

Do's and Don'ts of Effective Communication With Parents

Do ...

Provide a translator if parents' primary language is not one that you speak fluently. There is likely nothing more important to parents than their child's education. The nuance and detail necessary to convey how parents might best engage in the student learning process should be communicated in the parents' primary language. Internal school or school district assets may be available, such as bi-lingual teachers and paraprofessionals, in addition to possible volunteers from local businesses, community centers and nonprofit organizations.

Don't ...

Use the student as the translator. Even if parent-teacher conferences are student led, they may well become misled if parents and teachers are unable to communicate independently. The student's role as student is of paramount importance and encumbering them with translation responsibilities impedes open and honest teacher and parent communication. Using the student as the translator can put the student in an awkward, untenable position where loyalty and respect for both parents and teachers can feel contradictory.

Don't ...

Assume that any bi-lingual adult will do. Using parents of other students, or other students, compromises the privacy of both the parents and the student who is the topic of discussion. What is gained in increased clarity and effective communication will be lost if families feel embarrassed or disrespected.

Do ...

Acknowledge parents and the perceived power differential between parents and teachers, especially when working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Negative past experiences (as either a student or a parent), immigration status, different cultural norms and expectations, and lack of English language fluency, among other things, can exacerbate parental discomfort and the inclination to disengage from the school context. Off-site meetings, the use of parent advocates, or community liaisons can offset some the perceived power differential, as can acknowledging the many barriers and constraints that parents may have to overcome just to make it to a parent-teacher conference.

Do ...

Use terms that everyone understands. If there are some concepts or terms that need explanation, provide necessary detail and consider providing additional preparatory materials to families in advance of the scheduled meeting.

Don't ...

Use unidentified or unexplained acronyms. Most parents don't have degrees in education or familiarity with acronyms and jargon that may be second nature to education professionals. Avoid education jargon whenever possible.

Do ...

Be clear about the purpose of the meeting, set goals and communicate them prior the meeting or conversation so that parent and teachers have shared, realistic expectations.

Do ...

Start the meeting on a positive note. Try to find an area where the student is doing well academically, socially, athletically, etc. Positive attention indicates care, concern, and genuine regard for the student. Beginning the meeting with what is wrong or what needs improvement can make parents defensive and protective, but rarely proactive. Parents who are proactive and supportive of teacher suggestions do so in furtherance of the best interests of their child.

Educator Reflection—Parent Interviews

One way to establish good communication with families and parents is to think about the conversations that you have with parents during conferences, home visits, “back-to-school” nights, and other interactions. The list below is a checklist of sorts, with issues to think about in preparing for the conversation and conducting the actual discussion.

Before the Meeting

- Have I done anything to develop a relationship with parents before calling them to a meeting?
- Have I considered that the parent may be a grandparent, step or foster parent, same-sex parent or relative?
- Does the meeting time allow working parents to attend?
- Is the meeting in conflict with religious or cultural events in the community?
- Have I invited the parent to bring family members or family friends?
- Have I telephoned those people for whom it would be more common to convey messages orally?
- Have I invited translators and cultural interpreters?

(Cultural interpreters are people who are familiar with the official and unofficial cultures of the school and the cultures of the home. Cultures here include the meanings, values, and practices that are common not only to the ethnic group from which the parent comes but also to their social class. Inviting the parent to bring family members or family friends can help ensure cultural interpretation)

- Do I attempt to hold some meetings with parents in the school and others in community buildings (i.e., community centers or recreational rooms of apartment buildings).
- Have I ensured that the doors of the building are unlocked so that parents can enter?
- Have I learned the correct last name and pronunciation of the parent’s name?
- Do I have several examples of the students’ work on hand?
- Have I placed signs in appropriate languages, or appointed guides to escort parents to my room?
- Have support staff been made aware that members of the community will be in the school?

At the Meeting

- How specific and candid am I in giving a parent information about her child’s performance?
- Do I believe in the student’s ability to learn?
- Am I conveying that confidence to the parent?
- How clear am I at explaining what I am attempting to do in class?
- Am I using the opportunity to learn about the parent’s hopes for his/her child?
- Am I using parents’ comments to rethink my teaching strategies?
- Am I giving the parent a chance to ask questions?
- Am I listening/Am I paraphrasing and giving back to the parent my understanding of what is being said?
- Am I allowing time for the parent whose native language is not English, or who speaks a variety of English different from mine, to convey her meaning?
- Am I noting the parent’s non-verbal cues?
- Am I using the opportunity to learn from the parent about the strategies which work well with the student in the area of work habits and conduct?
- Am I using the opportunity to discover ways in which the parent might contribute to the student’s learning and the life of the school?
- Am I open to the fact that the parents’ economic / social reality may make it impossible for them to participate in school life in the traditional ways?
- Am I using the occasion to provide a parent with more information about the school and about their rights as parents, in order to empower them to participate significantly in the life of the school?
- Am I inviting parents to express their expectations of the school?
- Am I inviting a parent to express dissatisfactions and explore conflicts which he or she has experienced with the school?
- Am I using the opportunity to explain the school’s diversity policy to parents from all cultural and racial backgrounds?

Adapted from Irene McGinty and Noni Mendoza-Reis, *Towards Equity: A Guide for Teaching and Learning in a Multicultural Society: Classroom Applications*. (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1998), 1105-1106.

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