

Dealing Successfully with Your Students' Parents

By Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. Reprinted with permission.

Parents and guardians can provide a great deal of support and reinforcement. For the most part, they want to know what's happening in school, how their children are doing and how they, the parents, can help. They tend to be far more enthusiastic and positive in their support when they feel informed and included, when they feel welcomed in our classrooms, and when their interest in their children's well being is respected. Unfortunately, parent-teacher relationships rarely attain their maximum potential. Often both parties complain of a lack of contact unless there's a problem. If this has indeed been the case with the parents of your students, imagine how effective a more positive approach can be!

Here are a few ideas that might help:

- Get acquainted early in the year, either by note, phone, in-school conferences, welcome meetings or home visits. Keep first meetings positive.
- Keep parents informed about your policies and goals. If you have certain specific requirements about how you want work done, when assignments are due, or other boundaries or follow-through intentions they may have some questions about, let them know ahead of time.
- Keep them informed about your classroom projects and practices. For example: If you are doing a special program, or allowing new behavior options—like leaving the class to work in the library or sitting on the floor to read or do special assignments—let the parents know.
- Maintain regular positive contact. Best bet: A weekly progress report that focuses on responsible learning behaviors necessary for success in the classroom. (See example at right.) Having the students (or one student) put the names on the forms will leave you free to quickly fill in the progress. I have found that these reports work best when we only mark the skills that had indeed been demonstrated (only positive marks, rather than “grading” each skill) and when we make sure that each student gets at least two stars or smiley faces every week. (I frequently checked all 5, as often as possible.)

Name	For week of:
Takes care of materials	
Is caught up on all homework assignments	
Is caught up on all seatwork assignments	
Says "please" and "thank you"	
Raises hand before speaking	
Signed	

Make a point, when you can, of writing a few words on the back or bottom of the form—always something positive! *“Doing great in math!” “Self-control is improving.” “Great sense of humor!” “Very helpful and caring with other students.”* The little time you put in will pay off in a big way.

- Make positive “surprise” contact. Example: An unanticipated phone call or note home about something special that happened or something that you noticed. These calls don’t need to take more than a minute. Pick one class that really needs a lot of encouragement. Attempt to get back to the parents of each child in the class—say once a month, or even once a semester.
- Create (or supervise the creation of) a monthly newsletter. Be sure to include samples of the students’ work—including all students in some way during the course of the year. Tell about new projects, guests, field trips or special events. You might also include reviews of parenting resources, parenting tips and ideas, and/or excerpts from books, magazines or Web sites (be sure to reference them correctly).
- **PROOFREAD** all correspondences that go home or, better yet, have someone else check for spelling, punctuation, grammatical and even format errors. Make sure your correspondences reflect your care and professionalism.
- Invite parents to visit your classroom, to see your class in action, to help out or to share their own expertise in some area.
- Be respectful of constraints on parents’ time. Begin and end meetings on time.
- If a student is experiencing difficulty, either with the work or social behavior, or if the student is demonstrating behaviors that are interfering with her potential success in school, get in touch with the parents right away. Don’t allow yourself to be placed in the embarrassing position of having to explain why you didn’t contact the parents until the behavior became enough of a problem to affect the student’s grades, progress or placement.
- **IF THERE IS AN INCIDENT**, call only to report what happened. Watch your tone and any tendency to judge. Stick to the behavior—what you saw—rather than trying to interpret or analyze the child’s intent. Avoid blaming or criticizing, or judgments about personalities, character or values that might leave parents feeling defensive, protective, shamed, anxious, angry or resentful.

- When reporting an incident, watch the tendency to suggest that this is the parent's problem or demand that he or she solve it for you. Best bet: Describe the problem and how you plan to deal with it. You might ask for input, but avoid asking the parent to "talk to him" or punish him for you. Offer to follow up in a few days. Remember, if you've been maintaining positive contact with parents all along, you're more likely to find them supportive.
- You have specialized knowledge that makes you qualified for your line of work. Do not use that knowledge against the parent by using jargon or talking down to him or her.
- Work with parents toward a mutual goal: the child's success and well-being in school. Do not presume to care more about the student than the parent does.
- Do not speak ill of coworkers, the administration or other students, teachers or parents. At all times, keep your actions and interactions professional.
- If confronted with an angry parent, STAY CALM and maintain your boundaries. Speak softly if they speak loudly. Acknowledge the parent's anger as well as how important it is for you to hear what he or she has to say. Encourage the parent to talk about what's going on and LISTEN! Avoid getting defensive or making the parent wrong for being upset. If you feel the least bit threatened, include (or call for) another teacher, administrator or support staff.
- Watch out for requests from parents for you to punish a child in the classroom for misbehaviors that happened at home. It is neither appropriate nor necessary for you to withhold privileges for events you did not witness, although you can suggest resources or classes for parents who are having problems and seem open to receiving such information.
- DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT. Keep track of all contact with parents in which you have discussed a student's progress or behavior. Note the date, the purpose of the call, the parent's response and the outcome. Alert administrators to problems you may be having. Also make a note to follow up as necessary and then do so.



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