

Connect with parents

When parents become involved in schools, children do better, teacher morale improves, parents rate the school higher and the entire educational process benefits.

Start the process by finding ways to open the lines of communication with parents. Here are some guidelines for communicating with parents and involving them in their children's education.

- Take the initiative. Contact parents through phone calls, email and personal notes. Provide information at the beginning of the year on what is covered in the class and what is expected from each student.
- Be sure to share feedback about students. One idea that works well is to catch students doing something good or noteworthy in class, and then generate notes, emails, phone calls or postcards to mail to their parents.
- Consider a variety of communication tools. Ask parents to complete a short questionnaire on their children's likes and interests. Create a classroom website or newsletter. Have students log their assignments and activities briefly in a notebook and take it home each day.
- Tap into parents' knowledge. Give them a chance to share their talents and experience in the classroom, on field trips or before schoolwide audiences. Send them a survey asking how they'd like to be involved.
- Encourage parents to spend time at school. Add a "parent section" to the school library and provide office or lounge space where parents will feel comfortable. Invite parents to spend a day in school with their child.
- Give parents a hands-on role in their child's school success. Ask them to sign off on homework. Encourage them to provide their children with a quiet study area, a good breakfast, a good night's sleep, time to read together and supervision over television viewing and computer use.
- Remember, every family setting is unique. Be aware of the special challenges facing students and their family setting.



Prevent and manage conflict

Conflicts between teachers and parents are hard on everyone. It pays to establish positive relationships early and maintain good communication throughout the year.

- If possible, call parents to introduce yourself before the school year begins. Make positive contact during the first few weeks of school via a phone call, note or newsletter. Use back-to-school night to establish rapport with parents.
- If it becomes necessary to deliver challenging news, don't do it in writing—call or arrange a meeting. Try to make sure parents hear the news from you first.
- Handle disciplinary episodes carefully. Touch base with the student before he or she leaves your room to dispel hard feelings and review the reason for the discipline. Inform your principal afterward.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you may be confronted by angry parents. Remember, it's usually not about you, or not only about you—you are part of a team at school. Don't hesitate to seek advice and support from your principal or experienced colleagues.

- If you're upset by an angry email take time to collect your thoughts, consult with a colleague, mentor or your principal and then call the parent instead of writing.
- When you meet with parents, the best thing you can do is listen. Let them express their feelings, note the issues that are being aired and ask questions that show you are trying to understand their point of view. Once they have calmed down, you can begin to give them missing information and redirect the conversation to how you and they will work as a team to ensure their child is successful.
- Assume positive intentions. If parents are unwilling to listen to you, ask respectfully if they will meet with you and your principal to discuss the situation.
- Remain professional at all times. Choose your words carefully. Never argue, yell or use sarcasm.
- Try to keep the focus on the future—what you and the parents will do to make sure the problem will not recur.
- Set a date for a follow-up meeting or conversation to go over the plan and determine whether any changes are needed.
- Document all contacts with parents, and keep the records in a file for future reference.
- If your supervisor asks you to meet with parents to apologize for your conduct, contact your union's member rights advocate or local president before you agree to do so.