



Parents and Teachers: Strategies for Working Together

By Andrea Canter, Ph.D., NCSP

Home and school—everyone shares the goal of helping children learn and feel successful. Research has proven that when parents and teachers work together, everyone benefits: students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, attend school more regularly, have better behavior, and show more positive attitudes toward themselves and toward school. School programs that include strong parent involvement are more effective! Yet, collaboration between parents and teachers is not always a smooth process.

Parent involvement in children's education goes beyond contributing cookies to class parties or attending PTA meetings. To be effective, parent involvement has to be a partnership between the family and the school to assure that children are learning to the best of their ability, that they feel safe and supported, and that their parents feel well informed and involved in making decisions that affect their child's school experience. At the same time, a strong home-school partnership means teachers perceive that parents are concerned about their children's education and promote positive attitudes toward school and learning.

Establishing this partnership requires efforts from both teachers and parents to create a trusting, equitable relationship. Sometimes parents must first deal with their own discomfort with schools and teachers. If you experienced difficulty in school, you may have to overcome negative feelings that carry over from your own childhood. If you are new to the community, come from another culture, or do not speak fluent English, you may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of attending a conference with your child's teacher or participating in a Family Night or School Open House. You should not worry or be afraid of a conference with your child's teacher. Even if you have talked frequently with school personnel about your child's failing grades or misbehavior, a conference may be an opportunity to start a cooperative partnership with teachers.

Increasing Home-School Collaboration

Tips for schools. There are many things that schools can do to make parents feel more comfortable and more involved in their child's school experience:

- Schools can provide interpreters and cultural advocates for parents who speak little English and/or come from other cultures. If such a resource is not offered, parents should feel free to request it. Some communities also have agencies that serve specific cultures and languages and provide advocates who can serve as a liaison between parents and teachers. Parents should feel free to bring another family member or friend to help translate and provide support.
- Schools can plan activities early in the school year that serve to introduce families and school personnel in a positive setting, rather than waiting until problems arise. This gives parents the opportunity to become familiar with school staff and the school building, and to meet other parents. It also gives teachers a chance to meet parents without the stress of a conference or disciplinary issue.
- Teachers can provide parents with periodic updates of class activities, assignments and expectations. This gives parents ongoing information about their child's school experience and provides the opportunity to seek more information about what is being taught and how their child is performing.
- Schools can sponsor presentations, workshops, homework guides, library recommendations, etc., for parents to support their child's education.

- Schools can establish working groups of parents and teachers to address school-wide issue as discipline, safety, homework, standards testing, grading, etc. Sometimes it seems that the same parents are always appointed to these groups, so it is important that schools seek out parents who might not be the first to volunteer and who represent the full student population.

Tips for parents. At the same time, there are many things parents can do to demonstrate their interest in working with school personnel to improve the school experience for their children:

- Seek out your child's teacher(s) at the first Open House or Family Night. Introduce yourself and let teachers know how to reach you.
- Ask for a conference early in the school year rather than waiting for a conference invitation. Meeting early, before any problems arise, can help establish a good working relationship as well as provide an opportunity to inform teachers of any specific concerns or unique issues that affect your child. For example, let teachers know if there is an impending or recent divorce that might be unsettling for your child; a recent death in the family; a health problem such as allergies or asthma; a recent move; etc.
- Find out if there are activities you can provide at home to help your child practice skills learned at school. What sort of books might you have on hand to read to or with your child? Are there some math games to help practice the newly introduced math facts? What is the best way to help your child practice spelling?
- Ask if your child's behavior is in accordance with expectations, if he or she seems to follow school rules without difficulty, if he or she seems to have friends in the classroom. If concerns surface, find out how the teacher deals with problems and how you might be able to reinforce appropriate behavior at home.
- Volunteer! This can take many forms depending on your time and skills. Some parents' schedules allow them to come to school and help out in a classroom on a weekly or monthly basis. Sometimes it is best to help in a classroom other than your child's class if your presence might be distracting to your child. Volunteers are often needed to help students practice their reading or math skills; to help teachers gather and manage materials for lessons and projects; to help supervise the class on a field trip or during an assembly. Often there are ways to help out after school hours—with PTA refreshments, as a member of a school or district committee. What is important is that you provide some support to the school, and preferably through an activity that involves you more directly with decisions about school policy or in ways that support your child's learning.

Preparing for the Parent-Teacher Conference

At least once per year, and frequently each semester or more often, parents receive a notice of a parent-teacher conference. Perhaps you have requested the conference yourself. There are many steps you can take to assure that the conference is productive and positive:

- Assemble relevant materials to help prepare for the conference. This could include records from previous schools and school years, such as report cards, test scores, immunization and other health records, and past and current correspondence between home and school.
- Review these materials to see if anything important is missing, and then see if you can find the missing material. Once you have started a collection of your child's records, it is easy to add new material each year. At conference time, if you or the teacher have specific concerns, you can then find whatever might be important to share with the teacher.
- Talk with your child before the conference. Children should understand why the conference is taking place (is it due to a problem or is it a routine meeting held for all parents?) and be assured that parents are seeking ways to help and learn about what their children are doing in

school. Find out if your child has any specific concerns about schoolwork or relationships with classmates.

- If your district, school or classroom has a handbook for students, be sure to obtain a copy well ahead of the conference and review it. In particular look for listings of expectations for behavior and attendance so that you might anticipate some questions from teachers or so that you might consider questions you want to ask.
- If your child has brought home homework, be sure you are familiar with the assignments and how your child has been performing. Is the work getting done? Does your child seem to understand the assignments? Does the work seem too easy or too difficult?
- Prepare a list of questions you want to ask your child's teacher: Is my child meeting expectations for learning and behavior? How has my child performed on daily class assignments, on tests, on homework assignments? How does my child compare to others in basic skills? Does my child follow school rules or does he/she exhibit any behavior problems? If my child is struggling in any area, what has been tried to improve performance? Does my child pay attention in class? What else can be done at home or at school? What are my child's strengths? Are there any concerns about my child's health, adjustment? Are there materials or resources that you would recommend?
- If you or the teacher have concerns about referral to special education, find out about your rights ahead of time. State and community agencies and advocate organizations can provide this information, and all schools should also have a printed copy of parents' rights under state and federal law.
- Be ready to collaborate, not attack or defend! Generally teachers will give parents bad news because they want to help the child do better, not to place blame on the parent or child. But sometimes the message does not come across that way and parents naturally become defensive and protective, maybe even angry. Assume the teacher has your child's best interests in mind and respond calmly and tactfully. Indicate that you are most concerned with solving the problem and helping your child succeed. Offer to meet further to discuss the problem and work out a solution. Remember that teachers are often as afraid to deliver bad news as parents are to hear it!
- You want to hear good news about your child. If the teacher does not offer any positive comments, ask directly! ("What does my child do well?") And remember that teachers often hear only negative comments too. Be sure to try to offer a compliment, a thank-you, etc. to let the teacher know you appreciate what they are trying to do to help your child—even when it doesn't seem to be working.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions if you don't understand something or feel your concerns are not being addressed. Teachers and other educators easily slip into jargon and forget that many parents are not familiar with the terms they use every day. Ask what test scores mean and what the results mean for your child. Stop and ask for explanation of unfamiliar terms or programs. Not understanding can quickly lead to *misunderstanding*!

Resources

Clark, L. (1996). *SOS: Help for Parents* (2nd Ed.). Parents Press.

Levine, M.E. (1994). *Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children With Learning Problems at Home and in School*. Educators Publishing Service.

Martin, M. & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (1995). *Solve Your Child's School-Related Problems*. HarperPerennial.

Rosemond, J. (1990). *Ending the Homework Hassle: Understanding, Preventing, and Solving School Performance Problems*. Andrews McNeel.

Rimm, S. (1996). *Dr. Sylvia Rimm's Smart Parenting: How to Raise a Happy, Achieving Child*. Crown Publishers.

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