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Why Parents Need to Communicate with Teachers

By Richard Asa
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By this time of the summer, teachers and parents have the coming school year foremost in their minds. Teachers are busily fine-tuning lesson plans; parents are cleaning out the school supply aisles.

As relationships with parents go, however, most "teacher accountability" schemes do not formalize them, says

Jerusha Conner, assistant professor of education and counseling at Villanova University.

Yet, she adds, because relationships between teachers and students "are one of the most important drivers of academic and nonacademic outcomes," close communication with parents is key to teachers knowing their students.

Frequent communication helps teachers gain insight into students' interests and strengths, Conner says, and also "can help ensure that students receive consistent messages and seamless support from classroom to home."

Although such relationships would seem organic — something that just happens as part of the education process — parent involvement varies greatly. It takes a proactive approach from parents to form a relationship with teachers, and an open mind from the teachers to accept parents' input.

How parents benefit: A good relationship with teachers can help parents "learn about strategies to help their child at home, which also support their behavior at school and other places," says Susan Sheridan, professor and director at the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. "Parents who are actively involved in education have been shown to demonstrate greater understanding of the work of schools and positive attitudes about school.

"They report increased communication with teachers, improved relationships with their child, better parenting skills and great involvement in providing learning activities at home."

Reach out early: Establishing a meaningful relationship begins with meeting a child's teacher well before school starts, by making an appointment, according to Scott Mandel, a longtime educator and author of "The Parent-Teacher Partnership: How to Work Together for Student Achievement" (Chicago Review Press).

"Dropping in the first day or two before or after school usually won't work," he says. "The teacher is preoccupied with getting her classroom established."

When you meet, "talk about your child's strengths and weaknesses," Mandel says. "Mention any problems or concerns."

He adds that the teacher should have a parent's cellphone number and email, with the assurance that the teacher can make contact whenever appropriate.

"Basically, you are trying to establish a climate of trust, respect and partnership," Mandel says.

To cement that, follow up the initial meeting with regular contact updates that focus on both the home and school level. But tread carefully, he says, because there is a fine line between being interested and involved and hovering or directing the teacher.

"If you know how your child is doing before a report card shows up, you have a good relationship with your child's teacher," Mandel says.

Seize every opportunity: Don't overlook communication opportunities via orientation sessions, planned teacher meetings, open houses and even Web pages with basic information as well a school's values and expectations, says Margaret Hannah, executive director of the Freedman Center for Child and Family Development at the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology.

If it's feasible, volunteering at school can be invaluable. It gives teachers welcome assistance, and gives parents a perspective of the classroom that may otherwise be impossible, says Denise Daniels, a parenting and child development expert in Minneapolis.

"The key take-away is to show up, be supportive and stay involved," Daniels says. "This shows respect, sensitivity and support for the teacher's role in your children's lives."