

## The Role of Parents in the Dynamics of School Discipline

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### Abstract

In this article the author draws attention to the importance of parents and community involvement in improving academic learning of the pupils. Pupils' academic accomplishment is not a unilateral process: the parents and educators must actively facilitate the education of pupils. This should function in four levels: instructions at school, instructions at home, school governance and community services. Getting parents involved in the educational progression is a Herculean task since parents and teachers live in different life worlds that are separated by psychological barriers. Here the author tries to address some of the issues and offer tangible proposals to overcome the prevailing barriers.

**Keywords:** Counseling; democratic approach; discipline; parent-teacher conferences; parental skills; positive attitudes.

### 1. Introduction

All parents want their children to be successful in their endeavors. School is no different! Parents want their children to learn and to be accepted by their peers and teachers. Consequently, they want their children to behave at school. Indeed, it would be strange to hear a parent say, "I hope my child causes trouble at school today."

Even though we may occasionally find parents who seem to interfere negatively and criticize teachers' efforts, it is safe to assume that most parents will be supportive of institutional efforts to educate their children. The Gallup Organization polls repeatedly report that parent attitudes towards schools and teachers continue to be positive year after year (Moore, 2001). This is not to say parents abstain from criticizing things they feel are not in the best interests of their children.

The key to gaining parental support for academic undertakings is to learn to take criticism seriously without taking it personally. Ideally we will find criticism from our friends rather than our enemies. In fact we should consider criticism taken personally as a warning signal that we might be assuming too much responsibility (Moore, 2001). This is frequently a source of teacher stress and burn out. After all, the teacher's legal role has always been *in loco parentis*, a Latin word meaning having the same responsibility for a child as a parent has.

The bottom line is that parents have primary responsibility for educating their children. We as educators are simply offering parents our professional services educating their children.

As with most business relationships, we may have to sell our ideas. It is unlikely that we would buy everything we hear about and see; like most people, neither will parents. However, parents, like most consumers, are more apt to buy something when there are a number of options to choose from (Moore, 2001). For this reason it is important to guide families into understanding our role as a provider of professional services, and also to use our professionalism to establish co-partnerships with parents.

## **2. School and parental links should be established through effective communication**

The overall quality of instruction will be improved when a school has a “concordant relationship” among the students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community as a whole. This relationship will help schools create a climate that fosters the development of the whole child. In addition, a harmonious relationship will help build trust and promote respect (Krall and Jalongo, 1999).

At a time when schools are being urged to solve many of society’s problems, community links are imperative. Community outreach programs should be developed that will provide supportive and nurturing homes, schools and community environments in which the academic needs of students are effectively addressed. There are six types of involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision making, and (f) collaborating with the community to improve and expand connections with students, communities and families (Epstein et al., 1997). School meetings, opening school grounds and buildings for the community use, meeting the principal or teachers for coffee, newsletters, student performances and presentations, student buddy systems, involving parents in policy-making, team teaching, offering adult courses in the evenings, developing a senior mentoring program, and using community guest speakers are just some ways to link communities with schools. This takes an open school-community communication system. Although, it is important to link the whole school and community bringing parents into the equation is still essential (Ludwig, 1999).

An effective parent communication system is vital to effective teaching and learning. Indeed many educational institutions are now requiring coursework that prepares teachers and administrators to work more productively with parents as partners (Epstein, 1991). Many schools are also putting more thought into, and developing better communication with parents. Schools now realize that initial contacts can make or break relationships with parents and first contacts often affect later communication.

Opening communication lines with parents should be a high teacher priority at the beginning of each school year. Parents can represent a great deal of potential help and support for teachers and schools. However, this help and support is too often locked up by insecurity, ignorance, timidity, and apathy, as well as a hands-off attitude towards schools by many parents.

Organized systems that consistently advise parents result in extremely positive attitudes from parents (Charles, 1981). Therefore, it behoves the teacher to find ways to unlock the reluctance of parents to become involved in the education of their own children. This takes communication, and it must be initiated by the teachers, those in charge of the school. Sadly, this contact between teachers and parents usually comes only when their children have upset the apple cart.

Establishing effective communication systems requires a variety of techniques and devices that will convey messages to parents. Newsletters, notes, phone calls, weekly folders sent home, daily reports sent home and parent conferences represent some commonly used forms of communication with parents. Weekly and daily reports sent home may appear to be impossible for teachers with large numbers of students. However, short-term communication checklists are useful when addressing specific improvement goals with students and weekly calendars on which students list their daily assignments in each class, are good ways to keep parents informed.

Although there are many techniques for communicating with parents, person-to-person is best. Well-planned parent-teacher conferences and home visits are most productive in removing barriers and establishing healthy parent-school relationships. While it is true that parent-teacher conferences can be one of the most productive techniques to get parents involved in school, they can be a discouraging waste of time—or even turn into ugly confrontations. The following tips will make parent-teacher conferences more productive and successful.

1. *Encourage both parents to attend conferences if possible.* Misunderstandings are less when both parents are involved in the discussion of the student.
2. *Make early contact with parents.* Send a note or letter home with all your students and let parents know you will be happy to meet with them at any time.
3. *When parents come to the school building meet them at the entrance they will use.* Above all, get their name right. Do not assume John Joseph’s mother is Mrs. Ann Mathew.

4. *When visiting with parents do not sit behind your desk and squeeze parents into children's desks.* Arrange to have a conference room and table available.
5. *When parents arrive, review the agenda of the conference—the why, what, how and when of the conference.* However, you should remain flexible.
6. *Avoid educational jargon.* Avoid terms which may be difficult for the parents to digest.
7. *Occasionally you will run into parents who are abusive and hostile.* Try not to be rude to these parents.
8. *Watch your non-verbal communication.* Smile, nod and make eye contact to show you are interested in the conference proceedings.
9. *Remember that parents may not share your attitudes and values.* Do not be judgmental. Do not try to assign blame.
10. *Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion.* Outline future plans and actions.
11. *If you run out of time, arrange another meeting.* Do not rush to a conclusion because of time constraints.
12. *Keep a record of the conference discussion.* Make some brief notes as soon as possible after the conference, while details are fresh.

It is difficult to design a system of communication that will be appropriate with all parents. Factors such as parents' preference for reading, listening, speaking, and writing; time available to devote school activities; parents' level of comfort in working with teachers, administrators and counselors and parents' level of literacy will influence communication. Furthermore, community ethnic diversity, cultural beliefs and past school involvement will have an effect on teacher-parent communication.

Communicating with parents requires skill and tact. Parents expect teachers to be friendly, but professional. They do not want to be your buddies. They expect teachers to be knowledgeable and businesslike. That is, they expect teachers to state information in a brief and clear manner. Jargon and terminology should be translated into familiar and comfortable language for parents. Teachers should be optimistic, have high expectations, and feel confident that by working together both parents and teachers can make a difference.

### **3. Parents as co-partners**

When parents are perceived as friends and co-partners in the education of our children, discipline efforts can be maximized. When enlisting parents for support in discipline always follow a well planned conference schedule (Cooper and Good, 1983). Establish a positive, team-like atmosphere between educators and parents. Remember, we are in this together as co-partners. Maintain our professionalism without sacrificing the warmth and compassion that should be felt toward students (Cooper and Good, 1983). Keep the conference short and sweet and stick to the subject. We must also keep in mind that some parents will not have the necessary parenting skills needed to deal with problem children. We must be the professionals in these situations and be prepared to offer suggestions and possible solutions for parents to try.

Many times conferences with parents will be needed to gather evaluative information. Parents often have information that will shed light on students' academic problems. However, to be beneficial, parent conferences should be well planned. Samples of students' work and anecdotal observations should be on hand and discussed. A parent conference should not be a time to lecture parents. Indeed you should be cautious about giving too much advice on the home life of the student. The overall atmosphere should be unrushed and positive.

Useful information can often be obtained from other teachers who have had your students in their classes. Often such colleagues can describe difficulties students have had in their classes, as well as the techniques that have been tried to correct them. Conferences with other teachers, like conferences with parents, should be well planned so that sufficient time will be available for productive meetings. Finally, guidance counselors and other support personnel often will be able to shed additional light on test results and on personality factors that might be affecting student performance. Parent/Student/Teacher conferences are

assuming an important role in today's schools. However, conferences take planning. Complete Expansion Activity: conferences which will let you experience planning a parent/student/teacher conference.

#### **4. Steps to a successful conference**

Step one. Plan ahead: Establish your purpose. Plan what the teachers intend to say, what information you want to obtain from parents and what to share with them. What are teachers' concerns about the student?

Step two. Start the conference: Be positive. Establish an atmosphere of sharing. Begin the conference with a positive statement.

Step three. Hold the conference: Establish and display a positive attitude. Be an active listener. Be accepting with regard to input and advice. Establish a partnership so that all parties concerned can work toward a common goal.

Step four. End the conference: End the conference with a positive comment. Communicate teachers' belief that working together will lead to achievement of common goals.

Step five. Conduct follow up contact: Keep all parties informed. Send notes and make telephone calls to share successes, concerns and other matters.

The opening remarks in a parent teacher conference should be communicated to accomplish three goals: (1) establish a co-partner relationship; (2) relate the seriousness of the meeting; (3) confirm we have their child's best interest at heart (Franken, 1998). For example, immediately after the formal introductions, we might say, "Luke is having some problems at school and we would like to try some things to help him." Or we could start with, "We are going to need your help to be able to help Luke be more successful in the classroom." Statements of this kind naturally invite parents to comment and immediately become involved.

Parent hostility, anger and frustrations often indicate that parents feel inadequate in dealing with school problems. After all, most parents spend very little time at schools. Sometimes it will be necessary to allow parents a few minutes to vent their frustrations but be prepared to get the conference back on the subject as soon as possible. Opening the conference in this manner will help to explain that school problems are serious and require working together to ensure success. However, it is critical that we provide specific ways parents can assist us with student problems. Of course, we could assign consequences to be carried out by the school, but this does not involve parents. To involve parents, teachers must sell their plans in such a way that they will want to buy (Franken, 1998).

With regard to discipline, parents need to know four things: (1) exactly what is expected of students; (2) how those expectations are going to be enforced; (3) how students are doing; (4) what the parents can do to help. Once teachers have established their intent to deal with a student problem as a co-partner with the parent, teachers may want to follow these four easy steps to reach their discipline goals (Moore, 2001).

When discussing exactly what is expected of students, it is important to keep expectations as few in number as possible and to focus on the immediate problems. The expectations should be briefly communicated in easily understood language. How we would like to enforce our expectations will reflect our leadership styles to some degree. However, if teachers are going to involve parents, it may be necessary to adjust their style to a more democratic approach (Moore, 2001). For instance, often teachers can lead parents in brainstorming activities that will yield in-school and at-home solutions and/or consequences for misbehavior. Many parents lack the skills needed for solving problems and will be unable to contribute ideas. In these situations teachers need to have a list of suggestions ready for parents to consider.

When exploring how students are doing we should examine with parents a list of things that demonstrate the students' skills and abilities. This will also be a good time to examine the students' strengths and weaknesses using these as a link in finding ways to motivate and/or change the undesired behaviors (Good and Brophy, 1987). When communicating about strength, teachers might choose to share specific assignments in which the student performed well. Perhaps the student performed well in completing a poster assignment in volleyball. Volleyball could be a source for motivation.

One way to involve parents in providing solutions for behavior problems is to ask their support in providing needed resources. For example, parents could be asked to provide baseball cards to use as reinforcements when their child performs appropriately. Although it might seem easier for us to just buy the cards and try these strategies on your own, an important element becomes loss of parent involvement and support! The

value of these elements should not be underestimated. Helping parents assume responsibilities as co-partners benefits the student because it gives the student a perception of parents who are modeling the importance of education to the family (Moore, 2001).

Another way is through cooperative discipline; teachers need a management strategy that enables them to work cooperatively with students and parents (Albert, 1996). She adds that once a true cooperative understanding has been reached, the classroom can be transformed into a safe, orderly, inviting place for teaching and learning. Students will therefore have a good chance of learning to behave responsibly while achieving more academically.

Explaining what parents can do to help is undoubtedly a vital element in gaining their support for discipline. For example, if a student refuses to do his or her class assignments day after day continuously, teachers could ask the parents to attend class with the student. Older students would rather die than admit their behavior is showing immaturity and requires their parents attend school with them. However, a request of this nature should never be made to humiliate a student but rather to communicate the teachers' feelings that the student will not receive an education if allowed to continue in his or her present path (Allington, 1980). Of course, the age of the student will be important to consider. Younger children might enjoy having their parents present in the classroom so much that the bad behavior would be reinforced. Instead, parents of young children might be asked to require students to read their lessons every night until work starts to be completed during class time. Frequently, working parents will have no way of knowing whether the child has homework assignments or not. However, parents could be asked to require reading in selected subjects every night. Through parent involvement of this type teachers are able to set reasonable standards for working parents to be involved in the education of their children. This will help to foster the co-partnerships needed between parents and teachers (Allington, 1980).

It is also important to link the whole school and community. Bringing parents into the equation is essential (Ludwig, 1999). An effective parent communication system is a requirement for effective classroom discipline. Many schools are putting more thought into and developing better communication with parents. Parents represent a great deal of potential help and support for teachers and schools struggling to maintain discipline. Organized systems that consistently advise parents result in extremely positive attitudes from parents (Charles, 1981).

### Conclusion

Even though parents don't always support teachers in every endeavor, it is important not to get a one sided view about the role parents can play in shaping our classroom efforts. The sonic boom of multiplying disciplinary problems among school going teenagers reverberates widely around the world because of excessive globalization and its adverse impacts. This can be resolved through combining the interests and visions of both parents and teachers through comprehensive, shared and pragmatic plans. It is certainly a rewarding experience when teachers and parents pool their abilities and resources to bring about positive student change. Even though it will require some time to plan appropriate ways to involve parents, it will be worthwhile. Students will misbehave. How you handle the misbehavior will impact, to some degree, on how the school cooperates with parents.

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