

Building Positive Communication With Parents

By Marcy Hemminger

It's still September and you're beginning to have problems with one of the students already, significant problems. Problems that warrant a phone call to mom or dad. You know that you need to let them know what's going on, but you procrastinate. You feel awful that you haven't even met the parents yet and you have to call and give these virtual strangers the bad news of "Your child is having trouble making good decisions in school."

Every teacher dreads this type of situation. Every parent dreads this situation. But, with a little work and planning, this, and many other unpleasant interactions with parent can be avoided. How? By developing positive communication with the parents right from the start. By first establishing this type of positive rapport, all future interactions will be taken seriously and generally without challenge. As a result of this rapport, your parents now know you and they begin to understand that you are willing to create a partnership with them to do the best for their child. Here are some tips and suggestions to get you on the right path:

Before school begins:

- Initiate contact:
 - Send out postcards and notes welcoming each new student in your class
 - Give the parents a quick "Hello, it's nice to meet you" phone call
- Create your own "Parent Handbook" which includes the following types of information:
 - Daily and/or weekly class schedules
 - Discipline policy – rewards and consequences
 - Class list – names and birthdays
 - Blank teacher/parent communication forms
 - Annual cognitive objectives and philosophy
- Plan the types and frequency of volunteer support in your room
- Send out letters saying, "I need your support!"
- Plan the frequency and type of ongoing contact you will have with the parents of your children
- Take your parents on a "tour" of the classroom
- Feel confident in your ability!

Once the school year begins:

- Keep to your plan!
- Make efforts for positive phone calls with each family regularly where you:
 - Describe the child's behavior ("Joelle was so kind today when she comforted a new child in our class.")
 - Describe how you feel about the child's positive behavior ("It really warmed my heart to see such compassion.")
 - Ask the parent to share the conversation with the child ("Please tell Joelle that I called today and was so pleased with her!")
- Keep a file of ready-to-use notes and pre-addressed envelopes handy, such as:
 - Thank-you!
 - Get Well
 - Birthday
 - Updates
 - Did you know...?

- Good job!
- Post or send a weekly/monthly newsletter
- Make special efforts to communicate positively with parents or students that have had problems in the past
- Thank parents for any assistance of time and talents
- Phone parents with positive updates on cognitive, motor and behavioral successes

Communication can be intimidating and difficult for teachers, especially if this is not something that has been done frequently in the past. Here are some valuable tips to help you create that positive impression each and every time you feel the need to contact your parents:

- Each and every word you say and action you show should be proactive with the “plan” to move from adversary to partner. Let the parents know that, together, you form a team. Keep communicating that you want to do what is best for their child and the other children in your classroom.
- Always acknowledge the parent’s concerns with words like, “**I hear** that you are upset with the show and tell format.”, “**I understand** that you would like to be more involved in the classroom.” And, “**You’re right** to be worried that she may be scared to try something new.”
- Use the “My child” test asking yourself, “How would I want to be treated if it were my child concerning:”
 - When, where and what kind of information should be shared
 - How a parent is approached about problems
 - How someone is listening to my concerns
 - The kinds of positive and/or negative feedback offered

By creating a plan for positive communication, you will not only show your parents that you are committed to providing the best for their child, but that you are interested in creating a bond with the whole family. This bond will pave the way for all contact in the future, whether you have wonderful or unpleasant news to share. It will improve the involvement and support you receive from the families. This rapport and support will improve your productivity, improve your relationships with both the child and the parents, and make you happier as you will be less stressed and worried about the possibility of negative interactions. As Lee Canter states, “By establishing positive relationships with parents, and by conscientiously maintaining these relationships throughout the year, you will find even the most difficult or apathetic parents can be motivated to give support.” (1991.)

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Resources:

Hemminger, Marcy. "Parent Communication Guide". Primarily-Kids, LLC., 2007.

Canter, Lee, Marlene Canter. "*Parents on Your Side*". Lee Canter and Associates, 1991.

Thomson, Michael. "*Getting Your Parents Off Your Back... And On Your Side*". Yats Esool Productions, 1997.

www.familyeducation.com