



Teaching Threads

Respect for Parents: Positive Communication

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Positive communication with parents and caregivers helps you understand and handle a child's special needs.

In my many years in special education, I have yet to meet parents or caregivers who were not disappointed, frustrated, and even depressed at the prospect of their children facing difficulties in school, or at the necessity of special education. Teachers should therefore exercise sensitivity and professionalism in all transactions involving adults in the lives of children with special learning needs. The suggestions presented here will help you meet the challenges of maintaining communication, empathy, and understanding.

Parents as Experts

Parents are experts on their children, and possess a great deal of information that teachers do not have. Their insights can be useful in building educational programs that might help their children to succeed. Teachers should ask parents about their children and listen to what is shared. After one guardian told me that her child had no friends to socialize with in their neighborhood, I began a weekly game hour during school, which enabled me to arrange groups of students to include some from the same neighborhoods. This encouraged friendships in school that were continued after school hours. Answers to questions such as "What are your child's favorite free-time activities?" or "How willing is your child to share toys with others when playing?" will provide teachers with information that can be used in the classroom.

Focus on the Positive

Too often parent-teacher phone calls or meetings have a negative focus on a child's difficulties. Instead, teachers can design discussion to explore positive solutions while focusing on the child's strengths. I frequently use four simple questions:

1. What are the things your child does well?

2. How did your child learn to do those things?
3. What are the things your child needs to learn?
4. How can we make it easy for your child to learn these things?

Maintain Confidentiality

The fact that a student is experiencing difficulties in school is a strictly confidential matter. Only those individuals directly engaged with the student and his or her education should have access to an individual student's information. The information includes test results, intelligence scores, family background, and mental health concerns. Teachers demonstrate respect when they refuse to discuss these matters at faculty meetings, in the teacher's lounge, or during casual conversations.

Parent Involvement

No two caregivers are alike. Parents are able and willing to involve themselves in their child's education in different ways. Federal special-education laws already direct schools to schedule meetings for students receiving special education services at times convenient for the parents. To accommodate busy family schedules, schools should offer parent-teacher meetings at various times throughout the day and evening. While some parents enjoy reading and writing in home-school notebooks, others would rather visit with the teacher. Some parents prefer to help out on class parties or field trips; others might volunteer in the computer lab. Encouraging a wide variety of options for parent involvement will enable more to become involved in ways that are meaningful for them.

Offer Support

Parents want to do whatever possible to help their children and are therefore attracted to news items that feature discoveries or insights about specific disabilities, educational methods for students with learning difficulties,

or pharmaceutical interventions. Teachers can provide support for parents by helping them make informed decisions. For example, if a television news programs describes a medication for students with attention problems, teachers can help interested parents or guardians by contacting the media to locate the source of the research; requesting a report of the findings; reviewing the report with the caregivers; and encouraging parents to contact their child's medical doctor. Being well-informed and keeping current will help teachers to work collaboratively with parents of students with special needs.

As always, my intent in presenting these activities is to help teachers answer this question -

What can I do to make it easier for my students to learn and behave?



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