Nurturing the Parent-Teacher Alliance

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by
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Introduction

Of the many professional responsibilities teachers assume, none is more important than establishing a productive working relationship with the parents of their students. Lamentably, home and school too often are perceived as distinct and unrelated elements in a child’s life. The gap between the two may at times seem wide and impossible to cross. In some instances the home-school relationship actually is viewed by parents or teachers as adversarial. Teacher expectations of pupils are intricately connected to teacher expectations of parents and to parent expectations of teachers. When questioned about the nature of a productive home-school relationship, a typical teacher may reply, “Well, I would like my parents to give their children more help in areas needing improvement, provide more support for school rules and disciplinary actions, and attend parent-teacher conferences” (Simmons 1990). The importance of productive, ongoing involvement between parents and teachers is clear and readily acknowledged by most teachers, but the means by which such relationships are sought and secured is less clear and often an area of great concern.
In order to be really successful in working with parents, teachers not only must desire good relationships but also must be prepared to facilitate such interactions. MacDonald (1991) contends many teachers never develop the skills needed for productive meetings with parents, particularly when sensitive areas need to be discussed. For beginning teachers especially, learning to engage in successful dialogue with parents can be a challenge that involves uncertainty and considerable anxiety (Clark 1999, Partin 1999). Even experienced teachers may feel threatened if their authority is questioned (Joseph and Burnaford 1994). While it is important to recognize that conferences frequently raise the anxiety level for teachers, it is equally as important to recognize that parents may feel similarly concerned (Fielstein and Phelps 2001).

The purpose of this fastback is to provide guidelines for proactive leadership on the part of teachers as they seek to improve student achievement by cultivating a partnership with the most significant adults in the child’s life. We make explicit recommendations concerning conferences in the home, in school, and by phone. We offer suggestions for documenting contacts or attempted contacts with the parents or guardians and for engaging and seeking the cooperation of resistant or aggressive parents.

Our aim is to help teachers better understand the importance of forming alliances with the primary caregivers of the children whom they teach. Although we use the word parent throughout this fastback, we do so with no intention to overlook any individuals who
lovingly assume this role. In an ever-changing society, it is important to be mindful of the many different people who may be primary caregivers, including birth parents, adoptive parents, stepparents, foster parents, or guardians, whether related or unrelated to the children. The actual familial background of those responsible for children is far less important than the relationship between children and the caring adults responsible for their well-being. Caring teachers intentionally will reach out to form the kind of alliances that encourage children to understand that the home and school are working together to ensure their success.
Essentials for a Positive Parent-Teacher Relationship

Open, honest communication between parents and teachers and shared goals for the student are the basic principles that help foster a positive parent-teacher relationship.

A worthwhile relationship between home and school does not develop automatically. It requires hard work and determination. Efforts to establish such a relationship may be exasperating and seemingly unproductive. Yet for the teacher who is willing to invest in this process in order to understand children, the benefits are high. It should be kept in mind that as much as teachers need to know about the home perspective, parents have an even greater need to know how their children are doing from the school perspective. Therefore the first and most basic principle is to recognize the need to secure honest and positive two-way communication, which will result in truly facilitative conferences.

Successful communication is one of the cornerstones of successful parenting and successful teaching — the
two most important and most difficult jobs we have. The notion that teachers and parents need to communicate regularly and frequently about the children in their care is not new. However, the means by which this communication can be carried out in a positive, facilitative manner is not necessarily obvious to parents or teachers. In an ideal school environment, parents and teachers would contact each other frequently and spontaneously to discuss ways in which they can mutually support their children’s learning. In most real-world settings, parents and teachers directly communicate with each other infrequently, usually when one or both are frustrated with or worried about a child. Thus typical communications between the significant adults in a child’s life often occur in the context of some emotional discomfort and apprehension. A teacher wishing to communicate successfully with parents must consider the emotional, social, and intellectual climate in which this communication is to occur and be willing to accommodate a variety of concerns and a variety of starting points from which successful communication may commence.

Clear communication is essential for successful facilitative parent-teacher relationships. The notion of a mutually beneficial parent-teacher alliance is not always successfully communicated to parents by teachers. Teachers and parents have the unique potential to create a consistent, supportive foundation of clear guidelines, firm yet realistic expectations, and genuine acceptance and approval on which each child can build his or her understanding of the universe. A lack of clarity in com-
munication between parents and teachers can undermine this notion of consistency and present to the child a set of confusing and even conflicting options and expectations.

Another essential aspect of successful facilitative parent-teacher relationships is to make certain everyone, especially the child concerned, views the teacher and the parents as a team united in support of common goals. Thus, to begin the process of successful communication, it is helpful to conceptualize the teacher-parent relationship as an alliance of concerned adults whose focus is the growth, development, and well-being of a child. Teachers and parents share a key, and rewarding, responsibility. Their task is to provide a nurturing and challenging environment, which will facilitate the unfolding and realization of each child's potential. Ideally, this is a shared partnership.

**Facilitative Assumptions**

Certain assumptions form the foundation for the successful parent-teacher alliance. These assumptions are built on feelings of mutual respect and genuine concern for the well-being of children. When cooperative, rather than adversarial, attitudes prevail, teachers and parents can work out most of the problems faced by young people. Fundamental to the process of establishing a common purpose are the following assumptions:

*Assume goodwill.* When parents and teachers meet to discuss a problem about a child, each should assume the person they are talking with cares about the child
and wants him or her to do well. Expressions of concern may vary widely or be masked because of shame or anxiety, but a fair assumption is that the vast majority of the parents have the best interests of their children at heart. The definitions of "best interest" also may vary widely; but that is a reflection of one's understanding and experience, not a measure of one's love (Howe and Simmons 2000).

Assume competence. Teachers and parents may have very different ideas or no ideas about the best way to resolve a problem; but when two or three caring adults put their heads together in a child's best interest, they should be able to find a workable solution. Indeed, once the parents feel their input is valid, they likely will stand ready to reinforce school expectations and to monitor their child's behavior in appropriate ways (Orlich et al. 1998).

Assume a shared responsibility. When mapping out a plan to help Susie with social studies or Albert with polite speech, it is most useful to assume joint ownership in the solutions. Parents, teacher, and Susie or Albert all need to cooperate and participate in the solution (Howe and Simmons 1993). No one gets to be a passive observer. It is not a question of loading a problem on one set of shoulders or another. The task is to work as a team toward a common goal.

Reasons to Communicate

At both state and federal levels, parents and teachers are being exhorted to engage in collaborative endeavors to promote the overall well-being of children.
For example, Goals 2000 (www.ed.gov/legislation/goals2000) calls on schools to work in partnership with parents to enhance the cognitive and the psychosocial development of all children. This challenge is not a difficult one, because in reality both parents and teachers share the same concerns — what is in the best interest of the child. Once these caring adults are able to assume goodwill, competence, and shared responsibility, almost any obstacle can be handled successfully (Simmons 2003). In order to implement these basic assumptions, communication represents the key to successful parent-teacher alliances. Although the reasons to communicate are many, some are fundamental in fostering and manifesting productive relationships.

Regular updates. One means of ensuring the lines of communication remain open between parents and teachers is to establish a pattern of regular contacts with the home to keep parents advised on their child’s progress and performance. These updates also can provide the teacher an opportunity to seek or provide information about past or upcoming activities. Parents come to expect and rely on such communications as a means of supplementing the sometimes minimal or elusive responses children provide to the question, “How was your day?”

Sharing a joy. Call for positive reasons. When a student has enjoyed some particular success, turned in an exceptionally good piece of work, or simply made some noticeable improvement in a given area, a call to parents is especially appropriate. Nothing brings more delight to a parent than hearing good news about an
offspring. Such an occurrence creates a feeling of competence for all concerned and helps solidify the teacher-parent alliance.

Seek assistance. Call to prevent problems. Bluestein notes, "Getting your version to the parent before the child does can often prevent serious miscommunication or the anxiety of the parent wondering why 'the teacher never called me about that'" (1989, p. 18). A veteran special education teacher related a story of one of her emotionally challenged students who was prone to crawl under tables. One day he did so and was inadvertently kicked in the eye by another child. The teacher immediately called the home. The parent's reaction was, "You did not need to be concerned since he was not really hurt." However, the wise teacher knew that had the child gotten to the parent first, the reaction might have been much different.

Teachers also may seek assistance from parents in other ways. Parents often provide support for field trips or celebrations. Parents may be willing to share information with or make presentations to a class on a variety of areas of relevant expertise, which support and enrich learning opportunities.

Attending to a concern. Call to solve problems. Teachers should let the child know that they want to help solve problems but that they will also need his or her help, as well as the help of the parents. It is necessary to begin to involve the parents as soon as possible. In some situations, the problem can be addressed satisfactorily in its entirety by means of the telephone, e-mail, or note home. In other cases, such communication may
be used simply to describe the problem and to arrange a time for a face-to-face conference. The important thing is not to let the problem grow worse through inaction or lack of attention.

**Elements of Effective Professional Communication**

Teachers have highly specialized knowledge that allows them to recognize areas needing attention. However, communication always must be tactful so that parents do not feel that they are being “talked down to” or lost in professional jargon (Bluestein 1989). Effective professional communication has the following characteristics:

*Open.* Effective communicators are willing to communicate directly about issues that concern a student in their care. There is no hesitancy because a topic is uncomfortable to raise or an issue seems too complicated to address. If a concern exists, it must be communicated in a tactful, open manner.

*Honest.* Effective communicators are honest in their communication. Information shared is accurate and true. There is no attempt to conceal, manipulate, or deceive even for the assumed “greater good.” Parents come to know that information shared by such a teacher is absolutely reliable.

*Clear and specific.* Effective communicators provide clear messages with specific information, avoiding ambiguity or uncertainty. Parents are then clear on the nature and scope of any concerns identified.

*Professional.* Effective communicators share informa-
tion and conduct conferences from a professional stance. They provide a distinct perspective to parents regarding their child, grounded in an understanding of child development, human learning, and school climate and culture. Parents come to rely on and value this unique view into their child's life.

Focused on solving problems. Effective communicators identify issues or concerns in order to solve problems. There is no need to place blame. The goal is to resolve difficulties for the good of a child. Parents come to view encounters with such a teacher as opportunities to improve the welfare of their child.

Confidential. Finally, teachers need to assure parents that information shared during the conference will be confidential and used only in the child's best interest. If the parent reveals sensitive information about the child, the teacher should use that information only if it will improve the education of the student. All other information given by the parent should be kept confidential unless the child's well-being is at risk.

Documentation

Whether the conference is in person or by telephone, it should be documented, as should any attempted contacts. In other words, if the teacher requests a conference and then the parents are no-shows, it should be documented. If the teacher calls and someone other than the parents answers or if they get the answering machine, documentation is useful. Such information can be very helpful if later questions or conflicts should arise.
After each conference, a summary of what happened should be recorded. A statement should be made regarding the purpose of the conference, the primary points of discussion, and the recommended courses of action. The information is then filed in a system easily accessible to the teacher, such as index cards or a computer file. Quick and easy access to such information may prevent misunderstandings and further the cause of clear, open communication between home and school.
Channels of Communication

At every contact, teachers must assure parents that they are deeply concerned about the success of each child as an individual. This is why early contact with the home is essential. Too often, no connection is made until problems arise and mutual frustration and anxiety jeopardize the process of building a relationship. This is unfortunate because it is so easy to begin a pleasant relationship based on mutual respect when teachers reach out to parents before difficulties arise. Although sending letters, notes, and e-mails to the home are good for making early contact, they may lack the warmth and interaction that are possible through direct conferences. Teachers who are successful in working with parents will avail themselves of either a face-to-face conference or a telephone conference early in the academic year.

Asynchronous Communication

Web page postings. Many teachers host a website for their classroom that contains a variety of useful information for parents on such things as homework
assignments and upcoming class activities. The information typically is posted for all to read and therefore is general in nature (not child specific). However, some teachers create personalized access sites for each family, where specific information about a child can be obtained and where comments and questions can be posted to the teacher. This requires a commitment to monitor and faithfully update such sites, or else the sites will be perceived by parents as "dry wells." Such sites require ready access to the Internet and are essentially passive communications, that is, the information is posted but will be received only if parents choose to access the site.

E-mail/note/letter home. Such communications are similar in function and purpose but have some interesting differences. All three allow the parent some time to consider the information and perhaps discuss it with the child before responding. The e-mail and note home offer a degree of informality compared to a typed letter sent on school stationery. The e-mail and letter also have a more reliable (but not foolproof) expectation of arriving at their destination.

Synchronous Communication

Home visits. One of the most effective but least used kinds of conferences is the home visit. Finding the time and personal energy to engage in this process requires a special kind of commitment. Teachers who do so find that they gain a far greater understanding of each child than they expected. They not only learn how the child lives on a day-to-day basis, they also forge a meaning-
ful and personal link with parents whom they might otherwise never see. It should be remembered that some parents feel uncomfortable coming to school. For more than a few, school was never a happy place, and for others a residual feeling of not being welcome there makes returning nearly unthinkable. One of the basic principles of facilitative conferences is to keep communication open. A visit in the home can help to do this because it tells parents that the teacher is concerned enough to go the extra mile and that the relationship is expected to be more than one-sided. This measure of teacher commitment calls for and encourages a like response in the parent. The content of the conference in the home will not differ markedly from any other face-to-face contact in terms of goals and outcomes, but there are some considerations:

- Make an appointment. Earlier an assumption of goodwill was made. Teachers should not let a seemingly small matter undermine a larger expectation. Parents may not welcome an unannounced visit.
- State the purpose of the visit when you make the appointment. If the teacher will visit all of the students' homes, then the explanation can be simple. However, if the teacher plans to visit only some students' homes, then a tactful but honest reason for the visit should be stated. For example, if the teacher plans to visit only those parents who were not at the most recent in-school conference, the teacher might say, "I realize it was impossible for
you and some of the other parents to be present at the opening of school conference, and so I am trying to visit each of your homes in order to get better acquainted and to discuss each child's early adjustment to school."

- Plan to visit early in the school year. In fact, if rolls become available in the summer, visit before school starts. This counters speculation that the teacher is coming because there is a problem. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to learn about each child before the start of the school term, which can make for a smoother beginning for teachers, children, and parents.

- Use caution and common sense. Not all neighborhoods are safe. For this reason, it often is advisable to team up with another teacher who wishes to visit parents in the same area. Whether alone or in pairs, teachers should tell someone, such as the building principal, exactly where they are going and approximately what time they expect to return. It is particularly important to exercise caution if the visit is to be made in the evening.

- Respect the family situation. Teachers usually come from middle-class homes and may be particularly surprised by the living conditions and circumstances that are usual for many lower-income families. Avoid making judgments. Take the time to find something of interest — a family photograph, for example — and comment on it. The education a teacher receives while on a home
visit often provides understandings that will help the teacher ensure the student’s success.

- Include the child when planning a visit. An appointment should be made that will coincide with a time when the child is at home. But do not merely assume that the child will be at home. The child will benefit from seeing that the teacher is concerned about his or her well-being.

- Create an expectation of ongoing communication. Let the family know that the relationship is to be continuous and interactive. Leave a card with your name, phone numbers, and the best times to be reached. Some parents may lack ready transportation and will find phone conferences the best avenue for ongoing communication.

Telephone conferences. There is little or no excuse for teachers failing to use the telephone as a means of fostering facilitative conferences. The great majority of today’s students have phones in their homes, and telephones afford an excellent means for getting to know parents, letting them know the teacher wants to help their child, and providing immediate feedback concerning their child’s performance. The following suggestions should be beneficial to teachers who wish to maximize use of this powerful conference tool.

- Call early in the school term. If a home visit has not already occurred, call each home during the first few days of school. Doing so will allow teachers to introduce themselves and to encourage parents to join with the teacher in a cooperative relationship.
Students also are put on alert that they must give their best performance because their teacher is taking responsibility for working with the home.

- Call at appropriate times. While the dinner hour may afford the best opportunity to reach parents, it is generally not a desirable time to call. Parents, like everyone else, need time to get home, prepare the evening meal, and relax a little before being “put back into gear.” Do not call a parent at work unless there is an emergency or unless all other attempts have failed and the problem is too pressing to leave unattended. With so many families working a multitude of schedules, it may be difficult to find a convenient time to call. A useful approach is to ask parents to tell you a convenient time to call when they respond to the introductory paperwork that typically is sent home to be read and signed at the beginning of each school year.

In-school conferences. The most frequent kind of conference takes place at school, often in response to a problem. While conferences at school are desirable, they should not be the only means of discussing a child’s performance and they should not be primarily remedial in nature. The proactive teacher will be concerned with facilitative conferences, which are more likely to prevent problems. Simmons (1991) suggests these steps:

- Plan ahead. Get the facts. Prior to meeting with parents to discuss significant issues, teachers
should have a clear understanding of their own and the child’s parents’ concerns and expectations. Teachers should be prepared to share work samples, portfolios, test scores, behavioral anecdotes, and other information that has a direct bearing on the purpose of the conference. For example, in some cases videotapes and audiotapes of the student can be used to give a more complete picture of the student’s behavior or performance. A gradebook alone should not be used as a means of proving that the problem belongs to the student.

- Make a personal connection. At the outset of a meeting with parents, teachers should spend a few minutes sharing some thoughts and feelings of a positive nature about the child and expressing appreciation of parents’ concern as evidenced by their attendance at the meeting. Whether parents initially appear appreciative or hostile, defensive or aggressive, involved or detached, they have shown enough interest in their child and in the teacher’s relationship with their child to discuss matters face to face. Epstein (1995) asserts that as parents and teachers work in concert, a caring community emerges and the chance for student success escalates.

- Set an agenda. Although this may have already been done by phone or note, it is helpful to precede a discussion of specific concerns with a statement about the purpose of the meeting and the goals to be accomplished. The teacher also should allow for parental input in setting this agenda.
• Attend to the environment. Arrange for a private, comfortable meeting place where parents can discuss their child without intrusion. Sitting behind a desk may make the teacher appear intimidating, and so the seating should be informal. Well-organized files, record books, and other materials should be close at hand.

• Set a professional tone. Remember that people often are judged by the way they look, and so teachers should dress in a professional manner. They should use controlled, specific, simple (no jargon) language and be mindful of unspoken messages conveyed by gestures, body language, and facial expressions.

• Establish rapport. Greet the parents warmly; welcome them into the classroom. Remember that parents are essential allies. The teacher should take a few minutes to establish rapport by asking them about their family or engaging in relevant “small talk.” Offering coffee or soft drinks can personalize the conference.

• Communicate accurately. Share clear, specific information with parents during the conference, and give parents opportunities to share their perceptions. Parents appreciate reassurance that their child is regarded as an individual of worth. But it is equally important to describe areas needing improvement. Jones and Jones (1990) recommend “sandwiching” suggestions for improvement between positive comments. This approach ensures a positive beginning and ending for the confer-
ence, but makes certain that the “meat” gets attention. The goal is to solve a problem, not place blame. When addressing difficult or troubling behaviors that a child exhibits, both teachers and parents may become frustrated at times. The teacher’s task is to remain open, accepting, and objective even when parents do not. Teachers who model a relaxed, interested, and dispassionate attitude encourage a similar response from parents.

- Be specific. Focus on specific behavior that needs attention and specific approaches to address problems. When describing problem behavior, give specifics about actions, frequency, intensity, and duration so that parents can fully appreciate the nature of the concern. This same level of clarity is even more important when discussing and developing an intervention plan.

Some final thoughts about communication: Before presenting data, it is important to hear the parents’ perceptions about their child. Teachers need to encourage parents to freely express their ideas and opinions. By the nature of their job, teachers are accustomed to doing much of the talking; and when a bit of anxiety is added to the mix, the tendency to dominate the conversation may escalate. Esler and Sciortino (1991) remind us that teachers must be careful not to do all of the talking, but to be sure that everyone, even the child (if included in the conference) takes turns talking and listening. MacDonald (1991) suggests that teachers practice listening attentively and empathetically and then
reflect what they have heard by paraphrasing the message. Faber and Mazlish (1995) point out that parents, like everyone else, desire to be respected. One of the ways teachers accord them this social courtesy is by actively listening to their concerns. For example, parents who move into a new community may worry that their child is not adapting well socially and, as a result, is having difficulty focusing on the academic aspects of school. The teacher might respond, "I sense you are concerned that Dale may be feeling a bit lonely and finding it hard to make new friends quickly." Such reflective listening not only conveys respect, it also ensures that participants understand the same message.

Successful communicators listen actively by maintaining eye contact with parents and giving complete attention. Taking notes while listening communicates to parents that the teacher sincerely wants to understand their child. Rapport is enhanced when a teacher:

- Takes time to create a friendly, informal atmosphere.
- Maintains a positive attitude.
- Uses language that is understandable and jargon-free.
- Listens carefully to what parents say.
- Assures parents that their confidence will be respected.

Talking About Tough Issues

At times, teachers find that they must discuss issues that are uncomfortable for some or all of the partici-
pants in the conference. Sometimes a child’s behavior is particularly upsetting or challenging. Sometimes the implications of a child’s academic or behavioral performance indicate that significant or long-term interventions are necessary for the good of the child. Parents have a tremendous emotional investment in their children (Manning and Schindler 1997). Thus productive alliances are more easily established when teachers communicate the notion that they are genuinely interested in partnering with parents to both nurture and challenge the child. When parents recognize that their child is accepted and liked by the teacher, the gate is open to address whatever problems or challenges may need attention (Simmons 2003). When discussing difficult issues, the following tips will be helpful:

- **Differentiate the behavior from the person.** While teachers may disapprove of a particular behavior, they need to show that they still value and care for the student.
- **Protect against infectious negativism.** At times, challenges may discourage parents and teachers, who may be inclined to see the student’s situation as hopeless. It is important to remain realistic and optimistic. No child is beyond help or hope.
- **Make a plan.** It is vital to have a clear, specific plan that will focus on and resolve identified concerns. The plan should clearly describe each participant’s role in solving the problem.
- **End positively and stay in touch.** Always attempt to end the meeting on a positive note. When teachers
and parents work together, even very difficult problems get solved.

One way to keep the focus positive is simply to enlist parent participation by asking, "What can we do together to solve this problem?" Brainstorming possible solutions and then deciding which tactic likely will be most successful can be very productive. If the problem is incomplete homework, what action will solve the problem? Will making sure the student has written down the assignment help? Will having the parent sign the homework improve its quality? If a follow-up conference has been called to share an exceptionally excellent piece of work or a great report card, it also can help to brainstorm ways to appropriately recognize the child's achievement and reinforce success. Will the child value a note from the parent? Would a special certificate be meaningful? Or would the parents like to provide a treat at home?

The teacher should conclude the conference by briefly summarizing what has taken place. Restate the roles of the parent, the teacher, and the child. Rose (1998) recommends stating the course of action in writing, recording precisely what each person has agreed to do. When parents have specific responsibilities, they will be more likely to recognize the relationship as one that is cooperative and focused on improving their child's performance. "Giving parents a sense of participation and promoting a bond of cooperation between the parent and teacher will result in conferences which are less anxious and adversarial and more focused on
improving the quality of instruction” (Simmons 1991, p. 122). Establish a reasonable timetable for the imple-
mentation, and set a date and time for the next confer-
ence if deemed necessary. Finally, the teacher also
should identify a clear system of ongoing communica-
tion, including means and frequency, between parents
and teacher as they work together to resolve a problem.

**Working with the Resistant or Aggressive Parent**

Nearly all beginning and many veteran teachers ex-
perience some degree of “parent phobia.” Most teachers
will agree with Manning and Schindler (1997) that im-
parting troublesome information to parents is one of
their hardest tasks. Nearly all teachers worry from time
to time about encounters with parents who are antagon-
istic or hostile. By and large, such fears are unfounded,
as both parents and teachers want the same thing,
namely, a well-behaved, well-adjusted, and academically
successful student. Most parents are pleasant, co-
operative, and kind people. However, teachers sooner
or later encounter parents who are angry or who have
personal problems that lead them to act in a hostile
manner. This behavior is most likely to occur when a
child is not doing well and when the trust relationship
between the parents and the teacher has not been ade-
quately developed and nurtured. When an explosive
situation appears to be in the making, it is up to the
teacher to defuse it as quickly as possible. The teach-
er’s verbal and nonverbal behavior becomes the critical
element. Bluestein offers teachers the following do’s and don’ts for dealing with the aggressive parent.

**Do:**

- Make certain you address all their concerns.
- Ask them to clarify any complaints that are too general.
- Show them the list [of concerns] and ask if it is complete.
- Ask them for suggestions for solving any of the problems listed.
- Write down the suggestions.
- Speak softly even if they speak loudly. (Bluestein 1989, p. 19).

**Don’t:**

- Put the parent on the defensive about anything.
- Talk about other children or compare this child with other children.
- Talk about other teachers to the parents unless the remarks are of a complimentary nature.
- Belittle the administration or make derogatory remarks about the school district.
- Argue with the parent.
- Try to outtalk a parent.
- Interrupt the parent to make your own point.
- Go too far with a parent who is not ready and able to understand your purpose.
- Ask parents questions that might be embarrassing to them. Only information pertinent to the child’s
welfare is important. Questions asked out of mere curiosity are unforgivable (1964, p. 533).

One of the best ways to calm parents is to be sympathetic to their feelings. Teachers who sense hostility or resistance should first examine themselves, asking, “What am I doing that may be offensive to the parent? Am I causing or adding to the problem?” Self-analysis can help teachers approach parents in a more sensitive manner. An experienced teacher explained that she always says to an upset parent, “I can appreciate your feelings of frustration, but remember that I really do want to support you. It is you who must provide for the lifelong education of your child. I will have the privilege of only 180 days. Please help me to understand how I can help you.”

If parental behavior is clearly counter-productive, such as attending the conference intoxicated, using abusive language, or showing signs of potentially violent behavior, the teacher should politely but firmly terminate the conference and offer to reschedule at another time. After this action is taken, the teacher should immediately leave the setting and inform a supervisor of what has occurred.
Student Participation in the Parent-Teacher Conference

An essential member of the parent-teacher-child triad often is not included in the deliberations: the child. The child's social and intellectual development must be carefully considered when determining how and when the child may either facilitate or inhibit effective communication between parents and teachers. Including the child in communication between these important adults is fundamental, but relying on the child to negotiate this relationship makes for confusion, miscommunication, and frustration. This is especially true for younger children and for students of all ages who are experiencing significant academic or behavioral difficulties in the classroom.

As a general rule, we recommend including the student. As Ricci (2000) points out, students need to share in the responsibility for their learning. When teachers, parents, and the student join together as a team, it is much easier to move away from blaming and toward solving a problem. Student inclusion also affords the opportunity for teacher and parents to present a united front to a student who may be attempting to manipu-
late parent or teacher feelings and perceptions. Such inclusion also can provide useful information about how parents and teachers interact with the child. Following are considerations worth noting when including a student in the conference:

*Time and length of conference.* Conferences in the late afternoon or evening may find the child tired, inattentive, and highly distractible and distracting. Older students may have work or social responsibilities, which should be respected when scheduling the conference.

*Parent input.* The notion of including the child may be unexpected to some parents, or the parents may have information they wish to share with the teacher but not the child. Discussing with the parents the intent and importance of including the child helps identify and address any such concerns.

*Student awareness and opportunity to plan.* Just as the parents and the teacher are aware of the proposed meeting, the student also should be informed and encouraged to prepare for this meeting by thinking about his or her concerns and issues that are important to discuss. Students may want to ask for advice or support in preparing for the conference, something that should be encouraged.

*Teacher as bridge between parents and student.* Sometimes school and home problems combine in frustrating ways that place parents and children at odds. Teachers must be aware that such frustrations can seriously impede effective communication. The teacher's task may be to find ways to encourage parents and children to hear and understand each other.
Active participation. Students should be viewed as active participants in the dialogue and encouraged to contribute at a level appropriate to their intellectual, social, and emotional capabilities. Active involvement increases the student's sense of participation and commitment.

Maintaining focus. The student's input during a conference may stray from the topics at hand and may involve information or concerns about other students that have no bearing on the problems under discussion. Stories about problems others have experienced also may be used as a means of changing focus at times when parents and teacher are asking the student to attend to his or her own behavior. Regardless of the reasons for such digressions, the teacher needs to refocus gently but clearly on identifying and solving the problem at issue. Parents will appreciate a teacher who discourages gossip and will feel safer in sharing their own concerns in such an atmosphere.

When Not to Include the Student

While student inclusion is generally recommended, teachers may decide against including the student in a conference for one or more of the following reasons:

Strained or tenuous parent-teacher relations. Despite the best efforts of a concerned teacher to establish and maintain a positive cooperative alliance with parents, there may be times when the relationship is strained. A teacher may decide at such times that significant work must first be done between teacher and parents — before including the child in a conference.

Student's affective or behavioral concerns. Sometimes a
student's problems are so intense that the student's behaviors will interfere with the ability of the teacher and the parents to communicate. Or the problem may center on a sensitive issue, such as an impending divorce or a serious illness, which has yet to be shared with the child.

**Strong opposition.** If for any reason parents or students are seriously opposed to student inclusion in the conference, forcing the issue rarely helps. A conference held with willing participants is more productive.
Conclusion

Productive relationships with their students' parents are an important responsibility for all teachers. Here are some points to remember:

This is about the child. The goal is to form as positive a connection as possible for the benefit of the student.

Parents don't always take it well if their child is having a problem; they often take it personally. When parents believe that their child is not succeeding, they are understandably concerned and often emotionally upset. It is no small issue for any parents to consider a difficulty in their child's life. Teachers must strive to reassure parents and remain focused on solving problems.

Every encounter is an opportunity. Whether a particular encounter with parents goes smoothly or ends with the teacher's discontinuing the conference because of the parents' inability to participate in an appropriate manner, the child's best interest must be maintained. Every encounter offers the teacher an opportunity to advocate for an alliance for learning focused on the good of the child.

Teachers and parents need to perceive themselves as a united team of caring adults who work together to
appropriately support the physical, emotional, and intellectual development of the child. Such a relationship requires acceptance, trust, respect, clarity, and honesty. These are qualities inherent to many successful human relationships, but they also are qualities that may not come easily when adults communicate infrequently and rarely face to face.

The task for a teacher wishing to establish a facilitative, effective alliance with parents is to communicate often, to invite and encourage parents to be present in the classroom, and to expect a degree of initial uncertainty or defensiveness. Teachers must model a high degree of acceptance, trust, respect, clarity, and honesty. Only by working as partners can parents and teachers help the learner find his or her rightful place in society and thereby achieve a happy and productive life (Balow 1999).


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