

## **Teacher Talk: Communicating With Your Child's Teachers**

by **Dr. Doug Haddad** [www.doughaddad.com](http://www.doughaddad.com).

When a parent establishes a strong connection with a teacher early on, children quickly realize that both parent and teacher are on the same nurturing team: their team. I have the pleasure of working with middle school children on a daily basis and see their joy and delight when their parents are involved in their schooling. The fact of the matter is, when parents and teachers are united, they've created one of the most powerful partnerships a child could ever ask for.

In order for parents and teachers to be "tuned in to the same station" and successfully make this connection happen, they must be willing to focus on the best interests of the child and let go of judgments and the impulse to jump to conclusions. The most successful proactive approach for benefiting a child is getting to know the child. When both parents and teachers commit to this philosophy, a child feels cared for, loved, and better understood, which results in better behavior and school success.

### **When should I reach out to my child's teacher?**

Parents may be hesitant to meet a teacher, perhaps anticipating bad news or worried that their parenting will be questioned. One of the biggest mistakes parents make is waiting until a problem arises with their child's academic performance or behavior at school to initiate contact with a teacher. At that point, the child is oftentimes deeper into a problem than the parent realizes, and it's harder to start a good parent-teacher relationship when the waters are already troubled.

While being in touch with the teacher when an issue is brought to your attention certainly is imperative, my advice is to be proactive. Don't wait until a problem comes up to begin a relationship with your child's teacher. The easiest way to start is by striking up a conversation with your child's teacher at Parent-Teacher events, like an Open House. Whether it's 20 minutes or two hours, setting aside time to meet your child's teachers will be the best investment you make for your child this school year. Besides getting to hear what teachers have to say about your son or daughter, you're laying the foundation for your parent-teacher relationship. You are also indirectly communicating positive messages to your child: that you care, are aware of what's going on at school, and that you're not too busy for them. And kids tend to like it; they feel they can talk more openly to you about their teachers when you actually know who they are.

### **What should I ask my child's teacher?**

While speaking with a teacher, it is important to make the most of the time, no matter how much or how little it is. Parents sometimes discover interesting information about their child's behavior and overall performance at school versus what they see happening at home.

I advise, first and foremost, before inquiring about how your child is learning, ask the all-important question, "How is my child doing socially?" "Is he being teased or teasing other children?" "Does she appear happy, withdrawn, outgoing?" While grades are important, they are not the only indicator of whether matters are okay at school.

We've seen the increasing amount of school violence over the past 15 years, and have come to understand that preventative factors include helping children feel accepted, valued and respected. One of the biggest reasons for low academic achievement and unhappiness at school is not feeling accepted socially or flat-out being bullied. Knowing if your child is feeling happy, is not in constant fear, and is doing okay socially is extremely important. If this is not the case, these matters must be addressed. Learning appropriate social skills helps develop a child's self-confidence and forms who they will become as they get older and enter the workforce.

Once you've established how your child feels at school, and provided there is time to ask the teacher another question, I would recommend asking: "What are my child's strengths and weaknesses? How can I be of help to my child at home?" A parent will gather a ton of useful information from asking this. You'll find out not only what your child excels at, but also be tipped off to what he or she may be motivated to do in life and have a desire to pursue one day as a career. On the flip side, by recognizing a child's weaknesses, parents can offer support at home to strengthen these areas.

### **How often should I be contacting my child's teachers?**

Once initial connection with the teacher has been made, be sure to learn the class policies, expectations and curriculum and get a good handle on your child's school profile. This, then, opens the door for back-and-forth conversations on an as-needed basis throughout the school year. I recommend that parents ask teachers which method of communication they prefer, email or telephone. Let the teachers know that you want to be kept informed about what is happening at school and if they see any sudden changes or incidents take place. Ultimately, establishing an open, regular means of parent-teacher communication—with the best interests of the child forefront in everyone's mind—will only benefit your child in the long run.

## Tips for General Communication With Teachers

From National PTA <http://www.pta.org/programs/content.cfm?ItemNumber=1758>

Parental involvement enhances student success. A first step toward involvement is **communicating with your child's teacher**. Effective communication consists of meeting with the teacher, being a positive partner in the learning experience, and keeping lines of communication open, according to Suzanna Smith, an associate professor at the University of Florida. As part of the university's Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, she offers these tips for communicating effectively with teachers:

- Offer to help by signing up to donate items or volunteer your time.
- Provide information that will help the teacher get to know your child as an individual. Include relevant information such as allergies, behavior issues (tendency to be distracted, for instance), learning issues, or changes in family life.
- Ask the teacher about expectations regarding homework and what to do if there are problems with homework.
- Find out the best way to contact the teacher. Ask for times when it is convenient to talk. Don't expect them to be able to talk if you happen to be at the school and run into them.
- Write short notes (written or as an e-mail, if allowed) and follow up with a phone message to the school if you don't get a response in a few days. Be sure to include your phone number and/or e-mail address.
- Be diplomatic, especially in e-mail. Choose words carefully and avoid criticizing the teacher.
- In e-mail communication, be brief, stick to the point, and don't use animation, pictures or graphics. Stick to school-related information in e-mail.
- Be positive and curious. Open with phrases such as "Can we talk about...?" Use "I" statements such as "I'm confused about..." so you don't put the teacher on the defensive.



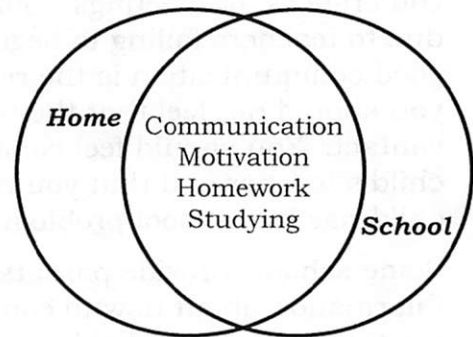
Helping with your child's homework is just one way to be a partner in your child's education.

- Don't be afraid to talk to other school personnel if needed. A school counselor might be able to intervene if you are unable to communicate with a teacher.
- Be a partner in your child's learning. Assist with homework, help your child learn time management skills, talk about school matters at home.
- Send a note of appreciation to the teacher when things go well in class (and mention this to the principal).
- It may be difficult to hear what teachers have to say if they deliver bad news about your child. Try to focus on solutions and work with the teacher to come up with a healthy plan to help your child learn.

## EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION

In teaching and raising children, certain activities are the main job of the home and other activities are the main job of the school. However, there are some important activities for which the home and school share jobs (see Figure 1).

Communication is one of those important activities. In order to help your child do well in school, you and your child's teacher will need to keep good communication. This handout will describe some of the common problems in parent-teacher communication, and six important tips to communicate effectively.



**Figure 1.** Overlapping Responsibilities between Home and School

### **TIP #1: BE A PARTNER WITH THE TEACHER**

Your child will benefit most if you and the teacher work together as partners in your child's education. Most schools and teachers know that good communication with parents is an important part of their job. Some parents have had bad experiences when they were at school. Other parents have had bad experiences communicating with their child's school in the past. Because of this, some parents approach the school with a defensive or angry attitude. However, this can interfere with good communication and does not help the child. It is best to believe that the school and the teacher care about your child. Begin your communication with a positive attitude and a willingness to be a partner with your child's teacher.

### **TIP #2: GET COMFORTABLE WITHIN THE SCHOOL AND WITH THE TEACHER**

Some parents feel uncomfortable in schools and talking with teachers. Some parents do not speak English well or come from different cultural backgrounds than the teacher. Below are some ideas that you can do to help you feel more comfortable at school.<sup>1</sup>

**Chat with the teacher.** When you can, stop by and chat with your child's teacher. This will allow you and the teacher to get to know each other better. It will also make communication easier when it is time to have a more formal parent-teacher conference.

**Join an activity or program for parents at the school.** A good way to get to know more about the school is to participate in activities planned at the school. For example, attend Open House or other parent meetings. Volunteering to help in the classroom or in the school is also a good way of getting to know more about what goes on at your child's school.

<sup>1</sup> Kreider, Mayer, & Vaughn, 1999

***Talk to other people who spend time in the school.*** If you feel uncomfortable at your child's school, talk with other parents or neighbors who know the school and can provide you with information.

### **TIP #3: FEEL FREE TO MAKE THE FIRST CONTACT WITH THE TEACHER**

A major problem with communication between parents and teachers is the failure of either the parent or the teacher to make the first move. Teachers have reported that some parents did not take the lead to communicate by phone or in person, even when the school provided opportunities such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, or meetings. Similarly, parents feel that problems in communication are due to teachers failing to begin the process of communicating with them. However, good communication is the responsibility of both parents and teachers. As a parent, you should not feel that the teacher should always be the one to make the first contact. You should feel comfortable with starting off the communication with your child's teacher and that you have the right to do so. This is important when your child has had school problems in the past.

Some schools provide parents with a school handbook or directory that provides information about how to contact the teacher and the best time to do so. If not, ask the teacher or the school principal how and when you could contact the teacher.

### **TIP #4: COMMUNICATE WITH THE TEACHER EARLY**

Another major communication problem reported by both parents and teachers is not communicating early enough when a student was having difficulty in school. Often you can anticipate a problem. Your child may have had difficulties in the past. Your child may tell you about a problem. You may also notice some problems with homework or class papers. If you suspect a problem, contact the teacher immediately. Do not wait. Also, do not think that just because the teacher has not contacted you that this means that there is no important information to communicate to you about your child's education. At the latest, you should contact your child's teacher at the mid-way point of the report card period. For a nine week reporting system, this would be at about 4 ½ weeks into the reporting period. This will give you enough time to help your child deal with any problems in time to make a difference in that reporting period.

### **TIP # 5: COMMUNICATE OFTEN**

An additional major communication problem often reported by parents and teachers is the failure to communicate frequently and regularly. Regular and ongoing feedback from the teacher will allow you to better provide the specific help your child needs. Three things to keep in mind when planning regular communication with your child's teacher are discussed below.

***How to Communicate.*** There is a variety of ways to communicate regularly with the teacher, including face-to-face meetings, phone calls, or through written notes. You will need to work together with the teacher to decide on which method of communication would be the easiest and most helpful.

***What to Communicate.*** It is important for the parent and teacher to discuss and agree on what concerns or problems need to be monitored. It is important to be specific about this information. Some examples include: specific information about

homework assignments or tests dates, the child's level of participation, how well the child minded the teacher, or the percentage of work completed in class.

**How Often to Communicate.** How often you need to communicate with the teacher will depend on the severity of the problem. For more serious problems, you may need to have daily contact with the teacher. Formal systems like a school-home note program or a journal are easy to use and require little teacher time. In these systems, teachers complete a note or journal entry providing feedback to parents on specific problem behaviors at the end of the day and send it home to the parent (see Figure 2). If designed right, such systems are easy to use and require little teacher time. For less severe problems, weekly feedback would be enough. The important thing is to communicate regularly.

School-Home Note		
Name: _____	Date: _____	
Completed ____% of classwork	YES	NO
Obedied class rules	YES	NO
Got along well with others	YES	NO
Teacher signature: _____		
Comments: _____		
_____		

**Figure 2.** Example of School-Home Note

#### **TIP #6: FOLLOW THROUGH WITH WHAT YOU SAID YOU WOULD DO**

Another major communication problem reported by both parents and teachers is not doing what was agreed upon. If you told your child's teacher you would communicate in a certain way or do a specific school or homework related task, do your best to follow through with what you said you would do. For example, if you agreed that you would check your child's homework and sign off on the assignment, be sure to do this consistently. Be sure to let the teacher know if you are unable to do what was agreed upon.

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