

## When Should Parents Contact the Teacher? How Effective Parent-School Partnerships Can Prevent School Difficulties

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*When a preschooler is asked about his day at school, he consistently replies that it was “fine” and he did “nothing.”*

*A first-grader swings in the door after school and tells her mother that the other kids are teasing or hitting her on the playground and she is “never going back again.”*

*During the spring parent-teacher conference, the teacher tells the parents that their fourth-grader is probably gifted and should be assessed for advanced placement in the school’s gifted program; however, the child does not want to be separated from her peers.*

*Much to his parents’ surprise, a middle-schooler’s report card shows that he is failing several classes because of incomplete or failed homework assignments.*

*A high school sophomore begins to skip class, and when questioned by his parents, he says that he might as well drop out because he will never get enough credits to graduate.*

These situations are characteristic of the concerns that challenge many parents as their child progresses through school. Parents may struggle with determining the seriousness of the problem, determining if the problem is important enough to seek help from the school, and determining how to make connections with the teacher, principal, or appropriate school personnel to help resolve a problem.

Susan Benjamin and Susan Sanchez (1996), authors of *Should I Go to the Teacher? Developing a Cooperative Relationship with Your Child’s School Community*, stress the importance of parents developing and maintaining effective communication with their child’s teacher and school community throughout the year and in the absence of

any problems. Just as parents appreciate hearing when their child is doing well, the teacher appreciates hearing when school is going well for a student or if the child is making unique progress as a direct result of the teacher’s influence.

Surprisingly, some parents may not realize that teachers also feel anxious about communicating with parents, and some teachers may not be aware that parents are being discouraged from participating in their child’s education (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Developing open communication and an effective partnership for many parents and teachers may not come naturally (Benjamin & Sanchez, 1996, p. 17). However, most school-related concerns can be resolved amicably through effective communication and a better understanding of the school environment. Experts suggest that parents:

**Take time to view the bigger picture.** It is easy for concerned parents to get caught up in their child’s emotional recounting of a distressing school incident. However, taking the time to listen to the child empathetically while encouraging the child to examine the problem or think of other points of view and possible remedies will help build the child’s competence to resolve future incidents. This strategy also gives the parents time to reflect on the situation rather than pass judgment too quickly and make a hasty phone call to the school. The parents may still need to call the teacher or school to get all the facts, but once again, the emphasis is on listening and problem solving rather than placing blame (Benjamin & Sanchez, 1996, pp. 87-101).

**Work within the system.** Almost all organizations have procedures or policies for resolving conflicts. Schools are certainly no exception, although their procedures may vary. Smaller schools may be more casual with their conflict-resolution policies, while

larger schools or schools that have a formalized school culture may have a more complicated set of procedures. Knowing more about the school's rules and unique culture is usually helpful for effective parent-teacher partnerships.

**Talk with your child's teacher first.** When a parent has a concern that his or her child cannot resolve and the issue requires more parental intervention, the next step is to speak directly with the child's teacher. Rather than trying to discuss the problem casually when the child is being picked up at the end of the school day, it is usually helpful to make an appointment with the teacher. Setting a time and location in advance allows both the parent and the teacher to discuss the problem without distraction. It is especially important to avoid discussing parent-teacher conflicts in front of children because this practice can be confusing for young children and may encourage disrespect in older children (Katz, Aidman, Reese, & Clark, 1996). Parents should leave the parent-teacher meeting with a plan that will address the concern and that will be implemented within 2 or 3 weeks.

**Talk with the principal.** The parent may wish to meet with the principal if the parent or teacher feels that the principal's involvement would be helpful, if the parent and teacher are unable to agree on an appropriate resolution to the concern, or if the plan did not improve the situation within an agreed upon length of time.

The role of the principal in parent-school partnerships is important because the principal typically sets the tone for the school atmosphere and motivates staff (Benjamin & Sanchez, 1996, p. 36). The principal also has a broad knowledge of curriculum, discipline, and special needs alternatives that are helpful for children. Therefore, he can act as a natural advocate for children, while balancing the needs of the school staff. Once again, parents should expect to leave the meeting with an identified plan that will address the problem within 2 or 3 weeks.

**Request a team meeting.** It is not unusual for the teacher, principal, or parent to request a "team

meeting" to discuss an educational plan for a specific child. The team typically includes the child's teachers, the principal, the parents, and any school personnel that might provide support for the child's successful development. Depending on the nature of the problem, participation by other school personnel, such as the special education teacher, the school counselor, the district's occupational therapist, or the school psychologist, may be requested.

Parents who are unfamiliar with the team approach may feel uncomfortable or intimidated at a meeting where there are several professionals discussing their child. Parents should keep in mind that they have valuable insight into their child's background, family experiences, and strategies that may have worked previously for the child. Parents are equal partners on their child's educational team and should feel free to ask questions, contribute when appropriate, and ask for clarification about the role of each school professional who is present at the meeting. Parents may also wish to bring another family member, friend, or counselor who can assist with advocating for the child by providing more information about their child's strengths and educational needs (Barnes, 1999, pp. 4-5). The goal of the team is to work together to develop a plan that will support the child's healthy development. Once again, the parents should expect to see the plan implemented within 2 to 3 weeks.

Most school-related concerns that require adult intervention are usually resolved amicably and successfully at the school level with the teacher, principal, or school team. Occasionally, situations arise that remain unsettled despite the best efforts of the child, parents, and school personnel. Reasons for this impasse vary and may include inadequate resources available at the school level or unrealistic expectations on the part of the school personnel or parents. As a next step, parents, as their child's advocate, may find it necessary to seek further assistance from the district superintendent, the district's school board, or possibly the state education agency. Many states have a person who has been identified as an "ombudsperson" who is

responsible for providing state-specific assistance with parents' questions and school-related concerns. Contact information on all 50 state education agencies can be found on the Internet at <http://ericeece.org/statlink.html>.

Because parents, teachers, and school personnel are partners in education, they also share responsibility for effective communication and resolving of difficulties. Parents will likely find that the time spent getting to know their child's teacher and school community will be invaluable if school problems arise.

## For More Information

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## Source of This Document

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Robertson, Anne S. (1999). When Should Parents Contact the Teacher? How Effective Parent-School Partnerships Can Prevent School Difficulties. *Parent News* [Online], 5(6). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew1199/feat1199.html>