression will make them more likely to become active members of your PTO.

by Laura Ness

Here it is, the new school year. The first order of business for many parent groups is recruiting new members. After all, there are parties to throw, fundraisers to organize, and teacher luncheons to host. A healthy membership roster lightens the load on everybody. But if you want to attract one likely source of new members, parents who are new to the school, it will take a special effort. After all, they know little about the school and nothing about your group. Your first steps to reach out to them are vital in determining whether they will become contributing members of the PTO.



Most of your members probably recall their first interaction with the PTO. If the organization made a positive first impression, they were more inclined to become active. Interest in the PTO must be fostered. It usually takes a series of positive experiences before a parent's comfort level rises. The key is to develop a relationship with parents.

## First Contact

Much research has been done on why people join volunteer organizations. In general, it comes down to two things: a sense of philanthropy and a desire to feel they belong to something.

A parent new to the school benefits from contact with other parents. The PTO's main goal may be to work cooperatively with other parents and teachers to form a better school, but its other inherent function is to fill that natural human need to be part of a community of parents. Anyone who has worked on a PTO committee knows that you don't just walk away from the experience with the sense of a job well done; you meet and often befriend other parents. You also come away with the names of good babysitters, the dish on the best field trips to attend, and the names of good restaurants that you can actually take your kids to.

Judy Swan, past president of the West Oakview Elementary School PTA in Grand Rapids, Mich., admits to having a rather negative experience at her first parent group meeting. "The first PTA meeting I went to, the

board spent time deciding where they were going to go afterward for drinks. To me that was a real turnoff." Swan did not go back to a meeting until she was personally invited by another member.

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The most obvious group of potential new recruits, and the easiest to target, is parents of kindergartners. Many of these have school-aged children for the first time in their lives. They don't know about the mysteries of school policies, the longevity of head lice, and the magic of state standardized tests.

These parents need a personal introduction to the PTO. "From my own personal experience," says Swan, "personal contact is a biggie. Not until a current PTA member came up to me on the playground and personally invited me to consider being an officer did I even consider membership. But it takes a special person making the contact. This is a job not just anyone can do. If it were up to me, every parent would be contacted personally by a board member."

Parents new to a school are craving information. What seems like old hat to you is often Greek to them. Lori Swoboda, PTC president at Brookwood Elementary in Kentwood, Mich., believes strongly in attending her school's kindergarten information night. "I make it a point to shake every parent's hand and give them a copy of our PTC information sheet," she says. The sheet contains the group's mission statement, meeting times, and a list of past fundraising efforts.

Swoboda also makes a point to remind parents that she was in their shoes not too long ago. "A lot of these parents don't know anyone at the school, and it's so important to make a positive first impression." It is important to appeal to parents' sense of belonging. One PTA president told parents during a kindergarten information night, "When my kids first started school, I did not know what I was doing, and none of us do. It is wonderful to get together with other parents not only for the sake of the PTO but for the sake of just getting together."

Of course, not all parents of kindergartners are first-timers. With the rise of blended families and parents having children later in life, some of these parents have been through it all before. Don't forget about your veteran parents. While they may not have wanted to be PTO parents the first time around, many of them are ready to contribute in this phase of their lives.

You might also consider contacting parents who have enrolled their children in programs that are housed in your school building. For example, many elementary schools have a preschool program on site. Traditionally, these parents may not have been a part of the PTO, but they can provide a source of new members. It may be wise to ask your school principal if they may be included in your organization. The earlier in a child's school career parents get involved, the more they can contribute. Also, some PTOs advertise their activities at local preschools.

## **New Arrivals**

Another group of newbies is those parents new to the school district but with no children in kindergarten. These parents are not always easy to pick out. That's why it's helpful to have one member in frequent contact with the school secretary. The secretary usually knows how many families have moved into the district.

To make finding these families easier and to avoid problems with confidentiality laws, have the person who enrolls new families ask them to sign a waiver saying that the PTO may contact them. The form

immediately goes into the PTO box, and you have the information you need to reach out to new families as soon as they enroll.

A phone call or personal note welcoming a new parent to the community means a lot. New families are often quite interested in reaching out to meet others and to become acquainted with their new surroundings. Parents are more likely, however, to attend a meeting if they know at least one person there.

During the last school year, Swan, then PTA president at West Oakview Elementary, noticed that her school had more and more new families moving into the district. In this suburban and slightly urban school, about 30 families had either moved into the district or chosen to attend West Oakview through a school choice program.

She decided to put together a welcome bag for parents who were new to the school. "I wanted to try to make the new families feel more comfortable in a new environment and help them become acclimated to their community at large by providing them with information," she says.

Swan began by assessing what might be of interest to parents in her particular school. Then she contacted local businesses, the police department, and other agencies to find out what materials they offered to parents. The sheriff's department, in particular, supplied a wealth of free information: a card with important phone numbers, neighborhood watch details, a pamphlet on pedestrian and traffic safety, and more. Like many public agencies, the sheriff's department had a stack of information for parents but no good means to pass it on to them.

One of the most popular items in the packet was a refrigerator magnet printed with the school calendar. Listed on the calendar were important dates in the school year, such as half-days and parent-teacher conferences. The calendar also listed the dates and times of PTA meetings. The magnets were supplied by a vendor called Magnet Street.

Swan placed the materials in plastic bags, which were distributed during open house. She gave extra bags to the school secretary and social counselor. Both requested the bags to pass out to new parents. Parents who were new to the community said they found the information useful.

The next welcome bag may contain more information on school policies, says Swan. Many parents said that more information on policies related to busing would have been helpful. They found the magnet most useful.

Swan says the bag alone did not bring in new members of the PTA. It did bring parents in to volunteer at the school, and this often is the first step taken before PTA membership. The packet was a great way to say "welcome to our school and to our community," she says.

## **Overcoming Objections**

New parents often are leery of joining a parent group, worrying that they might be getting into a bigger commitment than they can handle. "We are in an area where there are a lot of single-parent homes," says Swan. "Many parents are trying to make ends meet, and time is limited. We are trying to reach out to make them see that there is little time commitment involved, and they get so much in return for their membership."

Swoboda of Brookwood Elementary assures parents that there are several opportunities to contribute to the PTC. "We have a system of sign-up sheets that allows parents to know exactly what the time commitment will be for their service," she says. "These sign-up sheets provide a detailed description of each volunteer opportunity and the time commitment required. We place these sheets around during

school open house, kindergarten information nights, and our first ice cream social."

The ice cream social coincides with the first PTC meeting of the year. Families are invited to this event. The PTC provides ice cream to the families, and a brief PTC meeting follows. Attendance is large, and the volunteer sign-ups are posted everywhere. Volunteers watch the children on the playground during the meeting. "We keep the meeting brief; this is not the time to go over the budget," says Swoboda. "We discuss our mission statement and try to generate a general interest in the PTC. The principal also speaks briefly. Parents get an idea of what our meetings look like."

Swoboda hands out an information pamphlet that lists the mission statement, meeting times, and the year's events. The ice cream social always results in increased attendance at the next PTC meeting.

At the beginning of the school year, parents tend to have a lot of energy and have not yet allocated all of their time. With a simple gesture like providing free ice cream for families, the PTC attracts parents who otherwise would not attend a school function. They hike up to their child's school to eat some ice cream, and the parent group has a great shot at tapping into the energy created by the new school year.

While parents may not join as a direct result of this one event, gestures like this often spark interest and foster later participation in the organization. So start early, make individual contact, and remember to have fun. Parents are looking for a welcoming atmosphere, and PTOs are the perfect organizations to offer just that.

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