**communicating with parents and families**

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Good communication between teachers and parents doesn't just happen. It requires special skills on your part — skills such as good listening techniques, tact, kindness, consideration, empathy, enthusiasm, and an understanding of parent-child relationships. No matter how you interact with parents and the community at large — through conferences, telephone conversations, e-mail, written notes or reports, lobbying or fund-raising efforts, working together in the classroom — good communication and interpersonal skills will enhance your efforts.

Veteran teachers stress the importance of effective communication skills. "When working with parents, be honest," advises Pennsylvania teacher Laurie Borger. "And be sensitive! Remember that you are talking about their most valuable family resource — their family's future."

Adds Frank Garcia of California: "Always be tactful with parents. Think and plan what you are going to say to them, and how. Never be confrontational. Always speak in a pleasant voice, yet with firmness and authority when needed. Keep in mind that parents really love their children."

**The Right Attitude**

Garcia is right. Parents really DO love their children. That's just one of several important ideas to keep in mind when establishing partnerships with parents. Writing about at-risk families and schools, L.B. Liontos lists other "beliefs" that teachers must adopt to work effectively with families:

* All families have strengths.
* Parents can learn new techniques.
* Parents have important perspectives about their children.
* Most parents really care about their children.
* Cultural differences are both valid and valuable.
* Many family forms exist and are legitimate.

Further, former teacher Oralie McAfee offers the following guidelines for working with families:

* **Recognize that schools and homes have shared goals.** Both are committed to the nurturing, development, and education of children. "Teachers must believe that parents have a crucial role in their children's education, and parents and teachers must trust each other," McAfee stresses.
* **Respect caregivers and communicate that respect.** Tone of voice, word choice, facial expressions, body language, expectations, how long we make people wait — all these communicate respect or lack of it. Many parents have personal, family, work, health, or other problems that we know nothing about. Avoid being judgmental, and give parents the benefit of the doubt.
* **Acknowledge the changes in the American family.** In most families, both parents work outside the home, including the families of school teachers. Yet many of us still think of this common lifestyle as an aberration. Further, millions of American school children come from single parent homes. Still others live with relatives or in foster homes.

To the above lists, add one more important item concerning attitude:

* **Be positive!** "Parents enjoy positive communication," says West Virginia teacher Jane Baird. "Most teachers only make contact when something goes wrong." Other veterans heartily agree. "Make sure if you give negatives that you also give positives — positive phone calls, letters, and so on," suggests Jane Kelling of Houston.

**Parent-Teacher Communication Advice from Veteran Teachers**

* **Parents will be much more supportive** of you and helpful disciplining their children if you contact them as soon as a problem starts. Keep them updated on their child's progress. Most kids just need to know what their boundaries are!

Susan Cowell
Medfield High School
Medfield, MA
Grade Levels: 9-12
* **Remember you are not just doing a job**, but you are also advocates for the children. Become a member of the PTA, and have a voice in what goes on at the legislature level.

Val Gentry-Fernandez
Kearney Middle School
Kearney, CO
Grade Levels: 6-8
* **Keep parents informed regularly of what you are doing in class.** They really do appreciate this and it helps with parent-teacher communication. Using MyGradebook.com has been a lifesaver as parents know their child's grades at all times. This cuts down on questions like, "Why is my child getting this grade?"

Lynette Wehner
Central Middle School
Plymouth, MI
Grade Levels: 6-8
* **Send home a weekly newsletter to parents and have them sign it.** This way you are keeping the parent informed about what is going on at school.

Anonymous
Grade Levels: All
* **Get to know parents and students ahead of time.** Ask the counselors to give you a list of your students about two weeks before school starts. Send the students and parents a "Welcome to my class. I can't wait to meet you postcard." It does wonders for opening communication lines!

Keron Gwaltney
Luella Middle School
Locust Grove, GA
Grade Levels: 6-8
* **You can say no to parents.** Politely, diplomatically, gently, but firmly, you can say no and survive!! For example, a parent asks if you can send each assignment home a day ahead so that they can go over it with him or her the night before? You can respond with a no and then give an explanation.

Mary A. Lang
Gwynne School
Gwynne, Alberta, Canada
Grade Levels: K-2
* **Call home or send a postcard to parents** as soon as possible letting them know how enthusiastic you are about having their child in class. Be sure to state that you want parents to call you if they experience a problem. I have yet to find a parent who doesn't tell a teacher to do the same. Besides, students are less likely to misbehave once they realize you and parents "know each other". (Although this is substantially more work at the middle or high school level, the positive results make it worth the effort).

Charmaine Wierzbicki
Calumet High School
Gary, Indiana

# Parent/Teacher Relations

Page 2 of 2

**Bribery vs. Behavior Management**

Occasionally parents will object to behavior modification techniques used in the classroom because they see them as a form of bribery. Explaining the difference between behavior management and bribery requires a clear understanding of the steps involved in both. When a child is in the midst of a tantrum and an adult says, "Act right, and I will give you a cookie," that is bribery. Children learn that trick early. Every time someone tells them, "No," they go into action.

With behavior management, the emphasis is on prevention of inappropriate behavior through the initial rewarding of appropriate choices the student makes. The student is told before a problem arises what rewards and punishments are available to him. He is then told that he may decide which ones he wants to earn. This is no more a form of bribery than signing a contract to receive payment for a job when the job is completed satisfactorily. Relating the behavior management system to the work world makes it easier for parents to understand and accept.

**The Initial Parent Meeting**

The initial meeting between the parent and the teacher can set a productive tone. The teacher should come to the meeting with an outline of the behavior management plan used in the classroom, a sample point sheet, and a written list of materials the child will need to bring to school. Don't be surprised if, a week or two later, the parent requests another conference to review the point sheet and behavior management plan.These can be overwhelming to the parent in the beginning. Make sure to discuss any policies the school has about restraining students. Get written permission for this if it is allowed and may be needed. Also ask about any allergies. Some parents object to their children's eating items cooked in class. If the class cooks regularly, discuss this with the parent. Let the parent take the lead in how much is covered in the first meeting. Some parents have a lot of useful information to share with the teacher, while others are hesitant. Being prepared, positive, and professional is the best approach to take.

**Examples of Parent/Teacher Communications**

1. Phone conferences -- two per semester.
2. Daily point sheets. Write brief notes on them as often as necessary. Be positive.
3. Weekly or biweekly "good behavior" notes. These can be preprinted with fill-in-the-blank type messages. Put them in work folders or staple them to the point sheet.
4. Weekly or biweekly work envelopes. Put samples of the student's work in the envelope. Have the parent sign the front of the envelope. The student can return and reuse the envelope.
5. Semester outlines for academic subjects.
6. Special event notices.
7. Face-to-face conferences.
8. Report cards.
9. Annual individualized education programs (IEPs).

It may not be necessary to do all of these things for all of the parents all of the time.These are merely suggestions that may help parents and teachers work more efficiently together.

**General Guidelines**

1. Keep parents informed.
2. Be as positive as possible as often as possible.
3. Discuss appropriate choices students have made when at all possible, even when problems arise that need to be shared with parents.
4. Keep a community resource file with names, phone numbers, and addresses of agencies, that may offer assistance to families in any way.
5. Keep complete and accurate records. Share these records with the parents.
6. Provide parents with the names of books and articles that might help them manage the child more easily at home.
7. If problems arise between the parent and teacher, notify a supervisor immediately. Have another staff member present at all conferences. Keep copies of any letters and notes sent home.

Excerpted from [*Tough to Reach, Tough to Teach.*](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/go/http/www.cec.sped.org/bk/catalog2/emotional.html#P387)

**Policies & Practices: Family Communications - Ideas That Really Work**

**During this time of parent conferences and open houses, keep in mind that communication needs to happen all year long!**

By Kimberly B. Moore PhD | October , 2002

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It's already October, two months into the school year. My class is so special-I'm really beginning to get to know the children and their families. We're all getting into a comfortable working routine. Parents have gotten involved, and I feel like we're developing good relationships. But last year, it was such a struggle to keep the parents engaged. How can I keep families attentive and our communications open this year? -Ms. Johnson's journal entry, October 2002

Communication between school and home is the very foundation of a program's success. At the beginning of each new school year, communication often goes smoothly. Occasionally, parents may resist your efforts, but you can still win their interest with determination and creativity. The challenge is to make sure that communication is ongoing and not just a beginning-of-the-year effort.

**Maintain Your Momentum**

No doubt your goal is a yearlong exchange with all the important adults in a child's family. This ongoing communication will benefit the child and family in several ways. It will:

* create feelings of acceptance and partnership
* create trust
* build confidence
* foster appreciation of teachers and caregivers
* lay the groundwork for resolving issues

When families are actively engaged in frequent conversations, it's much easier to talk about the ups and downs of the child's development. Parents need, and want, to feel part of their child's daily school lives. Even when they trust and value your teaching, they know they are missing things that happen each hour they are not there.

**Investigate Contact Options**

Positive, respectful listening and communication can draw families in. Communication can be verbal, in person, on the telephone, through the Internet, and via e-mail and voicemail. Because families are unique, each will have communication preferences. Ask them to tell you their favorite method. Be prepared for some to request e-mail or calls to their cell phones as well as personal discussions in the evenings. Remember, communication must be easy and effective for both parties. Don't feel you have to give up evenings with your own family to satisfy a parent.

**Open Lines of Communication**

To open communication lines, relationships must be:

**Respectful,** a process of listening as well as talking

**Reciprocal,** a give-and-take that includes all family members

**Inclusive** of all family needs (Spanish, Chinese, written, verbal)

**Thoughtful,** including detailed information about the child

**Planned,** so it doesn't get forgotten in our "hurried" world

During their first contacts with your program, tour parents through your center and talk about the importance of communication. Let families know that children need support from both home and school every day and that they will benefit from discussions between family members and teachers.

Create colorful and interesting parent boards for each classroom. Post articles, information about the class schedule, curriculum, and upcoming events. Highlight a family each week or each month, with pictures and a short narration describing family members and their hobbies.

Hold an orientation night. Discuss how children learn, along with your program goals and methods of providing and encouraging communication. Ask for their suggestions on how best to share information and chat about their child.

Inform families of your schedule. Suggest days and/or times in the week when you have time to talk. You may find that once families know your schedule, theirs will mesh nicely.

**Keep It Going!**

How can you preserve the climate of open dialogue and sharing you set early in the year?

**Schedule an evening educational program.** Ask a local guest speaker to discuss the importance of communication and how it benefits the child and the teachers.

**Establish a parent committee.** The first item on your agenda can be to improve and enhance communication (call it a Communication Committee or a Parent/Teacher Communication Team). Charge the members with brainstorming and recommending ideas to increase communication and make it more effective.

**Create a family survey.** Ask families what they think might draw them into the school more often and help them feel connected. Distribute the survey as they arrive at the end of the day (before parents get to their child's classroom). Add a cookie and a cup of punch and most will gladly fill it out right on the spot!

**Distribute a family newsletter.** Include interesting articles, information about each classroom, and upcoming school or community events. Highlight special achievements of a teacher, family member or a child. Sharing information about a teacher's educational and personal achievements will increase her credibility with families.

**Sending notes home is a wonderful way of giving families insight into daily events.** And make the notes child-- specific. The best way to have time to keep these very personal and individual is to divide and conquer: Divide the number of children in the class by four or five days per week. Then write that many notes each day throughout the week. Some children will get a note home on Wednesday, some on Friday and others on Tuesday or Thursday. Parents who want a note usually don't care which day they receive it as long as it arrives on the same day each week.

**Ask colleagues for ideas** about how to maintain communication or attend workshops at your local AEYC conference. Communication is an issue discussed and presented frequently. Anyone talking about it may have a new idea you haven't thought of yet!

Ongoing family involvement is critical because the family is focused on their specific child while teachers must focus on the whole class. Family observations and sharing will help the teacher get to know the child and see the patterns of development both at home and at school.

**About the Author**

Kimberly B. Moore, Ph.D., an author and consultant, has more than 20 years of experience in early childhood education.