

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

Center for the Advancement of Mental Health Practices in Schools

Roadblocks to Communication:

Parents

- Protector role
- Inadequate-Me role
- Avoidance Role
- Indifferent-Parent Role
- Don't-Make Waves Role
- Club-Waving-Advocate Role

School

- Authority-Figure Role
- Sympathizing-Counselor Role
- Pass-the-Buck Role
- Protect-the-Empire Role
- Busy-Teacher Role

Newsletters or written communication

- Send messages home in parent's native language
- Use an appropriate reading level
- Try to keep your newsletter to one page (and remember the \$1 bill rule that says A dollar bill placed anywhere, at any angle, on any page should touch some element of graphic interest—headline, box, screen, bullets, **bold type**, picture—or it's too dull for most people to read.)
- Send audiotapes for parents who cannot read

Phone Calls

- The number of "positive" phone calls you make should outweigh the number of "negative" phone calls. (Only talking to parents when problems arise damages your interpersonal relationship with them.)
- In the first month of school, call each parent and introduce yourself. Tell them how much you are looking forward to working with them in helping their child to succeed.
- Make it a point to call each parent occasionally to give a positive report. (Even the most difficult kids make progress and do good things at times.)
- Balance the discussion of problems with positive reports. (Start the phone call with positive statements, and then discuss problems that may be occurring.)
- Give parents the opportunity to provide solutions to problems.
- Ask the parents for their concerns, and allow ample time for them to respond.
- Reflect (mirror) what you hear the parent saying using "I" statements. ("What I'm hearing you say is....Am I right?")

Conferences or Face-to-Face Interactions

- As with phone calls, balance the positive with the negative. Make a list of at least 10 things you like about the child or the child does well. Add 4 problem areas to the list in which you would really like to see the child improve. Go over the positive statements first.
- Give parents the opportunity to express their concerns and provide solutions to problems.
- Listen to and mirror the messages being returned using "I" statements.
- Communicate always with courtesy, sincerity, and ample time to convey concerns (without interrupting!)
- 15 minutes is often not enough time with which to conduct parent-teacher conferences.

Different Cultures have different rules for:

- Sharing space
- Touching
- Eye contact
- Time ordering of interactions

Communicating with an upset parent-caretaker:

Things to do (depending on culture):

- Shake hands and truly welcome them
- Sit eye to eye and knee to knee
- Listen
- Open your mind
- Keep calm, remain confident
- Establish time limits
- Apologize
- Get to the real issues
- Empathize
- Ask questions
- Speak gently
- Be positive (and very gentle with the negative)
- Redirect
- Welcome constructive criticism
- Don't fight 'em, join 'em
- Give options to parents
- Focus on problems, not personalities

Things not to do:

- Don't interrupt!
- Don't change the subject without warning
- Never focus on things that can't be changed
- Don't complain about your own agenda
- Don't engage in silent combat
- Don't start rehearsing your answer before you've actually heard and understood what the parent is trying to communicate
- Don't advise unless you're asked
- Don't try to persuade the parent that you are right and he/she is wrong
- Don't try so hard to be neutral that you show no empathy
- Don't come across as the know-it-all professional
- Don't talk compulsively and over explain
- Don't let yourself get backed into a corner by a parent who intimidates you
- Don't be so intent on solving a problem that you reach only a superficial resolution

Parents who are really worrisome

- Gather as much information as you can about a parent to help you understand their behavior and motivations
- Keep careful and complete notes about all encounters and experiences with parents
- Keep superiors informed
- Consult with mental health professionals
- Consult with law enforcement professionals
- Know your school board policies, parents' and students' rights, and your job description
- Invite someone else to attend the parent conference to take notes or act as a witness
- Be aware of the laws protecting the rights of children and your legal obligation to report any abuse of the children who attend your school

Information for this handout adapted from the following sources:

Berger, E. H. (2000). *Parents as Partners in Education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Publishing.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (1996). Communicating with culturally diverse parents of exceptional children. Available at: <http://ericed.org/digests/darchives/e497.html>.

McEwan, E. (1998). *How to Deal with Parents who are Angry, Troubled, Afraid, or just Plain Crazy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.