Parent-Teacher Talk

Five strategies to help smooth communication at school — and ensure that your child has a successful year. Be sure to check out Good Housekeeping's report on establishing effective parent-teacher communication.

By Hilary Quinn

"Mrs. Quinn? This is Mr. Smith, Adam's math teacher." Just hearing the message on my voice mail launches my heart rate into overdrive; yes, I'm going to have one of those conversations. After all, how often does the teacher call to congratulate me on Adam's stellar behavior or fabulous grades? Then again, I'm sure Mr. Smith gets the same anxious feeling when he hears my name on his voice mail; I'm usually not calling to praise him for how well he taught an algebraic unit, or to compliment his exceptional patience with my spirited son.

I'm hardly alone in sensing this tension between well-intentioned parents and teachers. In fact, a 2005 MetLife survey found that 73 percent of new teachers agree that too many parents today treat their children's teachers as adversaries. Granted, their interaction has always had a "he said, she said" aspect to it: "Unless you've actually observed your child at school, you're going to have a completely different perspective from the teacher about how your child behaves," says Sam Wineburg, professor of education at Stanford University. Beyond that, "competition to get into college is tough, so parents are demanding more from schools to give their children an edge," says Suzanne Tingley, a former school superintendent in New York State and author of How to Handle Difficult Parents. "And due to the economy, some schools have had layoffs, making it more difficult for the remaining teachers to provide individual attention," setting the scene for misunderstandings and flaring tempers.

To help you handle this tricky terrain, here are five surprising tactics for partnering with your child's teachers — and helping your kid do her very best in the year ahead.

Next: Start talking early

Old Think: I'll just sit tight till the first report card arrives

New Think: I'll meet the teacher before the month of October ends

Once a child moves up to middle school, parent-teacher conferences usually fall by the wayside, but that doesn't mean you should just wait for that first progress report to hit your mailbox. "While parents are really invested in their kids in elementary school, teachers feel that interest drop off in the later years," says Tingley, but your child still needs your involvement to make sure she meets the increased demands.
So set up a brief get-together with your child's teacher (or team of teachers) early in the academic year. While Open House or Back-to-School Night provides a good opportunity to put a face with a name, don't try to slip in impromptu discussions there. Not only will a couple of hundred other parents have the same plan, but "teachers are like any other professional; in order to have a private conversation with us, you need to make an appointment," notes Lauren Ade Kreifus, a language arts teacher at William Davies Middle School in Hamilton Township, NJ. When you have that get-together, fill in the teacher on any issues that will impact performance — perhaps there's financial stress in the family, your child has a history of class-clown behavior, or you're concerned about the number of honors-level classes she's taking. If the school or a teacher discourages you from setting up a meeting — say, due to time constraints — try this script: "I have information to share about my child that I think will lead to her having a successful year. I believe a quick meeting will be very valuable."

Touching base is especially important if your child has learning or organizational issues, though many parents conceal this info so teachers don't think less of their kids. In fact, many educators can start deploying supportive tactics as soon as they are clued in about a child's needs. "I had a parent flag me early in the year that her son struggled with organization," recalls Rebecca Hudson, English teacher at Tampa Bay Technical High School in Tampa, FL. "So I personally made sure he wrote down the homework assignments. I was able to help much more because I was contacted early. We never had to go through a period of failure; we jumped straight to success." How to get similar results: Tell the teacher, "Ashley had difficulty keeping up in enriched math last year. She's ready to give this year her best effort, but I hope we can talk if you notice she's slipping behind. Should I check in with you by e-mail next month?"

Next: Bear part of the burden

Old Think: As long as my child pulls his weight, we're good

New Think: I have responsibilities to tackle, too

It's not just your child who has to learn what teachers want and how to give it to them. "Increasingly, parents have to shoulder some of the load as well by regularly checking a school district's or teacher's Web site for their children's grades, any missing assignments, dates for tests, rubrics that lay out expectations for each unit, and details on how much projects count toward the final grade," says Carmen Grey, an English teacher at Edmonds Woodway High School in Edmonds, WA. And you may be required to sign a homework log and graded work so the teachers know you are up to speed. "We need parents to hear which tools we've created to assist with the flow of information, and then use them," says Ginny Morath, a teacher at Southeastern Career Center, a vocational-technical high school in Versailles, IN. "Teachers at the secondary level can see over 180 students a day, so we simply can't let individual parents know about every missing assignment or failed quiz." Not clear about what to check and when? Call your child's counselor to get looped in; bookmark Web sites and write key dates (say, "Research-paper outline due in one week") on the family calendar.

Next: Know when (not) to step in

Old Think: A good parent steps in whenever there's an issue
New Think: A good parent lets a kid fight his own battles

Chances are, most parents have that Mama Bear instinct to swoop in if their child comes home ranting about getting a "big fat zero" on an assignment just because it was turned in a little late. Before you rush to your kid's defense, know this: "Teachers, especially those in middle school, teach life skills, including accepting responsibility for one's actions," says Kreifus. So encourage your child to meet with the teacher (many are available at lunchtime or after school) to see if the problem can be resolved. Perhaps your child was not clear on (or flat-out ignored) the teacher's policy on late assignments. Perhaps he can ask about doing an extra-credit project to raise his grade. Kids need to understand, notes Hudson, that they are in control of their grades and schoolwork — not the teacher, nor the parent.

Perhaps, though, your child will insist that the teacher "hates" him or is evil to the core. In that case, consider this: "Let your kids know that, later in life, they will not always be working for or with people they like or respect, and they need to accept that. Learning to cope now will help them to be more successful in the world," says Nicole Shaub, counselor at Atlanta International School in Atlanta. Just make sure your child knows you have his back. Try this tip from a mom in Bayside, NY, whose son was wrongly accused of cheating on a test: "I told him, 'These things happen in life. And if you don't feel it gets addressed properly, I'll step in.' But ultimately, I want to give him the tools to resolve issues on his own."

Next: Get both sides of the story

Old Think: If there's a problem at school, I need to defend my child

New Think: If there's a problem at school, I need to hear both sides

If there is a classroom situation your child can't handle on her own, don't treat the teacher as if she's on trial. Your role is to suss out the facts, and even the seemingly harmless opener, "Max told me what happened in class today...I'd like to hear your side of the story" can be offensive. "That puts the teacher on the student's level and turns the parent into the moderator," says Diane Lavin, a middle school teacher at the Agnon School in Cleveland. Instead, try this script: "I know Max is upset that he lost points in math due to a classroom participation problem. Can you help me understand what's been going on?" Doing so is respectful to the teacher and lets her share what she's seen.

Bonus tip: When you hear something negative about your child that rings true, own up to it. Debbi Raffalli, a mom of two in North Andover, MA, met with a teacher who was fed up with her son's fidgety classroom behavior and coming down hard on the tiniest infraction. Raffalli's response to the teacher was, "Thanks for explaining your perspective. I know my son has a lot of pent-up energy, and I'm sorry if he's been disruptive. How can we work on resolving this?" Explains Raffalli: "When I acknowledged the truth in the situation, the teacher was completely disarmed. We collaborated on a plan for him, and she's treated him with more sensitivity. My son's schoolwork and outlook are much improved."

Next: Head to the principal's office

Old Think: If I have a problem with a teacher, I'll slip in to see the principal

New Think: If I have a problem with a teacher, I'll schedule a meeting with the principal
New Think: If a teacher and I disagree, we'll talk to the principal

Sooner or later, almost every parent reaches that moment when she is so enraged by a school situation, she wants to storm the principal's office. And that's the correct course of action in cases "that involve a child's physical or emotional safety [sexual impropriety, criminal concerns, sexism, or racism]," says Peyton Chapman, principal at Lincoln High School in Portland, OR. But for less serious scenarios (a test grade or a classroom comment), know that a parent who jumps over the teacher's head and goes to the administration sends the message that he or she doesn't respect the instructor's authority. "Too often, parents go to the administration about things they've heard from their child out of context," says Peter Bloch, a social studies teacher at Intermediate School 230 in Jackson Heights, NY. "A teacher, in great frustration, might say, 'That was a stupid thing to do.' Next thing you know, there's a complaint saying the teacher called the kid 'stupid.'"

Tip to try: Give the teacher a chance to explain, and see if you can wrestle the issue into submission. If not, make an appointment with the principal, saying you want to discuss a school matter that couldn't be resolved with the teacher. Fill the teacher in so he or she won't feel blindsided. Counselor Nicole Shaub recommends this script: "I think this problem isn't resolved yet, so I've contacted the principal to see if she can help us make progress."

Know that by going to the principal, you will probably be meeting with the teacher again, albeit in another forum. "If the parent, teacher, and administrator sit down together, the principal has minimal input nine times out of 10," explains Corey Harris, principal at Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis. "Everyone has time to reflect, and the issue gets solved between teacher and parent — exactly as it should be."

http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/family/school/parent-teacher-communication