

Education Matters

How parents and teachers should talk to each other

A successful alliance between parents and teachers starts early. Above, Ruth Greene of Venice High School talks to parents and students during a magnet schools fair at Crenshaw High School earlier this month.

(Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

By **Michelle Maltais**

Students aren't the only ones who have homework. We parents also have an ongoing assignment: building, nurturing and maintaining a relationship with our kids' teachers.

"The level of success a child experiences during a school year is definitely enhanced by communication and cooperation between parents and teachers," former LAUSD kindergarten and middle school teacher (and mom) Wendy Kennar said.

For some of us, forging a collaborative relationship might seem daunting. As a mother of five, Gracie Lujan of La Cañada, put it: "You always feel like you're going to the principal's office."

Sure, exchanges between parent and teacher can, at times, feel territorial or even adversarial. But they shouldn't -- and they don't have to.

Why do I need a relationship with my child's teacher?

Teachers are the people we parents entrust with the most precious people in our lives -- the people who inspire the strongest emotions (and fears) within us. Just on that basis alone, it makes sense to connect with them. Both teacher and parent are working toward the same end: forming and facilitating the development of your child.

"As a teacher, there's only so much you can do -- after all, you've got 30-plus other children in the room, depending on the grade you're teaching," Kennar said. "So what you're trying to do in the classroom must be supported at home."

What should I expect from this relationship?

I saw the value of this advice within the first month of school this year. My 4-year-old started a transitional kindergarten program this fall, and my husband and I have been navigating the relationship through this perspective.

When we first dropped him off at carpool, we left a smiling, playful child who both charms and challenges us. For the next six or seven hours, we have no idea of the person the teachers encountered. We assumed it was the same child we took to preschool. Back-to-School Night proved very instructive, even if a bit unsettling. I lingered a bit to ask more questions of the teacher one-on-one.

We learned that in the classroom, our son was exerting some of the same defiance that we saw at home. The most useful takeaway: The specific words and actions the classroom used to deal with this behavior. When we began to implement the same approach at home, it was like a miracle. Mornings shifted from stressful screaming matches to a pleasant routine easing him into the school day. The need for communication is particularly imperative when a child has unique challenges, said Jennifer Loza. Her son, who has ADHD, “gets bouts of depression and anxiety dealing with the loss of his dad,” the Bermuda Dunes mom said. “As long as I communicate this to his teachers, they are really good about giving some leeway and allowing him some space and even doing some extra things to keep him distracted or help boost his spirits.”

What should we talk about?

Just as you know your child in a certain context, so do teachers -- and you two might not experience the same person. The idea is to help teachers round out their image of your child and to help them most effectively reach the student.

Tell the teacher what you know about your child’s interests, skills and history that will help to build a complete picture of who your child is at this moment. Share any information that can affect your child emotionally, mentally or physically.

Remember, too, communicating isn’t only about telling teachers. It’s also about asking and listening. Let the teacher tell you about what he or she knows of your child and how the child is in the classroom. You may get some ideas on how to encourage and extend that learning environment at home as well.

How do I know what to tell them?

“Teachers don’t know everything parents are dealing with at home -- other siblings, long commutes, extended family, housing issues, medical issues, etc.,” Kennar said.

Former preschool teacher Lacey LaCour agrees. “Is there something disruptive going on at home? Did your child have a really bad night of sleep or a stressful morning? It is good for teachers to know a child’s home environment,” said the Torrance-based mother of two.

It’s already mid-October. What if we didn’t start at the beginning of the school year?

You don’t need to wait until parent-teacher conferences -- or until there’s a problem.

“A parent’s first contact with a teacher shouldn’t be for a ‘negative’ reason,” said Kennar, who taught at LAUSD’s Rosewood Avenue Elementary for 12 years. “Honestly, it took me a few years to learn that my first phone call home shouldn’t be because of a problem but to compliment something a child did.” When there is a problem, some teachers may prefer to encourage their students to deliver -- and take responsibility for -- the news. “I send a note home,” said Deidre Krieger, a fifth-grade teacher at Thomas Edison School in Anaheim. “I want them to have the option to make the right choice. When I

don't get it back the next day, I forward the photo of the note in an email to the parent and ask them to keep an eye out for it, with a brief explanation of what happened during the day.”

How can I initiate a conversation with my child's teacher?

Don't wait to be called on by the teacher. “Parents shouldn't hesitate to send a note and request an informal ‘how's-my-child-doing’ discussion -- through email, phone, or in person. Parents also shouldn't hesitate to ask for concrete suggestions on ways to help at home.” (Kennar [offers some tips](#) on navigating the parent-teacher conference.)

Some teachers do the initiating by distributing to parents at the beginning of the year a kind of “student information sheet” to fill out, including preferences for how to be contacted.

How often do we need to be in touch?

That will vary, depending on your child. My son's teachers have been sending us a weekly progress report on how effective our coordinated efforts are and what we might discuss tweaking. It was a wonderful feeling getting that note saying that they've been seeing in their classroom more of the child we have known.

What mode of communication is best?

If you don't already know, ask the teacher or the school what's preferred. Swap contact information and exchange the best times to reach each other.

Our school provides an email address for the teachers and for the community's families. When we met, I confirmed the timing to get a better sense of when to reasonably anticipate responses. And I see they typically respond shortly after school ends or in the evening.

Although many teachers email or use whatever schoolwide online communication system is in place, some will prefer phone calls and handwritten notes. Others employ third-party apps such as ClassDojo, which allows them to, among other things, track students' classroom behavior and send weekly reports. At our school, we typically email but also use Haiku for weekly classwide communication and assignments.

What about IRL?

While ongoing communication over the phone or email is important, the “event” meetings can still be a useful opportunity as well, particularly as your student's universe of teachers broadens.

“Back-to-school night is even more important in high school,” said mother Michelle Machado of Escondido. “Since [my kids] have six to eight teachers now, you never really get to know them -- except from your teenager's warped version. Even just spending 20 minutes or so with them made me feel like I kind of know them and their personalities a bit better.”

The way you communicate communicates a lot, too

Remember, you are really on the same team with the same goal. And just as you are working hard as parents, so are your child's teachers.

“Make sure your child’s teacher knows that you appreciate him or her,” reminds LaCour. While it doesn’t have to mean showering them with gifts -- though the occasional coffee or treat might be nice -- it really is about “starting from a positive assumption of the teacher's motivations. Make it clear to the teacher that you know your goals for your child are the same ... safety and success.”

A simple thank-you or kind word can go a long way in strengthening relationships. And teachers should remember that students aren’t the only ones who respond well to praise. A quick note to parents with kudos for their kids can deepen trust.

This is something Krieger incorporates as a form of positive reinforcement in her classroom that extends home. “It's one of the prizes in my raffle/treasure box. Lots of kids choose that prize,” she said. “They give me a ‘Positive Note’ slip, and I've generated a positive note to their family by the next day.”

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