

Laying the Groundwork for Positive Relationships

More and more often these days, teachers are expressing concern about establishing and maintaining positive relationships with parents who may believe negative media reports about education.

As a new school year begins, consider using a variety of strategies that will demonstrate a desire to have effective communications with parents. Also, consider reviewing your best strategies with colleagues who may, in turn, provide excellent tips based on what has worked for them in your particular school community. Here are a few ideas to get started.

MAKE EARLY CONTACT

Look for opportunities to introduce yourself personally to parents as early as possible in the year. A telephone call is the best; and some teachers even call the week before school starts. If your first conversation is positive, parents will be less hesitant to bring concerns to you before they become problems. Explain what you want to achieve in your role as teacher and express your desire to work cooperatively.

An early call can also be used to identify key information about the family, such as when parents can be reached at work or home and who takes care of their children immediately after school. Likewise, an early call or letter can be used to communicate class routines and procedures for parent-teacher telephone calls and visits to the school or classroom.

If you make calls from your own home, remember to use the code *67 before dialing a number. That protects the privacy of your home number from appearing on “call display” screens; and it is free.

INVITE INPUT AND INFORMATION

Often after a child has been away from school for the summer or arrives new to a school in September, the parents have insights about student interests and abilities that have developed over the summer that can help you in developing your program.

In a call, note or letter, consider asking parents for help in identifying interests or activities that might serve as good motivators, or information about any concerns or setbacks that can be addressed early. For example, the parents might say: “We took a short trip on a neighbour’s sailboat; now she’s interested in sailors and ocean travel” or “He said he was worried about math being more difficult this year.”

MAINTAIN PROFESSIONALISM

Whether on the job or in the public eye, most teachers are respectful of their position in society as a role model to children and parents.

With parents often being in the school building or on school property throughout the day — attending meetings, visiting the classroom or volunteering — it is important that teachers maintain a level of professionalism that extends right into the staffroom and beyond the school day.

EXPLAIN HOW TO RAISE A CONCERN

In an early letter or newsletter, communicate the process you would like parents to follow in drawing any concerns to your attention. For example, clarify whether you prefer a handwritten note in a sealed envelope (confidentiality), a note in a student agenda or organizer, a telephone message through the office with the best time to call back, or another method. Then indicate how you will usually respond. This lets parents know they can approach you, rather than have them fret over a concern or problem until it gets more serious.

To ensure that communication does not break down through a third party, encourage parents to contact you directly with a query or concern.

COMMUNICATE YOUR DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES

Possibly at the same time, or in a distinct communication, explain:

- ▶ How you handle discipline in your program;
- ▶ How you identify inappropriate behaviour;
- ▶ What the range of consequences is;
- ▶ How you will let parents know if a matter needs to be addressed at home.

Parents do not want any surprises; nor do you. Waiting to contact parents until after a student has had several detentions or other consequences will often elicit the response: “If you had let me know sooner, we could have done something from our end!”

Ask for and assume that you will receive parents’ support on follow-up consequences and thank them when they cooperate.

LET PARENTS KNOW ABOUT VISITING PROCEDURES

Parents have the right to request a visit to their child’s classroom; but this must be done in consultation with the school. Provide some direction for a process that will help you accommodate their request to visit. For example, you may wish to invite parents to observe their children’s learning on a designated monthly parent visiting day.

To help parents make the most of a visit, give examples of things they can do to prepare for the visit and suggest activities or student work that they may wish to concentrate on when they are in the room. Make sure, as well, that parents are aware of the types of behaviour and quality work you expect from a successful student in your class or program.

SHARPEN YOUR INTERVIEW SKILLS

Consider upgrading or practicing your skills before you are faced with a difficult parent-teacher interview. This may involve participating in conflict management workshops or role-playing discussions related to difficult issues with a colleague before actually meeting with parents.

ESTABLISH A PROTOCOL FOR REVIEWING COMMUNICATIONS THAT GO HOME

Often administrators will insist that all general communications to parents be vetted through the office, including permission letters, newsletters, etc. While some may see this as potential “censorship,” there are, in fact, many benefits. For example, administrators may:

- ▶ Gain insight on challenging issues you are trying to address and be better able to support your actions if parents call to question them. If parents do call to complain and administrators are unaware of what you have sent out, it looks like they are not aware of what is going on in their school. Then you may have both parents and administrators questioning your judgement.
- ▶ Have a diplomatic “turn of phrase” to express a challenging issue you wish to address with parents.
- ▶ Suggest a useful sample, in order to refine what you have prepared.

Some teachers find it beneficial to include a tear-off, sign-and-return section for every communication that goes home. This can help to ensure that a communication actually reaches the parents and is read.