

Communicating With Families



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The impact that family involvement can have on student achievement has been widely recognized. Research has demonstrated that families of all backgrounds are supportive of their children's learning, but it remains important to further involve families in what's happening at school (Mapp & Henderson, 2002). Parent engagement has been found to have many advantages for students, including higher achievement and improved relationships (Osborne, 2015). One of a teacher's professional responsibilities is to encourage family involvement, truly engaging families in their child's learning. Danielson writes, "Although parents and guardians can vary enormously in how active a part they can take in their children's learning, most parents care deeply about the progress of their children and appreciate meaningful participation" (2007, p.407).

In order to effectively engage families in their student's learning and progress, teachers must work to establish relationships with families. Key practices include: building trusting relationships through school and classroom-based activities, recognizing and respecting individual family's needs as well as the cultural differences between families, and adopting an approach that considers families partners with shared power and responsibility (Mapp & Henderson, 2002).

There are numerous benefits to engaging families in school activities at all grade levels, and the impact can be most powerful when teachers communicate specific information about the instructional program or the individual student.

In a summary of several studies on the impact that family engagement can have on student achievement, Mapp and Henderson (2002) explained that communicating with families about how they can develop and support specific knowledge and skills in their students has a greater impact on student achievement than general initiatives that are meant to involve families.

To invite and encourage deep and substantive family engagement, teachers must frequently and strategically provide information on both the instructional program as well as student progress. Student progress can include feedback on academics, social skills and emotional development. Notes, newsletters, phone calls, and in-person meetings can all be useful communication tools. Technology, such as email and websites, can be used to increase the frequency of communication with families. Information to share regularly with families can include: information on the instructional program, projects, assignments, and ideas for families to become involved in the school or classroom.

Further, distinguished teachers regularly engage in two-way communication with families and include student contributions. Research has demonstrated that the most effective programs and interventions honor and respect the needs of families (Starkey & Klein, 2000). Teachers should interact with families with both empathy and respect, being mindful of diverse families' needs and listening carefully to families about their insights into their child's needs and progress.

Information Alignment

Materials presented in this eBook align with the following:

Essential Questions

- What culturally responsive approaches can be implemented to effectively engage diverse families in the instructional program?
- What strategies can be used for responding to family concerns and inviting family participation?
- How can student involvement in the process of designing informational materials strengthen teacher/family relationships?

Learning Outcomes

- Identify culturally responsive approaches designed to engage families in the instructional program.
- Analyze strategies for responding to family concerns and inviting family participation.
- Design informational materials for families that integrate student contributions.

Topic Focus

- Developing Relationships With Families
- Strategies for Communication
- Actively Engaging Parents and Families

Table of Contents

Communicating With Families	2
Information Alignment	3
Developing Relationships With Families	5
Strategies for Communication	7
Actively Engaging Parents and Families	10
Conclusion	11
References	12

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Developing Relationships With Families

Developing relationships with families takes an array of skills as well as repeated efforts. In this section, we'll discuss ideas you can use to develop a toolkit of skills for starting and sustaining positive relationships with families. Osborne (2015) stresses the importance of engaging families in order to help students succeed. We'll start with establishing trust and respect with families, then we'll focus on how culture impacts the way teachers and families relate to each other.

Building Trust and Respect With Families

Each family has a unique history and culture. Part of building trust and respect with families is being mindful of how our experiences and views may differ from theirs, and planning communication thoughtfully. Improving communication between teachers and families can lead to stronger relationships and positive experiences for students. When students know there is an established relationship between home and school, there is a higher level of accountability and students understand that teachers and parents are working together for their benefit (Flanagan, 2015).

Assume the initiative. Many families will proactively reach out to you to get to know you. Others will not. When you assume the responsibility to build these relationships, there will be no delay or confusion about who should take actions. Make it a goal to build relationships with each and every family, whether they have communicated with you or not.

Start with happy and neutral news. Be sure the families hear from you often, and share happy or neutral news about their child. By doing so, families will not hear something unpleasant about their child from you as the first point of communication.

Be persistent. Building relationships takes time. Families may not respond to your first, second, or even third attempt to contact them. Be sure that you are sharing a variety of messages using different methods. There are endless reasons why a family may not be responding. Keep reaching out to them.

Develop empathy. Mentally take the time to put yourself in the family's shoes. Doing so can help you shape your conversation to deliver the information a family needs in a way they will find agreeable. By imagining yourself to be the adult family member of the student, you can develop ideas about what to communicate, when to share it, and how best to deliver it. Consider the spectrum of information you need to share with families. For each message, think of three ways you could deliver it and what would be the likely reaction to each. By identifying the approaches that would most likely result in a positive outcome, you can avoid missteps without having to live through them.

Communicate their way. Ask each family how they like to be contacted. They are likely to have preferences for a method (e.g., phone, email, postal mail, text), time of day, length of communication, and level of detail. Consider the literacy level of parents as well. The most recent results of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2009) shows that over 11 million adults in the U.S. are not literate. Chances are good that one or more of your student's families have a member who is not literate. Verbal communication may work much better for them. Since you may not know who they are, and it's not considered polite to ask, you can address the matter by communicating the same information in a variety of ways. Developing relationships with families takes an array of skills as well as repeated efforts.

Protect privacy. An important part of demonstrating respect for families and students is keeping confidential information private. This includes such things as test scores, documented or suspected disabilities or health conditions, performance, and behavior issues. You can probably think of a number of other examples of information the family would want you to protect.

Deliver a good news sandwich. It is possible that, very early in the relationship, you'll need to deliver some less than pleasant news. The approach you take can help families feel less defensive and understand that you believe their child is a valuable member of the class. Think of examples that showcase how the student is performing well. Place the news that is an opportunity for improvement in between two or more positive comments. Doing so will help families know that it's not all bad news and that you appreciate their student as a whole person (Maroney, n.d.).

Verify your understanding. This is often referred to as active listening. Listen to the family without interrupting. Then summarize what you believe you've heard and see if the family agrees. By having a clear understanding of what you've heard before you respond, you can avoid having a disjointed conversation.

Prepare, prepare, prepare. By being prepared you can guide the conversation successfully. Think about what it will feel like to be receiving this information or news. Is it a happy occasion, such as the student has won an award? Is it a potentially stressful situation, such as when the student has had disruptive behavior? What kind of outcome do you want from the conversation? Determine what you want to say or avoid in order to steer the conversation to a positive outcome.

Culturally Responsive Practices for Engaging Families

We may be tempted to think of culture as a set of beliefs that belong to a homogenous group of people. We may think in big categories (such as religion, nationality, or gender) when culture is actually very granular and unique. Each student's family is a blend of history and experiences. You can't make any assumptions about their opinions, political positions, values, or beliefs (Zion and Kozleski, 2005).

Learn by doing. Kozleski (n.d.) recommends an experiment to help you understand what it feels like to be immersed in a culture that is unfamiliar.

“Put yourself in situations where you're not dominant, where you're a noticeable minority or in a group where you don't know the norms and unspoken rules. Recognize what that feels like and sit with the discomfort. Ask yourself these questions: What did I do to make myself more comfortable? What did I do to be effective or survive in that situation? What did others do that either helped or hindered my effectiveness? What would have helped me in that situation? Use the answers to these questions help you to structure how you include students.”

Be accessible. Being highly visible to families offers them opportunities to approach you in person. You might decide to stand at the student pick up and drop off area. For families that prefer face to face interaction, this is an opportunity to establish or reinforce the relationship. After meeting you face to face, these same families may become much more comfortable with other communication methods.

Adapt communication format. With our nation welcoming people from all over the world, it is likely that several of your families speak a language other than English at home. Here are two ideas for keeping communication clear. First, consider sending printed communications home on different colored paper. Later, if speaking with the family, you can be sure you are discussing the same paper by identifying its color (Lindeman, n.d.). Be careful not to use the color of the paper to convey meaning. Colors have different meanings in different cultures. Second, you may also enlist volunteers (colleagues or families) to help translate school communications into home languages. If possible, have two native speakers work together on each translation to help avoid errors (Warger, 2001).

Create shared values. When developing the family relationship, ask open-ended questions about the family's goals for their child. Letting them speak first will help you to customize your ideas to fit with their ideas. If you speak first, the family may feel less like sharing because they don't want to contradict you or assume you won't accept their views. You may need to ask additional clarifying question to ensure you fully understand their goals.

Communicate educational value. Because your student's families are diverse, they may not have had prior exposure to school events that seem commonplace to you. When describing an activity, including specific details that support how that activity is educationally valuable. For example, if the class will take a trip to the zoo, explain that prior to the trip students will be learning about classifying animals into groups. While at the zoo, students will describe the characteristics of the animals they see in a notebook and write a conclusion about to what group each animal belongs.

In this section, we've suggested a few ideas for how to establish and sustain relationships with families. When done well it can be highly rewarding. Next, we're going to explore some specific ideas for communicating with families that will help you, your students, and their families articulate and achieve learning and development goals for the student.

Strategies for Communication

When communicating with families, you have goals for what you want the communication to achieve. While your profession seems, on the surface, to differ from a marketing or sales representative, each of your communication types has the same effect as a marketing campaign. Communication typically serves one or more of these three purposes: to inform, to persuade, or to entertain. Your communication should always include information and persuasion. Entertaining your readers could be difficult since not all of your families will have the same idea of what is interesting or funny. When communicating, you are sharing information that your families need and you want them to take some kind of action. When thinking about your communication, start with your goals in mind. This will help you pick the right information, timing, and wording.

Use the Communication Planning worksheet provided in this course to start detailing your communication plan. You will want to include: date when communication will be sent or done, format of the communication, the audience for the communication, the information it will contain, the skills it will teach, the attitudes it will foster, potential objections the families may offer, and how you plan to prevent or counter those objections. The next section provides some starter ideas of communication you may want to do throughout the year.

Points of Communication

There are many reasons to communicate with families throughout the year. It is important for teachers to establish communication with families early in the school year to develop trust and open the lines of communication (Wilson, 2016). Taking the time to do so early, will create a foundation for future communication. Below are some suggestions of topics for discussion with families. Some of these may not apply to you, and you will likely think of many more that are relevant to your students and families.

Get to know the teacher. Share what families need to know about you including: expertise, experience, teaching plans, and how to reach you. If your school supports home visits, ask the family if you can come visit before the school year starts.

Home visit. While you have a list of topics in mind to discuss with the family, start by engaging in informal social dialog. Family members may be nervous about you being in their home. They may feel that you are judging them. It takes confidence for the family to feel comfortable letting a stranger or acquaintance into their home. You can demonstrate respect for them by establishing rapport before getting into your topics. A way to make a transition from informal conversation to school topics would be to show photographs of the classroom while describing what students do in each part of the room. This is also a good opportunity to invite them to an open house so they can see the classroom firsthand before the school year starts - or shortly thereafter.

School calendar. A school calendar typically shares dates and events determined by the school or district. Even if you think the school or district has sent this information, it's helpful to communicate this information more than once. School calendar information may include: the start and end of grading periods, special events, midterm reports, standardized testing dates, student days off, and conferences.

Get to know our classroom. Show students and families how the classroom is organized, what your student experiences (where they sit and keep their belongings), how centers are used, the kinds of information on bulletin boards, and how students help keep the space organized and clean.

Reaching the teacher. Across all of your family communications always include multiple ways to reach you and the best days and times to schedule calls and conferences. They may not have written it down or kept earlier communications. Repeating it is a kind way to ensure they've got immediate access to you.

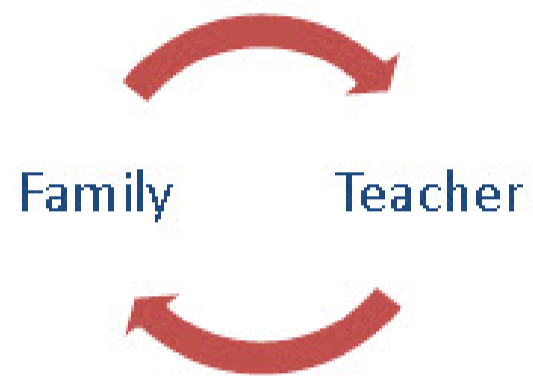
Establish a pattern or pace for your communication (e.g., a certain number of calls each week, post cards). Get families in the habit of expecting your communication. When they know the pattern, they will notice if they missed it.

If you haven't started your Communication Planning yet, take a moment now to start working on it. You can use the Excel or Word format of the Communication Planning Tool. Then return to continue reading the eBook and as you think of ideas for communicating with families, you can add them to your Communication Planning worksheet.

Fostering Two-way Communication

It's somewhat simple to think of all the information you want to share with families and all the actions you want them to take in response. The likelihood that the family will agree with your requests can be influenced by how much they participate in the development of the ideas. Sharing ideas and challenges with families and asking for their feedback can help you develop highly effective solutions.

On your Communication Planning worksheet, one of the columns asks you to think about what information or actions you need from families. This is a prompt for you to plan to engage the family in two-way communication. Your requests for inputs from the family might be specific, such as a request that they vote on which of three potential school field trips (which you name and describe) they think will most benefit their student. Your request might also be opened ended, such as a request that they submit ideas for fun and educational activities for Family Fun Night at school.



Depending on the number of families you work with, you may be able to track how often you are getting responses from each family and the nature of those responses. You can use these insights to tailor your future communications and to make requests of families that are reasonable given what you know about them. For example, if one family has explained that they work evenings, you can remember that (or keep it in a written file related to the student) and offer to meet with them in the early morning, during your planning period, or on the weekend.

In some cases, a communication is critical to reach the family. You'll have to decide how best to deliver it so you can be sure it reached the responsible adult(s). If you use the phone, you can be confident of reaching the family because you'll hear the voice and be able to have a two-way conversation. You will have to decide whether you need to document that you had the conversation if there is any chance that it will come up again in the future. You might also decide to send the message home in writing and ask the responsible adult to sign it and return it. Consider carefully whether this strategy will be sufficient. Without conversation, the responsible adult may not have understood your message. Your written communication should include requests for family input, ideas for actions they can take, and encouragement for them to contact you.

If you find that your personal availability is a bottleneck that slows the flow of information to families, you can increase availability of important information by asking a family member of a student serve as a contact point for all the other families. This person can host once monthly social events for the families and be a source of information about the instructional program and events. This gives families someone else to reach when you are involved in teaching and frees up your time for instructional activity instead of repetitive communication. This person also can be a source of feedback about how your communication can improve by sharing with you what questions they field on your behalf.

Using Technology to Communicate With Families

As technology continues to develop and evolve, teachers have an increasing number of tools that can help improve communication with families (Provenzano, 2016). How you use technology to communicate with families will depend on what technology you have access to, the kinds of technology in use in your families' homes, and school or district policy. Most schools have students and families read and sign their agreement to, or understanding of, an official policy about when and how students can use computers and internet at school. There may also be an official policy about whether you can use email or websites to communicate with students and families. Be sure you know and follow those policies to avoid any issues with accidentally disclosing student information improperly.

Email. Ask families whether they'd like to receive email communication from you. You can determine the frequency, length, and topics to communicate. Examples of information families might want as a group newsletter by email is a weekly summary of what was learned in the current week, questions families can ask students in order to create

conversation around the subject, any graded assignments students have completed (so families can ask to see the work), and what will be taught in the upcoming week. If sending a group email to all families, be sure to put all of the email addresses into the BCC (blind carbon copy) field so that the families do not see each others' email addresses. This shows your respect for their privacy.

If the family agrees, and it's within policy, you could send student-specific information about both ordinary and mildly sensitive topics including: performance on a recent assessment, how prepared the student is for class, and praise for the student. "The use of email communication between the teacher and parent can help ease the strain during parent teacher meets because any issue, problem or announcement can be communicated at the required time without waiting for a later scheduled meeting so that the issue can be addressed immediately," (Ramasubbu, 2015). Take care not to over-use email for topics that are best handled in person. Examples of topics that are not well suited for email include: behavior issues, persistent low performance, interpersonal issues such as bullying, and concerns about the student's emotional health or home life.

Websites. Another option that might be available to you is the school website or one of your own. Teachers have used websites to reach families in many ways (Sumner, n.d.). Your school or district might already be maintaining a website. If so, find out how you can use it for your students and families. Depending on the features the website supports, you can consider the options described below.

Classroom home page. This is a central location where all the general information about your instructional program can be found. The school home page will share high level information such as policies for students and families, important dates, and schoolwide events. Your class page should offer a link to the school home page and not repeat that information. At the classroom page level, you should not share any student specific information. If you are considering using photos of your students, be sure you have family permission in writing first.

Student pages. Pages for each student can be used as a portfolio of student work which they can share with their families. Students could use a blogging feature to practice their writing skills. If there are features for two-way communication, their fellow students and family members can provide feedback, support, and encouragement. Deciding how much information to share should be done carefully and in collaboration with school officials and families. Disclosing too much information that identifies the student can increase risk to the student.

Mobile apps. Developments in technology have resulted in a new tool to facilitate communication between parents and teachers. Mobile apps such as Remind, Bloomz, and ClassDojo are used by many teachers to share information about what is happening in the classroom, both for the whole class and for individual students (Ramasubbu, 2015). Information is shared in a secure environment, and opens the door for two-way communication.

However you decide to use technology, be sure that you market it repeatedly both verbally and in writing. To get families using the technology, you'll have to first develop connections with them using interpersonal methods. To keep families coming back, keep your content updated regularly, send expected communications on time, respond to families' queries promptly, and keep reminding families about the technology options via verbal and written communication.

Considering that some families are not using these technologies, also offer to send printed versions of your communications home. By placing the printed versions where students can help themselves, you minimize the possibility that students could be self-conscious about admitting they don't have these technologies at home. This helps you get to the goal of reaching all families.

Strategies to Involve Students in the Communication With Families

Part of the challenge in family communication is getting the message home. Students can be forgetful, disorganized, or not appreciate how important it is to deliver a paper to their family. Consider having the students design, write, edit and compile the communication. Have them discuss what is important to include. Teach them journalistic writing style so that families get answers to the important questions of who, what, where, when, why and how. Before handing the paper to the students, praise their efforts. Then, have them look at and appreciate their own work while emphasizing how important it is for them to get the paper to their families. By instilling this sense of ownership and pride in the communication, students are much more likely to present the paper to their family. Their excitement in having created the communication can then flow over to the family's appreciating the importance of reading and responding to it.

Actively Engaging Parents and Families

Ideally, a student will benefit from having the active participation of their family all the time - not just when something goes wrong. In this section, we'll explore some specific ways to engage families in the instructional program and school activities all year long.

Inviting Family Participation

Provide the family with some specific, actionable ideas of how they can help their student grow. Make each idea into a short activity that the families will easily understand and not perceive to be too time consuming. Ask the family to commit to working with their child on these activities. By having several options of activities for the family to choose from, you are not presenting them with a single option (yes or no), but an assortment of options from which they can select one or more. Below are a few ideas to consider.

- Parents bring in their favorite book (that will still resonate with the students age group) and do a little book talk about it. Teacher give guidance what points they should include.
- Parents present a talk on a subject they are comfortable with and would interest students. Teacher partner to discuss subject and how to present.
- Have a spot in the classroom where parents can find the tasks you need their help with and enable them to work independently so you don't have to stop teaching to explain it.

Developing Action Plans With Families

Clearly communicating expectations. At the beginning of each school year, and perhaps with reminders throughout the year, be clear with students and families about the expectations you have for the students. Include subjects such as attendance, timeliness, preparedness, positive behavior amongst peers, and so on. Doing so can help prevent students from falling behind or performing at a lower level than they are capable of performing (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

Be specific. You should also outline to parents what actions they should take in order to stay promptly informed of school events, the instructional program, and academic progress for their student. Students and families want to partner with you and work together to ensure the student's success. By sharing expectations and hearing family feedback early in the year, you establish a common understanding of how each person will participate.

Offer ideas. Think creatively and look for several ways to address each goal or issue that you and the families may encounter during the year. Doing so eliminates a lot of potential struggles where the family may be less involved than you would like - simply because they did not know what an expected or anticipated level of involvement includes.

At-school family activities. The nature of an at-school family activity will depend on your school, your students, and their families. Here's an example of one approach to a fun-filled family event at school.

At a time convenient for the majority of families, or rotating different times to eventually reach everyone, have a family night where you play games related to the subjects the students are learning. Teach the students how to play each game before the event and have each student teach their family members on the game night. Invite siblings too, so families don't have to get babysitters. Send families home with the tools they'd need to play those games at home together. Turning your students into teachers helps to cement the learning, gives them the opportunity to be proud of their skills, and shows the family what they are learning.

Conclusion

Throughout this eBook, we have focused on ways that you can be of service to your students and families. An important part that we want you to remember is that taking good care of your own needs helps you be the best teacher you can. With this in mind, we have two recommendations for supporting yourself as a great communicator.

Help yourself feel better. When you have to communicate uncomfortable news to families, the stress can take a toll on you. It can be as simple as making you nervous or tired. If you are sensitive, the discomfort can stick with you long after the conversation is over. When you know you have an uncomfortable or challenging communication coming up, plan to follow it immediately with a happy communication. Make a point of noting where your students are doing well and call their families to tell them how much you appreciate the student and specifically describe what the student is doing well. This not only builds a positive relationship with this family; it also gives you reason to feel good by making others feel good.

Nurture your own talents. Even after you've finished this course, keep reflecting on your communication skills and continuously look for ways to improve. Eventually, you'll reach a place where you've developed a highly effective skillset that you can share with others. If you feel you've reached a consistently high level of performance, reinforce it by offering to mentor others.

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