

Issues and Solutions in Communicating with Families

Very little professional development time, if any at all, is devoted to helping teachers communicate with every family. The following section is designed to take issues and challenges in communicating with every family and provide practical solutions that can be implemented in a very simple fashion.

Issues in communication seem to be the ones that can anger both teachers and families and create tension, which hinders positive relationship building. Here are some tips and ideas to improve relationships with better communication:

1. *Major changes.* Don't make major instructional or curricular changes without either family input or notice. Changes to calendars, meetings, planned activities, and so forth, without sufficient notice or involvement leads to mistrust and animosity.
2. *Share information in a timely fashion.* The more quickly and thoroughly information is shared with families, the less likely families will be angry, rumors will swirl, and misconceptions will form.
3. *No surprises.* We don't like surprises. Neither do families.
4. *Don't make promises you can't keep.* If you indicate to a parent you will do something, then do it. Often we indicate we will do something or promise to do something and for a host of reasons do not follow through. This only breeds mistrust.
5. *The letter of the law and the spirit of the law.* Use common sense with issues that surround children and families. Don't overreach your authority to prove a point or hold your ground on a particular issue. Know the difference between policy and common sense.
6. *Don't label.* Never label parents by marital status, religious affiliation or beliefs, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.
7. *Don't get defensive.* Remember that most of the messages parents have received over time are perceived to protect teachers and schools without regard to students and their families. Whether true or fair, the perception exists. Defensiveness is natural but unwise and is almost always perceived as guilt.
8. *Meetings.* Give parents a say in meeting calendars. Setting dates with no input and without checking for parent availability is unwise.
9. *Identify meeting purposes.* One of the most damaging things we can do to relationships with families is to set meetings with them and not let them know the purpose of the meeting.
10. *Physical and verbal barriers.* Using furniture, tables, or room setup to keep parents and school employees separated reinforces the notion that we do not value relationships with every family. Using sarcasm, belligerent or demeaning words or actions is never a good idea, regardless of the situation.
11. *Meeting participants held to a minimum.* Parents are often overwhelmed when they come to meetings and the room is filled with specialists and support personnel. If it is critical these people be at the meeting, contact the parent and let them know who will be at the meeting and their purpose for attending. Put them at ease that the meeting will be productive.

12. *Show up.* If you have a scheduled conference or meeting, attend. Don't send an e-mail or a grade sheet in your place.
13. *No blame.* When things don't go exactly right, don't point fingers and blame students, parents, the school, the administration, or other entities. Describe the challenge and work together to find solutions. It doesn't really matter how the problem started or who started it.
14. *Be trustworthy.* You cannot make people trust you, but you can earn the trust of anyone. The unity and consistency of personal and professional behavior that withstands scrutiny and invites confidence goes a long way to establishing healthy relationships with every family.
15. *Keep an open mind.* Don't prematurely judge people you do not know based on rumors or the comments made by others.
16. *Keep calm.* There are difficult people on the earth. Always remain calm. Remember the old saying "To change a difficult person, you must first change yourself."
17. *If you are wrong or make a mistake.* Admit it, apologize for it, and move on. Trying to avoid responsibility will not end well for anyone.
18. *Do your homework.* When confronted with a meeting with a difficult or angry parent, find a piece of positive information about the parent, family, or student and use it to ease the tension.
19. *Think about responses.* If a parent angers you, use the "wait twenty-four hours" rule before responding. Never use e-mail and TYPE IN ALL CAPITALS. We call that "e-yelling."
20. *Demand strategy.* When a parent makes a demand that you cannot meet, do not say "I cannot do that." Simply reiterate the things that you can do. After a few minutes, the strategy will have a calming effect and allow you an opportunity to enlist the parents help in problem solving.
21. *Remember.* Anger is a mask for fear.
22. *Don't do these things.* Interrupt. Think about what you are going to say while the parent is talking. Change the subject. Focus on things that cannot be changed. Complain about your own agenda or situation. Embark in silent combat (stare down). Rehearse your answers before you have heard the question. Give advice unless you are asked. Persuade that you are right and they are wrong. Try so hard to be neutral that you show no empathy. Compulsively talk and over explain. Lie. Let yourself get abused or bullied when sincerely trying to communicate.