

Effective Communication & The School Community

The interface between school staff and students families is a large part of a working school community. This is apart from the main job of all school personnel, which is to create a safe learning environment for hundreds of students. When you take your child to school in the morning, you're not dropping them off — you're handing them over to a trusted partner, who is dedicated to making sure that your child has everything he or she needs to be successful now and throughout the rest of their educational career. And as with any partnership, communication is the key to success. Here are a few communication tips that are important to maintaining a thriving student family and school relationship.

Communication Musts:

- Speak clearly and concisely. Be specific. Be direct. Be polite. Be professional.
- Use the “I-message” strategy. A particularly good way to prevent escalation of arguments and avoid putting others on the defensive is to use I-messages. When there is a conflict between you and another person, I-messages can help prevent the situation from getting out of control. They also work when you are put on the defensive. There are three parts to an I-message: **Problem behavior:** i.e.: When you interrupt me. **Feelings:** I feel that you think what I’m saying is not important. **Effects or consequences:** I would appreciate it if you would not interrupt me while I’m talking.
- Recognize and honor confidentiality. Information about students in school settings, which also include the school bus, is confidential information. Always maintain confidentiality! Seek a private location if at all possible and avoid noisy areas to facilitate good communication.
- Employ active listening techniques. Active listening is paying attention to the speaker’s verbal and non-verbal communication and asking questions to ensure understanding. It is full-service listening! When using active listening:
 - Verify what you hear: Paraphrase.
 - Clarify what you don’t understand.
 - Ask questions.
 - Validate feelings.
 - Acknowledge feelings.
- **Balance** the tendency to be too emotionally involved to be objective, affecting your ability to make rational decisions and be an effective communicator. **Practice clear boundaries.**
- Respect and honor cultural differences. A lack of knowledge about cultural differences can cause communication problems. A culture is a shared system of beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations and norms of behavior. Members of the same culture have similar beliefs and ideas about how people should behave, think and communicate. When you communicate with someone from a different culture, you do so using beliefs and theories from your own culture, and people from different cultures do likewise. Therefore being aware of other cultures in your school is imperative for effective communication with anyone.
- **Communication never land:** Never use profanity. Never use a threatening tone, posture or look. Never talk down to anyone. Never lose your temper or composure. Never gossip.
- **Barriers to relationship building** Angry or aggressive behavior ---- Blaming --- Inconsistent communication --- Logistics --- Lack of systemic flexibility --- Inaccurate records & written documentation --- Personal comments or attacks toward the school or school personnel ---- Battle of the wills, power struggles ---- Attitudes (staff and family)

Additional Tips:

1. Treat people as individuals first: Respect time and schedule: what might be a good time for you to talk may not be such a good time for the other person.
2. Put yourself in the other persons shoes
3. Say Thank you
4. Do not make judgments or assumptions about other people. Or their children.
5. Don't forget to acknowledge all school staff: classroom aides, lunchroom and playground supervisors, secretaries and school nurses, custodians, and security personnel, bus drivers and crossing guards — anyone who helps to keep the school running and safe.

*Last, but not least: the school community is a large system, filled with many rapidly moving parts going in a variety of directions! The energy is exciting, but can also be difficult for many people. **Trusting** your school community is an important step to communication and **being a part** of your school community. If you need help or have questions please make appointments and use the above mentioned communication strategies. All of our children will thank us for it!*

Being an Advocate for your Child

Each parent wants the best possible learning environment for their child.

Build good relations from the start. Don't wait for an issue to emerge to introduce yourself to your child's teacher. Raising a concern will be easier and less confrontational if open communication has already been established. There are many ways to become a positive force in your child's classroom. Consider dropping a friendly note or making an appointment with the teacher early in the year just to **touch base**. **Volunteering** in the classroom or **chaperoning a class trip** will also help you get to know the teacher better, as well as allow you to observe your child firsthand.

If a problem occurs, gather the details. Perhaps your child is struggling with a subject that used to come easily, or maybe he has voiced concerns about being **teased**. It makes sense to act when you observe an issue or your child tells you something's wrong. Trust your own judgment and move forward, but also make sure you have all the information available.

Begin with the teacher, usually. In most cases, an informal chat with the classroom teacher should be the first step in addressing any issue. Starting with the teacher gives you the opportunity to escalate your complaint should a suitable solution not be reached. The guidance counselor and school psychologist are also helpful in-school resources. The principal is the next step. You can contact the superintendent if the principal is not able to help reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Connect with others. There's strength in numbers and most likely any school-based issue is not unique to your child. Look into your local **PTA** to connect with other parents. If you're concerned about a disability of any kind, contact your state's federally funded parent resource centers.

Keep a record. Document all your communications, both to be on the same page about expectations and so you'll know who told you what and when. If you move beyond the casual chat level, express concerns in writing. Keep a copy, and send the letter by certified mail.

Avoid the blame game. Mixing an important issue that concerns your child with busy teachers and school administrators can make for potentially frustrating feelings. For best results, try to keep your cool. Do try to **be considerate** of the teacher's time. If educational jargon has left your head spinning, use our **teacher translator**, but also feel free to ask for clarification. Even though you may have to be persistent, keep in mind that ultimately everyone involved wants what's best for your child.

Know your rights. Most issues have a good chance of being addressed to everyone's satisfaction within your school community. But if you are unable to get to the resolution you need, legal means are available. If your child's disability affects his educational performance, you have the right under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) to have your child tested to determine his special education eligibility. You can also request mediation or a "fair hearing." Mediation brings you and the school district together with a neutral third party who is trained to help everyone come to an agreement. At a fair hearing, you and the school district present the dispute and a judge issues a decision.

Barriers to Effective Advocacy

Ø Angry or aggressive behavior Ø Blaming Ø Inconsistent communication Ø Logistics
Ø Lack of systemic flexibility Ø Inaccurate records and written documentation Ø Personal comments or attacks toward the school or school personnel Ø Battle of the wills, power struggles Ø Attitudes (staff and family)

Advocating Effectively

Effective Advocacy Tips Ø Introduce yourself soon after the child is placed in the classroom

Ø Ø Ø Ø

Ø Ø

Build a relationship with the child's teacher over time Develop ongoing communication; don't wait until a major problem occurs

Practice respectful communication Be respectful of the teacher's position and understanding of the fact that there are many other children in the room Learn assertiveness skills; a set of relational skills to help you get what you want without being angry or aggressive Put yourself in the other persons shoes

10 Advocating Effectively

Effective Advocacy Tips

Ø Know how and where to get appropriate information

Ø Communicate this information convincingly (firmly but respectfully) to the appropriate helping source with evidence

Ø It is vital that you learn how to step back, reflect, rally your troops, and encourage others to think outside the box, be creative, and find common ground

Ø Remember to focus on the positive and on solutions

Ø Balance the tendency to be too emotionally involved to be objective, effecting your ability to make rational decisions and be an effective advocate

11

Advocating Effectively

Effective Advocacy Tips

Ø Develop the confidence to do your own advocating

Ø Develop problem solving techniques to overcome obstacles

Ø Support your child's efforts towards independence

Ø Learn what your rights are and what your child's rights are

Ø Use effective communication in advocating for your rights

Ø Analyze problems and pinpoint areas of responsibility

Ø Learn about community resources and agencies

Ø Network with other parents and groups for mutual support

Ø Teach Self-Advocacy Ø Research has shown that as children enter high school they are often unprepared to

communicate their learning needs to others Ø Model advocacy skills for your child

12

Advocating Effectively

http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Building_Maintaining/?page=3