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The Role of Parent Involvement in Cooperative Preschool Programs

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Parent involvement in children's out of home experiences has long been heralded as positive for both parent and child. Research suggests that parent participation in a child's preschool program is positively associated with social adjustment and school performance.¹ With the increase of families where employment and other commitments reduce both the time and the common experiences a child and parent share, parent involvement may be more important than ever.²

Parent involvement is an integral, if not central component of cooperative child care and child development programs. At the helm of the cooperative program is an elected parent board of directors. Parents make programmatic and financial decisions about the cooperative. The director of the preschool program, an early childhood educator, works closely with parents and often serves as an advisory, non-voting board participant.

Parent involvement in the cooperative encourages dialogue between the parent and early childhood educator that focuses on the child. The ongoing, simultaneous interaction of parent, child and early childhood educator has something to offer each member of the triad. The parent is exposed to knowledge about how children develop, problem prevention and discipline strategies, and age appropriate behavior expectations that encourage more effective parenting. The parent has the opportunity to see how these principles and strategies are implemented by observing the early childhood educator. The arrangement allows parents to ask questions and to 'try out' new strategies in a supportive environment. The early childhood educator benefits in the cooperative because she is able to see the practical elements of her own education and develop 'hands on' approaches to sharing this knowledge and experience. She is also able to more fully know the child and his or her individual needs by sharing information with the parent. At the center of the triad is the child who benefits from the supportive linkages of home and preschool and shares important life experiences with his/her parent.

The involvement of parents in cooperative preschool programs vary depending on the type of program. In cooperative nursery schools, parents are usually expected to spend a substantial amount of time in direct classroom participation. Parents who belong to day care cooperatives are typically involved more in administrative and service roles. Positive aspects that both cooperative arrangements share include:

- environments that provide sympathetic, responsive support systems for parents and their children
- opportunities for parent and child development
- parental involvement in the early education of their child

¹Powell, D. *Families and Early Childhood Programs*. NAEYC: 1989.

²This may be particularly true for infants and preschool aged children. See for example: Bronfenbrenner, U. *The Ecology of Human Development* (chap. 9 &10). Harvard University Press: 1979. Karen, R. "Becoming Attached" in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Feb., 1990: 35-68. Powell, D. *Families and Early Childhood Programs*. NAEYC: 1989.

- opportunities for parents to interact with one another
- increased continuity between a child's home and preschool experiences
- parental involvement in financial aspects of the program encourage quality care at reduced costs