

Twenty Tips for Developing Positive Relationships with Parents

In our busy day of juggling papers, lesson planning and managing sometimes more than a hundred students, we can easily forget the group that could lend significant support in our charge as teachers -- parents and families. Consider these tips for improving connections with this valuable group:

1. Smile When You See Parents

Greet them. Most parents only occasionally interact with teachers so make sure that at least 90 percent of your encounters with them are positive, warm, and friendly. The impressions left from fleeting encounters in the hallway last a long time.

2. Learn Their Names

(If you have a self-contained class.) Learn how they like to be addressed (Mr. ____? Señora? By their first name?) and how to pronounce them correctly.

3. Declare Your Intention

Tell them that you want to partner with them, that you appreciate their support, and look forward to working together.

4. Communicate Often and in Various Forms

Provide information about what's going on in your class (weekly would be ideal): what students are learning, what they've accomplished, what you're excited about, what they're excited about, and the learning and growth you're seeing. Suggest things that they might ask their child about: "Ask them to tell you about what they learned last week about meal worms," or "Ask them to read you the haiku they wrote."

5. Make a Positive Phone Call Home

If you have a self-contained class, call all homes within the first couple of weeks and then at regular intervals throughout the year. If you teach many students, identify those students who perhaps need a positive call home.

6. Lead with the Good News

Give positive praise first when calling parents or meeting with them to discuss a concern. Every kid has something good about him/her. Find it. Share it. Then share your concern. Adhere strictly to this rule.

7. Find a Translator

If you can't speak their language, seek a translator for at least one parent conference and/or phone call. (For obscure languages, you can sometimes find a refugee center or other public agency that can help). Reach out to those parents as well; do whatever you can to connect.

8. Your Language is Powerful

It communicates an awareness that there are many different kinds of families. Be careful not to assume a mother is, or isn't married, or even that if she is married, she's married to a man. Learn to ask open-ended questions and understand that sometimes parents/guardians might not want to share some information.

9. Ask Questions about the Child

"What kinds of things does he enjoy doing outside of school? Who are the special people in her life -- family or family friends? What do you think are her best characteristics? What was he like as a little boy?" Demonstrate an interest in knowing your student.

10. Listen to Parents

Really listen. They know a whole lot about their kid.

11. Smile at the Child When talking to a parent in front of a child, smile and make eye contact with the student to demonstrate that you care about him/her. Recognize what he/she has done well in your class in front of the parents. *Then* share a concern, if you have one.

12. Invite Parents to Share

Distribute a survey at the beginning of the year (if parents don't read/write in English, students can interview them and relay their answers). Find out what parents know about and what skills they have. Invite them in especially if it connects the curriculum and content. Let them share with you their cultural traditions, interests, passions, skills, knowledge.

13. Let Parents Know How They Can Help

Many want to help but especially as kids get older, parents aren't asked for help as often and don't know what to do. There's always some way they can help in the classroom.

14. Be Very Specific

Provide ways parents can support their child at home: "You can help your child with her math homework by asking her to explain how she got an answer," or "As you're reading stories at night, ask your child to make predictions. This strengthens reading comprehension."

15. Be a Broker of Resources

If they share a concern, be prepared to point them to a direction where they can find help. If you share a concern ("Your daughter spaces out and doesn't pay attention") be prepared to suggest what the parents can do.

16. Explain Your Instructional Decisions

Take the time to do this and help them learn about the education system if they're not familiar with it. Help them understand what you're doing and why.

17. Invite Parents to Participate in Making Some Decisions

Invite their input, give them information that will help them form an opinion, and listen to their conclusions.

18. Thank Parents

Both individually and publicly for their support, perhaps in your weekly newsletter. Recognize what they do to help your class and how it's impacting students.

19. Share Every Success

Let parents know what their child is doing well, what academic skills, social skills or knowledge he's mastered.

20. Invite Parents to Celebrate and Break Bread Together

Communities are strengthened when people come together in celebration. Start the year with a potluck. Share food and stories about food. We all bond over food.

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