

EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION

In teaching and raising children, certain activities are the main job of the home and other activities are the main job of the school. However, there are some important activities for which the home and school share jobs (see Figure 1).

Communication is one of those important activities. In order to help your child do well in school, you and your child's teacher will need to keep good communication. This handout will describe some of the common problems in parent-teacher communication, and six important tips to communicate effectively.

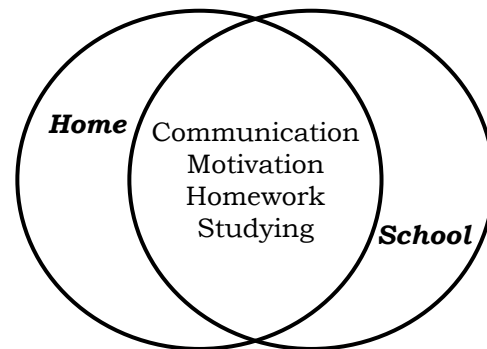


Figure 1. Overlapping Responsibilities between Home and School

TIP #1: BE A PARTNER WITH THE TEACHER

Your child will benefit most if you and the teacher work together as partners in your child's education. Most schools and teachers know that good communication with parents is an important part of their job. Some parents have had bad experiences when they were at school. Other parents have had bad experiences communicating with their child's school in the past. Because of this, some parents approach the school with a defensive or angry attitude. However, this can interfere with good communication and does not help the child. It is best to believe that the school and the teacher care about your child. Begin your communication with a positive attitude and a willingness to be a partner with your child's teacher.

TIP #2: GET COMFORTABLE WITHIN THE SCHOOL AND WITH THE TEACHER

Some parents feel uncomfortable in schools and talking with teachers. Some parents do not speak English well or come from different cultural backgrounds than the teacher. Below are some ideas that you can do to help you feel more comfortable at school.¹

Chat with the teacher. When you can, stop by and chat with your child's teacher. This will allow you and the teacher to get to know each other better. It will also make communication easier when it is time to have a more formal parent-teacher conference.

Join an activity or program for parents at the school. A good way to get to know more about the school is to participate in activities planned at the school. For example, attend Open House or other parent meetings. Volunteering to help in the classroom or in the school is also a good way of getting to know more about what goes on at your child's school.

¹ Kreider, Mayer, & Vaughn, 1999

Talk to other people who spend time in the school. If you feel uncomfortable at your child's school, talk with other parents or neighbors who know the school and can provide you with information.

TIP #3: FEEL FREE TO MAKE THE FIRST CONTACT WITH THE TEACHER

A major problem with communication between parents and teachers is the failure of either the parent or the teacher to make the first move. Teachers have reported that some parents did not take the lead to communicate by phone or in person, even when the school provided opportunities such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, or meetings. Similarly, parents feel that problems in communication are due to teachers failing to begin the process of communicating with them. However, good communication is the responsibility of both parents and teachers. As a parent, you should not feel that the teacher should always be the one to make the first contact. You should feel comfortable with starting off the communication with your child's teacher and that you have the right to do so. This is important when your child has had school problems in the past.

Some schools provide parents with a school handbook or directory that provides information about how to contact the teacher and the best time to do so. If not, ask the teacher or the school principal how and when you could contact the teacher.

TIP #4: COMMUNICATE WITH THE TEACHER EARLY

Another major communication problem reported by both parents and teachers is not communicating early enough when a student was having difficulty in school. Often you can anticipate a problem. Your child may have had difficulties in the past. Your child may tell you about a problem. You may also notice some problems with homework or class papers. If you suspect a problem, contact the teacher immediately. Do not wait. Also, do not think that just because the teacher has not contacted you that this means that there is no important information to communicate to you about your child's education. At the latest, you should contact your child's teacher at the mid-way point of the report card period. For a nine week reporting system, this would be at about 4 ½ weeks into the reporting period. This will give you enough time to help your child deal with any problems in time to make a difference in that reporting period.

TIP # 5: COMMUNICATE OFTEN

An additional major communication problem often reported by parents and teachers is the failure to communicate frequently and regularly. Regular and ongoing feedback from the teacher will allow you to better provide the specific help your child needs. Three things to keep in mind when planning regular communication with your child's teacher are discussed below.

How to Communicate. There is a variety of ways to communicate regularly with the teacher, including face-to-face meetings, phone calls, or through written notes. You will need to work together with the teacher to decide on which method of communication would be the easiest and most helpful.

What to Communicate. It is important for the parent and teacher to discuss and agree on what concerns or problems need to be monitored. It is important to be specific about this information. Some examples include: specific information about

homework assignments or tests dates, the child's level of participation, how well the child minded the teacher, or the percentage of work completed in class.

How Often to Communicate. How often you need to communicate with the teacher will depend on the severity of the problem. For more serious problems, you may need to have daily contact with the teacher. Formal systems like a school-home note program or a journal are easy to use and require little teacher time. In these systems, teachers complete a note or journal entry providing feedback to parents on specific problem behaviors at the end of the day and send it home to the parent (see Figure 2). If designed right, such systems are easy to use and require little teacher time. For less severe problems, weekly feedback would be enough. The important thing is to communicate regularly.

School-Home Note		
Name: _____	Date: _____	
Completed ____% of classwork	YES	NO
Obedied class rules	YES	NO
Got along well with others	YES	NO
Teacher signature: _____		
Comments: _____		

Figure 2. Example of School-Home Note

TIP #6: FOLLOW THROUGH WITH WHAT YOU SAID YOU WOULD DO

Another major communication problem reported by both parents and teachers is not doing what was agreed upon. If you told your child's teacher you would communicate in a certain way or do a specific school or homework related task, do your best to follow through with what you said you would do. For example, if you agreed that you would check your child's homework and sign off on the assignment, be sure to do this consistently. Be sure to let the teacher know if you are unable to do what was agreed upon.

References

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- Kreider, H., Mayer, E., & Vaughn, P. (1999). *Early Childhood Digest: Helping Parents Communicate Better with Schools*. (available from www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/digests/99may.html)

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