

Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students & Their Families

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/welcomingstrategies.pdf>)

Starting a new school can be scary. Those concerned with mental health in schools can play important prevention and therapeutic roles by helping a school establish a welcoming program and ways to provide ongoing social support.

Special attention must be directed at providing Office Staff with training and resources so they can create a welcoming and supportive atmosphere to everyone who enters the school. And, of course, there must be workshops and follow-up assistance for teachers to help them establish welcoming procedures and materials.

Start simple. For example, assist teachers in establishing a few basic ways to help new students feel welcome and part of things, such as

- giving the student a *Welcome Folder*

A folder with the student's name, containing welcoming materials and information, such as a welcome booklet and information about fun activities at the school.
- assigning a *Peer Buddy*

Train students to be a special friend

 - > to show the new student around
 - > to sit next to the new student
 - > to take the new student to recess and lunch to meet schoolmates

Some parents are not sure how to interact with the school. Two ways to help new parents feel welcome and a part of things are to establish processes whereby teachers

- invite parents to a *Welcoming Conference*

This is meant as a chance for parents to get to know the teacher and school and for the teacher to facilitate positive connections between parent and school such as helping the parents connect with a school activity in which they seem interested. The emphasis is on *Welcoming* -- thus, any written material given out at this time specifically states WELCOME and is limited to simple orientation information. To the degree feasible, such material is made available in the various languages of those likely to enroll at the school.
- connect parents with a *Parent Peer Buddy*

Identify some parents who are willing to be a special friend to introduce the new parent around, to contact them about special activities and take them the first time, and so forth.

The following list are additional examples of prevention-oriented welcoming and social support strategies for minimizing negative experiences and ensuring positive outreach.

1. **FRONT DOOR:** Set up a Welcoming Table (identified with a welcoming sign) at the front entrance to the school and recruit and train volunteers to meet and greet everyone who comes through the door.
2. **FRONT OFFICE:** Work with the Office Staff to create ways to meet and greet strangers with a smile and an inviting atmosphere. Provide them with welcoming materials and information sheets regarding registration steps (with appropriate translations). Encourage the use of volunteers in the office so that there are sufficient resources to take the necessary time to greet and assist new students and families. It helps to have a designated registrar and even designated registration times.
3. **WELCOMING MATERIALS:** Prepare a booklet that clearly says WELCOME and provides some helpful info about who's who at the school, what types of assistance are available to new students and families, and offers tips about how the school runs. (Avoid using this as a place to lay down the rules; that can be rather an uninviting first contact.) Prepare other materials to assist students and families in making the transition and connecting with ongoing activities.
4. **STUDENT GREETERS:** Establish a Student Welcoming Club (perhaps the student council or leadership class can make this a project). These students can provide tours and some orientation (including initial introduction to key staff).
5. **PARENT/VOLUNTEER GREETERS:** Establish a General Welcoming Club of parents and/or volunteers who provide regular tours and orientations (including initial introduction to key staff). Develop a Welcoming Video.

6. **WELCOMING BULLETIN BOARD:** Dedicate a bulletin board (somewhere near the entrance to the school) that says WELCOME and includes such things as pictures of school staff, a diagram of the school and its facilities, pictures of students who entered the school during the past 1-2 weeks, information on tours and orientations, special meetings for new students, and so forth.
7. **CLASSROOM GREETERS:** Each teacher should have several students who are willing and able to greet strangers who come to the classroom. Recent arrivals often are interested in welcoming the next set of new enrollees.
8. **CLASSROOM INTRODUCTION:** Each teacher should have a plan to assist new students and families in making a smooth transition into the class. This includes ways to introduce the student to classmates as soon as the student arrives. (Some teachers may want to arrange with the office specified times for bringing a new student to the class.) An introductory Welcoming Conference should be conducted with the student and family as soon as feasible. A useful Welcoming aid is to present both the student and the family member with Welcoming Folders (or some other welcoming gift such as coupons from local businesses that have adopted the school).
9. **PEER BUDDIES:** In addition to the classroom greeter, a teacher can have several students who are trained to be a special buddy to a new student for a couple of weeks (and hopefully thereafter). This can provide the type of social support that allows a new student to learn about the school culture and how to become involved in activities.
10. **OUTREACH FROM ORGANIZED GROUPS:** Establish a way for representatives of organized student and parent groups (including the PTSA) to make direct contact with new students and families to invite them to learn about activities and to assist them in joining in when they find activities that appeal to them.
11. **SUPPORT GROUPS:** Offer groups designed to help new students and families learn about the community and the school and to allow them to express concerns and have them addressed. Such groups also allow them to connect with each other as another form of social support.
12. **ONGOING POSITIVE CONTACTS:** Develop a variety of ways students and their families can feel an ongoing connection with the school and classroom (e.g., opportunities to volunteer, positive feedback regarding participation, letters home that tell “all about what’s happening”)

For more on this topic, see the Center’s on-line clearinghouse quick find search topic:

Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcome
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

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