

Dealing with Sporadic Attendance in First Day School

by Beth Collea, Wellesley Meeting, New England Yearly Meeting

The problem of sporadic attendance in First Day School is common to large and small meetings. The number of school, sports, and enrichment activities available to children has expanded leaving them exhausted or otherwise engaged on Sunday mornings. Religious Education Committees have to work hard to creatively find ways to thrive in spite of these cultural pressures. To have a vibrant First Day School, we need to offer well-planned lessons, create opportunities for personal engagement, and work more explicitly at communicating with families and developing our sense of community. Here are some specific steps we've taken at Wellesley (MA) Monthly Meeting (NEYM) to connect more effectively with families and increase attendance.

- **Value attendance and say so.** Martha Pott, our preschool teacher, sent a letter home and ended it by noting how the children's friendships had been growing so nicely and it was important to attend so that this continued to happen. The next week nine children attended, a good number for us!
- **Welcome Back Letter.** Every fall, the year, who will be teaching and which class will meet where. This is a great chance to reconnect with families who have been out of touch.
- **Weekly Family Update.** Rebecca Grunko, Cambridge Meeting (NEYM), originally encouraged us to try this and it is probably the easiest and most effective thing you can do to improve attendance. Send out a brief email summary of First Day School lessons for Sunday on the preceding Friday. The Family Update motivates families and helps parents overcome possible resistance from children or the simple inertia to stay home. It also reestablishes ties with the program for children who have been absent. As an added bonus, parents can ask questions after the lessons to spark follow-up conversations.
- **Opportunities for personal engagement** ("put everyone to work"). Give parents and/or children a reason they need to return the next week. Ask them to bring in something special like a food eaten in Jesus' time (for a snack) or to report on attempts to resolve conflicts in a new way during the week. If people are involved, they are committed. (e.g., learning the rules of the kitchen). We explore their gifts and for our last class I bring in members of the meeting's committees to discuss the work of the meeting. Let's spend our time cooking a luscious feast of welcoming for those who are curious about who we are. Let's lead them home to Quakerism by focusing on them and their needs while drawing the map to guide them through Quaker culture and tradition. This is also the map that leads to our future. Let's travel it together in peace and love. An earlier version of this article appeared in the November 2005 issue of *Spark*, the New York Yearly Meeting newsletter.

- **Plan special events.** We offer two weeks of Worshipping Skills in the fall and the spring. Seasoned Friends meet with the children and talk about how they center, have experienced leadings in their lives, deal with distractions in worship, etc. These are high attendance weeks and even children in two-faith families make an effort to attend.
- **Build Community.** Plan events at different times and include offerings to help the whole family enjoy a Quaker activity together. Try a family movie night, a field trip, or service project. We host a Parents' Night Out every fall for parents of at least one child six years old or younger. The parents enjoy a potluck dinner in a nearby home and the young children have a companion dinner party at the meetinghouse. When the young parents develop friendships, they have another reason to get to meeting on Sunday morning.

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