



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

A Strategy for Building Productive Relationships With Parents

Reaching out to parents and guardians early with positive messages goes a long way toward creating successful partnerships with families.

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“Can I schedule a conference with you?”

Do these words cause anxiety?

If so, you’re not alone. But communicating with parents and guardians is one of the most important things we do, and it may be even more important now as more schools turn to remote instruction.

As an educator with 19 years of classroom experience, I have met a wide variety of parent types. Some are absolute blessings, and a few haven’t been quite as pleasant. Through the years, I have cultivated habits and routines to start off the school year on a positive note. I compare this work to that of a gardener’s. Seeds planted in August will bloom all the way to June.

PLANT THE SEEDS EARLY IN THE YEAR

Author and podcaster Angela Watson ends each episode with, “It won’t be easy, but it will be worth it.” I repeat this mantra as I compose an individual and personal email to each family during the first week of school. The first week of school is crazy busy. Who has time to compose dozens of emails? But you should find the time because it will be worth it. This is a sample of an email that I send to each family by the end of the first week of school:

Mr. Jones and Dr. Garcia,

It is such a pleasure having Sofia in my Grade 7 pre-algebra class this year. I can already tell that she has a fun sense of humor. I hope to see you at parent night scheduled for 6 p.m. September 14.

[Include your photo or a link to a short video introducing yourself and some class basics, especially if your class is virtual.]

- Use your school student information system (if available) to correctly address the parents by their titles and last names. If you're not sure, use a generic greeting such as "Garcia/Jones Family." Also note if a student is new to the school. This introductory email is especially welcoming and reassuring for new families.
- Mention one good thing you have observed about the student. You build relationships by making your first contact a positive one. Do this early in the year, because Sofia may perform poorly on a quiz or throw a pencil across the room the next week. You don't want that to be your first outreach to the parents.
- If possible, remind them when they can meet you in person or online (open house, parent night, Zoom meet and greet, etc.). This will appease the overly eager parents who may want to schedule a meeting in the first two weeks of school when time is scarce.

SEND HAPPY NOTES

Periodically send "happy notes" to parents randomly throughout the year. Keep these notes succinct, informal, and specific. Explain how a student did something helpful or had an insightful comment during a class discussion. Copy or BCC an administrator on these emails if you feel it is appropriate. Aim to send a note to each family throughout the year.

WHEN THE NEWS ISN'T SO HAPPY

OK, you've sent the introductory email, presented a stellar parent night, and maybe even sent a happy note, but now you need to reach out to a parent with not-so-good news. Hopefully, through your prior communications you have planted the seeds for a trusting and caring relationship. The parents may be more open to hearing your concerns at this point.

- If the situation is minor, go ahead and send a quick email to parents. Be sure to conclude with suggestions on how the student can improve his or her performance or behavior. Use supportive language and come from a place of "I'm here to help."
- If the email is longer than a paragraph or contains sensitive content, send a request for a phone call. Provide two possible time slots for the call and the reason for it.

PICK UP THE PHONE

In a phone conversation you can hear tone, volley questions back and forth, and end the conversation in a timely manner without dragging it out with a chain of emails. Write yourself a script to get started:

"Hello Ms. Vanwinkle, I am not sure if you have had a chance to review Kevin's recent quiz. It seems that he wasn't quite prepared. He left 10 out of the 20 questions blank. I was hoping to work together to see if we can find out more about what may have happened."

This introduction is nonblaming, fact-based, and cooperative. Once you have stated the issue, be quiet and let her talk. After answering her questions, suggest steps for improvement, and remind the parent how you will support Kevin at school and how they can support him at home.

THE 10 PERCENT

Ninety percent of parents will be supportive and understanding. Then there's the other 10 percent. Some of these parents will be rude, overbearing, or poorly behaved because of factors that have nothing to do with you personally. Remain calm and kind, because you have no idea what life experiences they have been through, especially now as we all cope with the negative effects of Covid-19. That being said, you deserve to be treated with respect and should never allow verbal abuse.

Don't be shy about asking for help. If you fear that a parent may get out of hand, request that you meet with an administrator present, either in his or her office or via videoconference.

If a meeting was tense, follow up with an email to the parent and copy or BCC an administrator. Such an email provides documentation of what was discussed and also informs the admin team of the current status of the child's progress.

Thinking about the next school year, whether we teach face-to-face, virtually, or in a hybrid model, plan how you will plant the seeds of relationship building with parents. To welcome parents into your online class environment, consider recording periodic screencasts demonstrating how to access and utilize the learning management system, class calendar, or other features they might find helpful. Perhaps your happy notes can include screenshots of their child's work. No matter what the situation looks like for schools, take some time to consider how you might nurture your garden for the benefit of your students and your own well-being as a teacher.

Source: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/strategy-building-productive-relationships-parents>