

Families for R.E.A.L.

*Hawaii State Department of Education
Honolulu, Hawaii*

Families for R.E.A.L. is an elementary school-based family education/early childhood program for parents with children ages birth through five. Parents participate in the age-appropriate courses once a week for 10 weeks to gain and share information and skills. Because Families for R.E.A.L. programs are offered at elementary schools, parents and their young children connect with the school and resources in the community.

Unlike many federally-funded programs, there is no income restriction for participation in the program. Families from all socioeconomic backgrounds attend, learning from and with each other. In addition, the participant population represents a multicultural and economic cross-section of all families with young children. Families for R.E.A.L. has no eligibility requirements or fees that restrict attendance. In this way, parents realize that their own parenting concerns stem not from poverty or other social pressures, but from the fact that they have a young child.

Courses are offered at least three times a year. The six regular courses are divided by children's ages and also include a course for pregnant teens. In addition to the program's regular courses, special interest classes are offered on topics such as stress management, nutrition, and sibling rivalry. The program is based on Minnesota's model, "Early Childhood and Family Education Program."

Each course focuses on three common goals: empower parents in their nurturing and teaching roles of young children, strengthen the family, and develop community. Parents gain a keener understanding of early child develop-

ment and are able to identify physiological and environmental factors that can deter healthy child development and school readiness. They develop skills to enhance their children's learning process in emergent literacy. The course structures help families to build a network of friends, relatives, and community members to support themselves as parents and as individuals. Over the ten-week period, program participants develop a sense of family among one another and a connection with the school and community.

Families for R.E.A.L. assists parents to raise and teach their children more confidently and effectively. Each course includes a parent/child activity where parents practice what they learn in an environment that has been prepared for positive interaction. The children's behavior, interest, and activity during this hands-on experience serve as a reference point for the parent discussion portion of the program.

One parent participant summarized parents' reactions to Families for R.E.A.L.: "It is a little difficult to describe the feelings of such great satisfaction and happiness, to know that your children have learned something new and wonderful for the day, or the comfort and self-confidence we gain after each class in knowing more about how to help our children, and in knowing there is someone to help with difficulties or concerns we may have with our children or our family."

Elementary school teachers reported in a survey that Families for R.E.A.L. children and their parents transitioned into kindergarten more easily. "There is much talk about efforts to prepare children to begin kindergarten with

skills necessary to succeed in school. I think that Families for R.E.A.L. is a terrific step in this direction,” said a kindergarten teacher.

Also, Families for R.E.A.L. parents were far more involved with their children than those who did not participate. R.E.A.L. parents also continued their involvement as volunteers in the school setting and took an active role in reinforcing what children learned at school in the home. Many became active in organizing family and community activities at the school.

Each Family Support Services/Parent-Community Networking Center serves 350-400 families per year, or 750-800 regular participants. The cost of each site is approximately \$95,000 for staff, equipment, supplies, educational toys, and a parent library, approximately \$120 per participant.

The Centers provide the statewide administrative services, program and staff development, and curriculum support for this program. Staff members include an educational specialist, a resource teacher, and a part-time temporary teacher. Families for R.E.A.L. teachers are early childhood professionals and parents themselves. Master’s Degrees are the standard for teachers in this program.

The Family Support Office of the Hawaii State Department of Education envisions future establishment of fully developed Families for R.E.A.L. sites in each district. These sites would operate as they do now and, in addition, serve as the training and research sites to develop satellite sites throughout the state to provide access to all families of young children.

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