

Bridging the First Day School Absentee Gap

by Beth Collea, Wellesley Meeting, New England Yearly Meeting

A growing tension exists between our Quaker families and our culture of busyness and ‘round the clock scheduling. Caught between school sports and all of other choices that now exist on Sunday mornings, Quaker families often don’t prioritize meeting attendance. Needless to say, this is very discouraging for First Day School teachers who have worked hard to prepare a lesson. Irregular attendance also inhibits the formation of friendships among class members and the development of a sense of community. The more creative we can be as First Day School teachers about maintaining a connection with our families, the more successful we’ll be in our work to raise up the next generation of Quakers.

At Wellesley (MA) Meeting (NEYM), we’ve started playing with an idea we’re calling “Quaker Take-Out: First Day School Do-At-Home Activities.” It gives us a way to keep the Quaker connection going during multi-week gaps in attendance and as an added bonus it allows us to extend lessons beyond Sunday morning. We start with a Chinese food take-out container. You can purchase these on-line or at a party store. Any interesting small box or hand folded container will work. For the take-out activity, try a simple fill-in-the blank game to play at home. Our lower elementary teacher, Martha Pott, was teaching about George Fox and equality. She created a game so simple that a family can play it in the car! Take turns filling in the blank, “Even though some people _____ , we’re all the same under our skin.” Start families out with a completed example. Martha used, “Even though some people are fast readers and some people are slow readers, we’re all the same under our skin.” She included a set of small stickers for children to decorate the take-out box every time they came up with an answer.

The possibilities are endless. If you work on short periods of silent worship with kids (we call this “Listening in the Light”) you could create a Quaker Take-Out with a votive candle and some directions about starting family worship with just 30 seconds of silence for 3 to 4-year-olds and gradually increasing the time to a couple of minutes. Other ideas include: a guided meditation on the 23rd Psalm or the mind-in-a-jar activity from *Peaceful Piggy Meditation* , by Kerry Lee Maclean (Albert Whitman, 2006). For this one, include a small jar with a screw-on lid and some sand. Give directions to add sand and water to the jar and shake it. The sand is like thoughts that swirl around and cloud our minds. This is a lovely illustration of how becoming still can clear and open our minds. Try reading *Kindness Quilt*, by Nancy Elizabeth Wallace (Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 2006), in First Day School. (This book is appropriate for grades K thru 2.) In the Quaker Take-Out, send home nine squares of colored paper. Have the family think of kind acts they can perform and write one on each square and put them together to make a quilt pattern. I wouldn’t send Quaker Take-Out home more than about once a month to keep the idea fun and fresh.

Quaker Take-Out opens avenues of connection during times when a child is going to miss several consecutive weeks. Invite participation any way you can! Put a special letter to the child in the box with directions for participating in a service project that the class will be undertaking. It could be an ingathering of food at Thanksgiving, a shoe box of toiletries for a prison ministry at Christmas, or a class' decision to do extra chores at home to raise money for a relief effort. If you can find a Quaker theme that is illustrated through the passion that is occasioning the absence, so much the better. For baseball season, suggest children read *Let Them Play*, by Margot Theis Raven and Chris Ellison (Sleeping Bear Press, 2005). This picture book (grades 2–5) is about the all-Black little league team from South Carolina that traveled to Williamsport, PA in 1955 but was barred from playing in the World Series.

Often older children feel awkward about returning to meeting after a long absence. Anything you can do to clue them in and help them stay engaged will smooth the re-entry to First Day School. There is a wonderful secondary benefit of more actively linking the First Day School and the home. Through all of this, parents may come to value more highly their vital role in the faith formation of their children.

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