

## ABC's of Male Involvement

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*By Deborah Walsh and Marilyn Ferdinand*

A = Ask

Asking men. Nearly half the men polled said they were not asked to join PTA. As with every "sales pitch," asking for their membership is the strongest tool you have to get men involved in PTA.

Understand that sending a form through the "backpack express" or a flier on the PTA table at a school open house is not a very effective "ask." A real "ask" is personal and powerful. Show enthusiasm and draw on your experiences. Don't apologize for asking, and be prepared to say what your PTA is doing to help their children. Most important, make the message meaningful to men.

According to the survey, men join "to work to improve the school to benefit my child." Comments by the survey participants said that they tell men to join to:

- "Be active in your child's life"
- "Be involved with your child"
- "Help your child"
- "PTA benefits your child."
- "PTA membership is good for your child."
- "PTA supports your child."
- "PTA involvement shows your child you are interested in school and education."
- "PTA involvement shows you support the school and teacher."
- "Education is important."

The overall message should be, "Your child benefits when you join PTA."

Asking women. More than 90 percent of survey participants said their wives or significant others were already members and greatly contributed to their involvement with PTA. Yet, overall, only 50 percent of women claim their spouse is a member.

An obvious strategy for getting more men to participate is to encourage their wives to ask them. You can also modify your membership form to include spaces for the names of moms, dads, grandmothers, grandfathers, and so forth. This step can serve as a reminder that anyone can join PTA. You could also offer membership incentives, such as a drawing for a local spa treatment for every mom who recruits a male family member to join.

Ask for partners. Male community members participate in various organizations and activities, such as Kiwanis, YMCA, and Little League. The men surveyed also suggested PTA invite male speakers from typically male organizations to speak at PTA meetings about what their organizations do—and then ask for the same invitation to their groups. PTA leaders can contact these organizations to initiate joint projects, such as fundraisers, blood drives, and teen nights. Through such partnerships, you can demonstrate PTA's value to men and gain a valuable opportunity to ask them to join.

## B = Bend

One size does not fit all in meeting the needs of PTA members, particularly men. Unless your unit is brimming with male PTA members, what you are doing is not working. Therefore, it is essential that you bend, that is, be flexible in your actions and thinking.

The top reason men in our survey gave for not joining PTA was time. In fact, general membership surveys PTA does regularly all say that time is the top reason why all survey participants do not join PTA. But what does time have to do with signing up as a member, paying dues, and carrying a membership card? The fact is that most people think that to belong to PTA means they have to volunteer.

Be flexible when signing up new members by differentiating member from volunteer. Members who do not volunteer show support for PTA's work, increase the morale of volunteers, add strength to PTA's voice at local school board meetings, provide funds to help PTA do its work, and so forth. Members can and do emerge as volunteers. But members and volunteers are two different things.

Men not only want to know if membership equals volunteering, but almost half of the men surveyed said they would volunteer if their roles and expectations were clearly defined. For these survey participants PTA membership and volunteering are not social activities—these men want results.

Men also want to join organizations that reflect their preference in programs, and will volunteer for programs that use their skills. Can your PTA bend to accommodate men's preferences? Can you clearly define roles, differentiate volunteer from member, state expected outcomes, and create programs that appeal to men?

Create activities that appeal to men. When survey participants were asked how to motivate other men to be involved, highly ranked was "activities or events aimed at dads." Suggestions for such activities included building projects, family events, and helping with children directly. Building projects could include classroom or school beautification and upgrades. Helping with children events could include bike rodeos, book fairs, lunch buddies, career days, Reflections, dads clubs, and father/daughter dances. Fun family events include barbecues and cook-outs, carnivals and fairs, proms and homecomings, talent shows, family movie nights, entertainment assemblies, and ice cream socials.

## C = Communicate

"C" stands for communication—the centerpiece of any effort to attract new members. What needs to be communicated? At every opportunity, communicate the value of PTA, the value of membership, the need for members, and the need for men.

Our survey asked men how to communicate effectively with them. Their #1 answer was male-oriented advertising. It is important to understand that men do not necessarily respond to "parent" as meaning "male" or "dad." They see it as any parent who is handling the family/school stuff, and often this is the mom. Therefore, communicate to dads (not parents) that they are welcome by addressing letters, announcements, and other communications to "moms and dads." Highlight opportunities and activities specifically for men.