



Communicating with Your Child's Teacher¹

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One of the best ways that parents can help their children succeed in school is to be involved with their education. This starts with communicating *well* with your child's teacher. Basically, good communication involves meeting with the teacher, being a positive and courteous partner in your child's learning, and keeping the lines of communication open in various ways throughout the year.

Meet the Teacher

Go to your child's school open house or meet-the-teacher day. Even though time may be short, a few simple steps can show your interest and support:

- Introduce yourself and your child.
- Collect any information the teacher provides.
- Offer to help by signing up to donate items to the class or to volunteer for other jobs.

Schedule a Meeting with the Teacher Early in the Year

If your child is in elementary school or has special needs:

- Provide information that will help the teacher get to know your child as an individual. Be sure to share relevant information that could affect learning, such as:
 - Health (allergies, diseases),
 - Behavior (tendency to be distracted or behave impulsively),
 - Learning issues (difficulty with vision, hearing, learning disabilities, ADHD),
 - Changes in family life (grandfather moving in with family, parents divorcing)
- Ask the teacher about expectations about homework, what to do if there are problems with homework (for example, if she or he has set hours for homework help), and other expectations (such as a big project later in the year).
- Find out the best way to contact the teacher. Some teachers like parents to send a note to school with their child, while others prefer a phone call or e-mail.

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- Bring a notebook or paper so you can take notes. You may want to prepare a summary sheet with your contact information and other important information (for example, the fact that your child is allergic to nuts). Some teachers ask parents for this information.
- Keep in mind that middle and high school teachers typically have many students and usually are not able to schedule a meeting early in the year, unless the child has special needs or there are other concerns.

Go to Parent-Teacher Conferences

Often, schools schedule these sometime during the year. More information about how to get ready and what to ask can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/succeed/part8.html> and <http://www.nea.org/parents/ptconf.html>.

Make sure that you schedule a conference if:

- Your child has special needs, and your teacher needs to know this early in the year.
- Your child's grades drop suddenly.
- You suspect that your child is having difficulty understanding her or his schoolwork.
- Your child is upset about something that happened in school—with peers, or with the teacher.
- Your child does not seem to have any homework.
- Something changes at home that may affect the child's learning (e.g., new baby, parental illness, divorce, or upcoming move).

Find the Right Time to Talk to the Teacher

If you are at school, you may run into teachers and be tempted to ask about how your child is doing.

- At school, ask the teacher if it is a good time to talk or when is most convenient for him or her.

Just before or after school may not be the best times.

- If you run into a teacher around town, simply exchange pleasantries. This is not the time for a parent-teacher conference.

Write Short Notes and Follow Up

If you want a quick response to a question:

- Send a brief written note or an e-mail message (if allowed) to the teacher with your question clearly stated.
- Include your phone number and/or e-mail address.

If you don't hear back in a few days, follow up with a phone message to the school.

Follow E-mail Etiquette

E-mail is often a convenient and helpful way to communicate with your child's teacher, but should follow the same guidelines as any professional communication.

- Be aware that teachers get many e-mail messages and have many other responsibilities during their day, and may not be able to respond immediately to yours.
- Identify your child and sign your name. Include a phone number where you can be reached if needed.
- Be diplomatic. You can't take back an e-mail message, and e-mail can be easily forwarded. Be calm, choose your words carefully, and avoid criticizing the teacher. Don't write and send an e-mail when you are angry.
- Be brief and stick to the point. Don't include animations, pictures, and graphics.
- Use upper and lower case, not all caps (that's considered shouting).
- Stick to school-related matters. Don't forward chain mail, jokes, or frivolous information.

- Don't forward someone else's e-mail, including a teacher's, unless you have their permission.
- Watch out for viruses and spam—don't spread these around.

Be Positive and Courteous

Many teachers are overworked and underappreciated. Speaking in positive ways opens up the lines of communication so you can work together to help your child succeed in school.

- Open up communication with phrases such as “Can we talk about...?” Avoid criticizing and blaming the teacher with comments such as “You should have...” or “You must be mistaken.” Instead, use “I statements” that present your thoughts or feelings without putting the teacher on the defensive. For example, you might say, “I'm confused about...” or, “I am wondering (or concerned) about...” instead of “You weren't clear” or, “That project was messed up.”
- Make respectful requests, such as “Could you send home the information about...?” Avoid giving orders to the teacher by saying, “You have to...” or “You need to...”
- Use kind and polite words. For example, “Please, could you...” and “Thank you for all you did,” go a long way in building a good relationship.

Accept Differences

Sometimes you may really “click” with a teacher, and other times it may seem a struggle to keep the lines of communication open.

- Listen to the teacher to get a sense of who she or he is.
- Hear what the teacher has to say about his or her expectations, classroom, and your student.
- Don't argue with or criticize the teacher in front of your child.

- Don't send e-mail messages written in anger.
- Try to work things out with the teacher before going to the principal.
- If you have conflicts with the teacher, remain calm. Listen, be positive, and talk things out.

Sometimes it may be difficult to hear what the teacher has to say. Parents may be defensive or upset if the teacher gives them bad news about how their child is doing in school. Try to focus on solutions and work with the teacher to come up with solutions and make a plan to help your child learn.

Talk to Other School Personnel if Needed

Sometimes a parent may not be able to work things out with a teacher. In that case, continue to be an advocate for your child by talking to others who may be able to help. The school's guidance counselor or school counselor may be able to intervene or mediate discussions. The vice principal/assistant principal and principal also may be able to help.

Be a Partner with the Teacher to Support Your Child's Learning

Thirty years of research shows that children do better in school when their parents are involved. Some of the most important things you can do are to:

- Help with homework as needed and appropriate.
- Help your child learn the skills needed to manage time and stay on task.
- Ask teachers for clarification on instructions and assignments as needed.
- Talk about school matters with your student at home.
- Ask teachers what you can do to help your child at home.

At the same time, as your children get older, teachers expect them to be able to take on more responsibility and to function independently. Your

child likely will want more and more autonomy as well. Help them build these skills while also continuing to be supportive.

Ask What You Can Do to Help

If there is something you can do to help your child's teacher, offer to volunteer. Hand the teacher your business card or a note with brief information about what you can do (for example, speaking to a science class about chemistry or tutoring) and how to reach you.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open All Year

Through positive, respectful, and helpful communication, you can build a good relationship with your child's teacher that will last all year and beyond.

- Send a note of appreciation to the teacher when something goes well in her/his class, and mention this to the principal.
- Give the teacher your phone number and e-mail address.
- Ask what you can do to help with classroom activities, presentations or fairs, field trips, or anything you can do at home.
- Check the school and teacher Web sites (if available) to keep up with what is going on, in and out of the classroom.

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