

The Positive Results of Parent Communication Teaching in a Digital Age

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug"

—Mark Twain

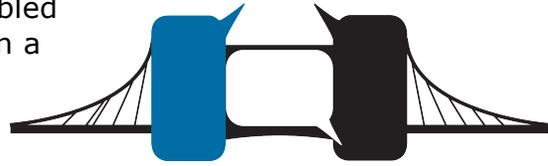
Parents and teachers are two of the most important contributors to a student's educational success. When parents and teachers communicate well with one another, they are able to support student learning together. As such, communication between home and school is vital. However, parents and teachers do not usually have obvious opportunities for interaction. Rather, one party must intentionally reach out to the other for communication to take place. Thankfully, the use of technologies such as email, texting, websites, electronic portfolios and online grade books have made communication between parents and teachers more timely, efficient, productive and satisfying (cf., Merkle, Schmidt, Dirksen & Fuhler, 2006).

Communication between parents and teachers can impact student learning according to new research in neuroscience. For example, research shows that the quality of students' learning environments critically influences their learning. The brain's capacity to make neural connections (in other words, to learn) is diminished when sleep, nutrition and social needs are not met. Furthermore, taking full advantage of the brain's plasticity (it's ability to adapt to change at the neural level) requires a holistic approach to learning where the student's physical and intellectual welfare are supported (OECD, 2007). Additionally, research shows that the emotion regulation areas of the brain influence learning more than had been previously thought. In fact, "evidence is now accumulating that our emotions [do] re-sculpt neural tissue" (OECD, 2007). Moreover, research shows that students who are over-stressed are not able to learn efficiently because the release of the stress hormone, cortisol, interferes with memory formation. Likewise, when a student's home and school environments are calming, the student's brain is able to learn efficiently (Goleman, 1997; Tennant, 2005).

These new insights from neuroscience serve to emphasize the importance of creating strong support systems for students both at home and at school to increase learning. One way to facilitate this rounded approach is to ensure regular communication between home and school. Parents can send teachers an email to let them know when the home learning environment may be (temporarily or otherwise) holding back a student's progress. For example, if the student has been sick or is dealing with the death of a loved one, sending a teacher a short email to let them know that the student may be "off" for the day can make that situation easier on both the teacher and the student. Teachers should likewise let parents know if issues arise at school for the student, such as noticeable changes in behavior, new stressors at school or deficits in academic performance. Teachers can send an email to the student's parents so that together they can determine whether the student

needs extra support. Together, as a team, parents and teachers can work to create the best possible environments to foster physical, emotional and intellectual well-being for students.

Recent technological advances have enabled teachers to communicate with parents on a more regular basis, in a more efficient manner. In our research, teachers indicated that communication is now



possible “24/7—anytime, anywhere.” Teachers reported using email, texts, and automated student status updates to communicate with parents. Additionally, many teachers now use online calendars, which can be accessed any time, from almost anywhere, for parents to schedule meetings, conferences, or to volunteer at school. Teachers are also creating online homework schedules, homework logs, and online grade books, which serve several functions. First, they enable parents to check on their student’s work to make sure that homework is being completed. Second, they allow parents to gauge how well their student is doing in a course in real-time. This enables parents to intervene early, at the first sign of a problem. Just as importantly, it provides parents with the opportunity to praise children for positive performance. Third, online homework schedules can help families plan their afterschool activities so that students are not over-scheduled and/or overworked on any particular day or week.

Although research shows that parental engagement in education has increased over the past 25 years, engaging parents continues to be a hurdle for many schools (Metlife, 2012). For example, the 2005 MetLife survey reported that new teachers were most likely to report their biggest challenge was communicating with, and involving, parents. This is particularly true in middle and high schools (Metlife, 2012). It is important for teachers and parents to have meaningful communication with one another because doing so increases parental engagement in student learning. Furthermore, parental engagement is associated with (1) higher academic achievement (Butler, Uline, & Notar, 2008; Haynes, Comer & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Henderson, 1987); (2) increased attendance rates (Butler, Uline, & Notar, 2008; Haynes et al, 1989); (3) positive student attitudes and behaviors (Becher, 1984; Henderson, Marburger & Ooms, 1986); (4) increased student readiness and interest in their work (Rich, 1988; Tobolka, 2006); (5) increased parent satisfaction with teachers (Rich, 1988; cf., Greenwood & Hickman, 1991), and (6) higher teacher satisfaction ratings (Metlife, 2012).

Despite the fact that some teachers struggle to engage parents, today, more than ever, many parents demand that schools provide them with timely information about their child’s academic progress. Parents have come to expect this information will be communicated to them regularly and early, before reporting periods end, while issues can still be addressed. Most (more than 88%) parents say that their child, individual teachers, and general written communications from the school are either very important or

absolutely essential sources of information about their child's school (Metlife, 2012). Supporting this position, The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) conducted a survey of 50 districts across the United States and found parents want regular updates from their children's teachers. Moreover, parents want most to hear about academic performance and behavioral expectations. Both traditional media (e.g., newspapers, television), as well as new social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were ranked low on their survey of preferred media for school-to-home communication. Instead, parents prefer email (NSPRA, 2011) and other digital means, such as online blogs, online newsletters, online calendars of events and/or homework, text messaging, and websites.

Parents and teachers have a common goal: to facilitate the best educational experience possible for students. When parents and teachers communicate with one another, they are able to work together towards this common goal. New technologies have made communication between home and school more efficient, and improved in both quantity and quality. Parents and teachers alike would be well served to seek out opportunities for communication with one another on a regular basis to ensure that all students have their physical, emotional and intellectual needs met. We know that the best educational outcomes occur when each of these needs are met. See below for some tips for teachers to connect with parents and tips for parents to connect with teachers.

Tips for Teachers

Use technology to reach out to parents specifically about their child

- Do not make class-level contact your only means of communication with parents. Make some personal contact with parents about their child.
- Consider contacting parents when their child has done something well, not only when there is a problem. Doing so can help you establish a rapport with parents.
- Of course, when problems arise, be sure to contact parents about those as well—and do so before the problem becomes too large.

Use technology to communicate class-level and school-level news on a regular basis

- Create a short email, newsletter, and/or update your website to let parents know what topics you are covering in class and what homework a student is expected to complete.
- Keep parents updated on field trips, PTA meetings, and other school activities.
- Consider including questions that parents might ask their children about the school week (“We are studying ancestors this month. Ask your child what he knows about his great-grandparents.”).
- Offer opportunities to have students and parents extend learning via online games or videos (e.g., parents and students together can watch the French and Indian War Interactive by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.)

Get to know your students and their families

- Create an optional and informal electronic survey for parents so that they may share information about their family and/or their child with you.
- Parents know their children well and using their insights into their child’s academic and social behaviors should prove useful in your teaching.

Provide parents with opportunities to volunteer in the class and at the school

- Invite parent volunteers into the classroom whenever you can.
- Use an online calendar to provide regular (weekly and monthly) slots as well as opportunities to help at special events. This helps all parents feel connected to the school and keeps everyone’s calendar current.
- Opening your doors will also create situations conducive to casual discussions, which can go a long way towards building strong relationships with parents.

Hold parent meetings early on in the school year

- Hold the first meeting within the first month of the year, if possible.
- Create an online sign-up so that parents who are not able to be on campus can find times that work for their schedules.
- At the meetings, try to make a personal connection with each family.
- Use this time to explain your plans for communication throughout the year.
- Openly discuss with parents what their communication preferences and expectations are.

Tips for Parents

Get to know your teacher—but keep it professional

- Making a personal connection with teachers is great, but remember that your teacher is a professional and overly personal comments or questions are not appropriate.

Get your teacher’s email address

- Most teachers will give this to you at Back to School Night, but you should feel free to ask for it earlier if you want to contact the teacher prior to Back to School Night.
- Do not forget that most teachers’ work email addresses can be found through school websites.
- Remember that some schools email filters block outside email addresses until those addresses are approved by a teacher. If you do not receive a response in a timely manner, consider that the teacher may not have received the email and follow up accordingly.

Gather class website information

- If you cannot find your teacher’s website through the school website, ask your teacher what online resources he/she has and how to find them.
- Find out whether your class has online calendars for conference, volunteer and special event sign-ups. If not, consider volunteering to create one for the class.

Gather school website information

- Inform yourself about the opportunities that exist for staying up-to-date on school-wide activities.
- The school and the PTA, as well as other groups such as Dad’s Club, Science Club, Book Club, or volunteer organizations may all have their own websites. Ask your teacher how you can access this information.
- Make sure you are on email lists so that you receive emails that the principal and other administrators send out.

Discuss communication preferences with teachers

- Just like parents, teachers are individuals with individual communicative preferences. Ask your teacher how she would like you to initiate communication. Does she want you to schedule a phone call in advance? Or, does she prefer that you email her questions?

Attend all conferences

- If you cannot make a conference because of other commitments, ask whether you can have an online conference using Skype, Google Hangouts, or other technology so that you are still able to view schoolwork.
- If that is not doable, ask for a telephone conference or reschedule.

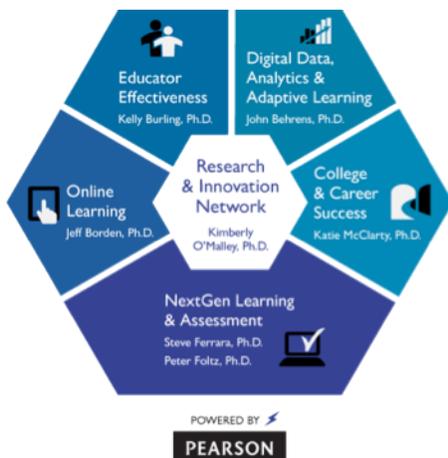
Check in regularly with your teacher on your child’s academic progress

- Some schools use systems that have online grade books. Find out if yours has one, and if so, how you can access it.
- Inform yourself about the opportunities that exist for staying up-to-date on your child’s academic progress throughout the year.

- cf. DePaul, A. (2000). Survival Guide for New Teachers: How new teachers can work effectively with veteran teachers, parents, principals and teacher educators. U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/teachers/become/about/survivalguide/survguide.pdf>
- cf. U.S. Department of Education (2010). Parent power: Build the bridge to success. <http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/parentpower/booklet.pdf>



Liane Wardlow, PhD, Research Scientist



Insights for Innovations.
www.ResearchNetwork.Pearson.com

References

- Becher, R.M. (1984). *Parent involvement: A review of research and principles of successful practice*. Washington, D.C., National Institute of Education.
- Butler, E.K., Uline, C. & Notar, C.E. (2008). The most effective approaches to increasing parental involvement. *Asian Social Science*, 4(5), 114-123.
- DePaul, A. (2000). *Survival Guide for New Teachers: How new teachers can work effectively with veteran teachers, parents, principals and teacher educators*. U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/teachers/become/about/survivalguide/survguide.pdf>
- Coleman, Daniel. (1997). *Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam Books.
- Greenwood, G.E. & Hickman, C.W. (1991). Research and practice in parent involvement: Implications for teacher education. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91(3),
- Haynes, N.M., Comer, J.P. & Hamilton-Lee, M. (1989). School climate enhancement through parental involvement. *Journal of School Psychology*, 27, 87-90.
- Henderson, A.T. (1987). *The evidence continues to grow: Parent involvement improves student achievement*. Columbia, MD. National Committee for Citizen's in Education.
- Henderson, A.T., Marburger, C.L. & Ooms, T. (1986). *Beyond the bake sale: An educator's guide to working with parents*. Columbia, MD. National Committee for Citizen's in Education.
- Merkley, D., Schmidt, D., Dirksen, C., & Fulher, C. (2006). Enhancing parent-teacher communication using technology: A reading improvement clinic example. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 6(1),11-42.
- MetLife (2012). *The Metlife survey of the American teacher: Teachers, parents and the economy*.
- National School Public Relations Association (2011). *National Survey Pinpoints Communication Preferences in School Communication*.
- OECD (2007). *Understanding the Brain: The Birth of a Learning Science* (Paris, OECD Publishing).
- Rich, D. (1988). Bridging the parent gap in education reform. *Educational Horizons*, 66, 90-92.
- Tennant, V. (2005). *The powerful impact of stress*; The Johns Hopkins School of Education.
<http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Keeping%20Fit%20for%20Learning/stress.html>
- Tobolka, D. (2006). Connecting Teachers and Parents through the Internet. *Tech Directions*, 66(5), 24-26.
- U.S. Department of Education (2010). *Parent power: Build the bridge to success*.
<http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/parentpower/booklet.pdf>