

8 Tips for Building Healthy Parent/Teacher Relationships

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It's astonishing but true: Many children spend more of their waking hours with their teachers each weekday than they do with their parents. By the time parents get home from work and kids get home from afterschool activities, there are only a few hours left in the day to get dinner, do homework, perhaps go to a kid event, and get everyone to bed.

Yes, those are all important activities. Yes, parents can get some quality time in at dinner, while helping with homework, and in the car going to and from whatever is on the schedule. But meanwhile, there's another adult who is teaching, influencing, and, I certainly hope, having some fun with our kids for 6 hours a day – their teachers.

When we're on the same team, our kids usually do better in school. When we know and trust each other, our kids can't play one against the other when they find work challenging or want to avoid a task. When there's good communication between us, accomplishments get acknowledged, little problems don't tend to become big ones, big ones can be better managed.

I've been on both sides. As a junior high English teacher in the early part of my career, I had over 100 kids a semester whose personalities and progress I needed to learn well enough so that I could respond to concerned parents. As a mother of 4 kids, at times I've been one of those concerned parents who wanted her kids' teachers to know their personalities and progress well enough to keep me informed. What I learned from both experiences is the importance of a strong parent-teacher partnership, especially when a child is having a hard time.

8 Tips for Building Healthy Parent/Teacher Relationships

Here are a few reminders of what we parents can do to build a positive and productive partnership with our child's teachers.

- **Introduce yourself to the teacher.** Start the year off right. Don't wait for a problem before making contact. Find a way to say hello, to help the teacher attach your face to your name, and to make a cordial connection. If the school limits contact immediately before and after school, email the teacher and ask if there's a convenient time when you can just stop by. This isn't the time to have a lengthy conversation. It's a time to simply let the teacher know who you are and that you are a parent who is interested in your child's education.
- **Introduce your child.** Elementary classroom teachers often have 20 – 40 new children to get to know each year. (Secondary teachers and specialists like art and gym teachers may have as many as 200!) Help them out a little. Write a brief note or email to the teachers telling them a little bit about your child's strengths and interests. Add a few goals and hopes you have for the year. If you have a particular concern or your child has a particular challenge, briefly describe that as well. Include phone numbers and times when you prefer to be contacted.
- **Go to "open house."** Teachers tend to be most interested in the families who show some interest. Open house, or back-to-school night, is a great time to get a sense of the teacher's goals for the year and to learn about his or her approach. Most teachers spend hours preparing their classrooms and lessons. Take the time to really look around the room and to comment positively on what you see.

This is not the time to corner the teacher with your own concerns. Other parents want time too. Instead, make an appointment for a parent-teacher conference to discuss your child's strengths and goals.

- **Go to the parent-teacher conference prepared.** Respect the teacher's time. Get to your meeting on time and don't overstay your assigned time. Take the time to jot down things you feel are going well as well as concerns. Share the whole list with the teacher right away. Then go back to each item together. You are much more likely to cover everything you want to cover if you are both keeping track.
- **Remember the Golden Rule.** Always assume good will on the teacher's part. People go into this profession because they like kids and they love the process of teaching and learning. Don't go by anyone else's (including your child's) opinion – especially if it's negative. Different people react to each other differently. Your best friend may not like someone you find to be terrific. Your child may need some help adjusting to a new teacher's style.

Also, please remember the teacher is human. Sometimes teachers have a bad day. Sometimes there is a crisis going on in their personal lives. Sometimes they get overwhelmed by all that is expected of them every day. If the teacher snapped at your kid or seems unreasonable, start by asking if everything is okay. A little support often turns things around fast.

- **Communicate regularly.** Email is a great way to maintain a connection. Every few weeks, send a comment on what your child has brought home from school. Be sure to compliment the teacher on interesting lessons and to share moments when your child repeats something positive that happened at school. Thank the teacher for any special efforts on your child's behalf. Let the teacher know early if a particular skill or subject is giving your child trouble. In addition, keep the teacher informed if there are issues at home that should be borne in mind if your child is struggling. Children don't leave family crises (like a parent's or sibling's illness, pending divorce, parental stress) at home. Conversely, they don't leave the excitement about an anticipated event (like a new baby, visiting favorite relatives, a special birthday) at home either. Kids who are unhappy and kids who are excited are often distracted from school work.
- **Help out.** The strained economy is having an impact on schools. Many school systems have increased class size, reduced the number of paraprofessionals, and cut the supply budget. If you have the time, offer to help. Some teachers welcome parent involvement in the classroom. Reading to a small group for an hour each week can let the teacher focus on kids who need extra help. If you have a special talent or interest that is compatible with the curriculum, the teacher may appreciate having you do a guest appearance to enrich the class. Others appreciate it a lot when parents do some of the preparation for lessons at home and bring it in. Still others are enormously grateful when parents donate such items as tissues, pencils, and art supplies to the class.

Always ask before taking action. Schools have different policies for parent participation and donations. Do take no graciously if you're turned down. 99 percent of the time it isn't personal but a matter of school rules.

- **If there's a problem.** This is where the good relationship you've worked so hard to establish pays off. You know that you and the teacher both want the best for your child. If your child carries home a tale of teacher meanness or unfairness, maintain a neutral stance until you have more information. Don't talk negatively about a teacher in front of your kids. Instead, email or call the teacher and ask politely for the teacher's point of view. You're on the same team. There is no need to be aggressive on your child's behalf or defensive on your own. When both parent and teacher stay focused on the problem at hand, be it a child's need for practice with a skill or a bit of an attitude transplant, things can usually be worked out.