Meeting the challenge of the positive, productive parent-teacher relationship

There is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools. Everyone believes that parents and teachers should be allies and partners. After all, we are all engaged in the important and precious work of raising, guiding, and teaching our children. But all too often, parents and teachers feel estranged from and suspicious of each other. The relationship can become competitive and adversarial rather than collaborative and empathic. What can teachers do to build stronger ties? Nearly all the teachers I interviewed reported that they receive little, if any, training on building successful relationships with the parents of the children that they teach. Yet, how teachers approach encounters with parents from the first day has a profound effect not only on how parents view the school, but also on the child's experience in and outlook on school and learning as a whole. Teachers need to develop strategies, tools, and skills for supporting productive dialogue with parents. They need to value the authority and wisdom of parents.

The Parent Point of View

To parents, their child is the most important person in their lives, the one who arouses their deepest passions and greatest vulnerabilities, and the one who inspires their fiercest advocacy and protection. And it is teachers--society's professional adults--who are the primary people with whom the parents must seek alliance and support in the crucial work of child rearing. Parents must quickly learn to release their child and trust that he or she will be well cared for by a perfect stranger. This is a hard thing to do. All of the parent's expectations and fears, as well as their own memories--positive and negative--of school experiences, get loaded on to encounters with teachers.

Different Roles

In his 1932 book, Sociology of Teaching, Willard Waller suggests that some tension between parents and teachers is inevitable because of the different roles and functions they play in the lives of children. Parents, he claims, have a "particularistic" relationship with their child, in which the bond is deeply passionate and individualistic. Teachers, on the other hand, have a "universalistic" relationship with their students, one which is more distant and dispassionate. Teachers work hard to find a balance between responding to the needs and capacities of individual students and supporting the development of a classroom community in which children learn to be responsible and accountable to the group.

In other words, when parents plead with the teacher to be fair to their child, they are usually asking for special consideration for their youngster. They want the teacher to consider the unique struggles and strengths of their child and respond accordingly. But when teaches talk about being "fair" to everyone, they mean giving equal amounts of attention, judging everyone by the same objective, universal standards, and using explicit and public criteria for making judgments. Inevitably, said Waller, these differences in perspective produce conflicts and distrust--often masked and oblique--between parents and teachers, even though both would claim that they are laboring with "the best interest of the child" foremost in their minds.

What Teachers Say

In my research on the parent-teacher relationship, I talked with many strong teachers who prided themselves on the successful relationships they build with their students' families. Most felt the key to their success in working with parents was the ability to put the child--their strengths and their vulnerabilities, their achievements and their challenges--at the center of the parent-teacher conversation. Keeping the focus on the child encourages a conversation that speaks to the unique temperament and capacities of the child--seeing the "whole child" from a variety of angles ("the whole 360 degrees," as one teacher put it). It avoids a conversation that puts forth a narrow view of the child--a recitation of his or her weaknesses or frivolous, ungrounded praise.

In the examples that follow, three teachers talk about how they build and, when needed, mend relationships with parents.

Starting Off Right

Molly Rose, a first-grade teacher in a city school that serves a largely poor, immigrant population, speaks about "the child as a bridge" between home and school and gives the child the most visible and audible role in her work with parents. "Almost everything I do with parents is with the child at the center," says Molly.

The first communication with the family occurs before school begins, and--true to her word--it is sent to the child. In early August, Molly writes a simple letter to each child in her class, telling each one about her summer. "Last August," she recalls, "I wrote that 'I read a lot of good books, I went swimming, and I went hiking.' Then I added a picture of myself hiking." Along with the letter, Molly attaches a blank page, and she asks each child to draw a picture of his or her summer and have an adult help write a letter back to her.

A couple of weeks later, toward the end of August, Molly sends a letter to the parents welcoming their child to her class and alerting them to some of the routines, rituals, and schedules that they will need to know.

Molly's first face-to-face contact with the parents comes a couple of weeks after the opening of school, when she schedules a short "getting to know you" conference. This meeting is specifically designed to give parents the chance to tell Molly about their child's personality, strengths, and challenges, and about their own expectations, goals, and concerns. "I try very hard," says Molly, "not to talk at all. This is purely a listening conference.... The parents are the experts, and I'm seeking their wisdom and their guidance.... I'm saying, "Come and tell me all about your child."

Even though Molly tries to make this first meeting "as low-key as possible," many parents seem worried and apprehensive when they come in. Some seem to feel awkward assuming the voice of authority, expecting instead that the teacher will tell them what to do, while others seem to feel nervous "about saying the wrong thing." Molly must quickly disabuse them of the idea that there

is a "right answer" to her queries or that they need to present a perfect picture of their youngster. "I try to convey to them my support and understanding," she says, often by asking a question that allows them to be proud and admiring of their child. "What is your child good at?" Molly asks, ready to receive any and all answers. "She's good at setting the table," says one. "He's good at making friends," answers another. "She's a terrific soccer player," beams a third.

Because Molly believes that these initial "getting to know you" meetings are crucial moments for her to bond with parents, she "insists" on a 100-percent turnout. "I just insist," she says. "I make myself available any time of the day, from early morning to late at night. We work through all kinds of scheduling complications."

Giving Parents Perspective

Elizabeth Morgan, who has taught children of different ages in a variety of independent schools, sees conferences as opportunities to give support to parents and help them become their children's best advocates. "As a teacher, I want to convey to parents some confidence in their parenting," she says definitively. "I want to help them learn how to advocate for their children." In order for parents to be effective advocates, they must see their children as separate human beings from themselves with different strengths and vulnerabilities. But parents not only need to see their child's singularity in order to be "fully supportive" of him or her, they also need to appreciate the different paces and trajectories of development. "I want to help them gain a sense of perspective and help to ease their anxiety," says Elizabeth. This usually requires that they "see a longer time frame."

When Elizabeth was teaching five-and six-year-olds--whose parents were desperate for their children to learn to read--she also worked hard to convince parents that they should relax and not pressure their youngsters. "Reading is a process of integrating. It's mysterious," she would tell concerned parents. "I try to tell them that it will happen in its own time if we provide the appropriate resources and conditions."

Negotiating Conflict

The best way to communicate empathy for parents, and to keep the child in focus, says Sophie Wilder, the teacher of a combined fifth- and sixth-grade class at an alternative public school, "is to mine the parents' wisdom about their child, to learn all that you can about how they see their child." Like Molly Rose, she believes that teachers see only the narrowest slice of a child's capabilities and temperament and that it is critical that teachers seek parents' insight in a specific and grounded way that provides useful evidence to the teacher.

"I see such a small picture of these kids at school," she admits sadly, "a smaller and smaller view as they get older ... So every bit of information that I get from parents is always helpful in filling in the spaces of what I can't see and don't know."

Her stance of curiosity and openness helps enormously when parents arrive with concerns that, if left unchecked, might lead to misunderstanding and stalemate.

Several weeks ago, for instance, Malcolm's grandparents came to school and told Sophie--in a calm and thoughtful manner--that their grandson was very unhappy in her class, that he felt picked on by her, and that she never seemed to notice how hard he was working. Sophie remembers "listening comfortably" and not feeling the slightest bit defensive. As they spoke, there were things that felt familiar and rang true. I probably am on his case a lot, thought Sophie. He is really being disruptive in class, and it really does bother me.

Sophie asked Malcolm's grandparents to tell her exactly what he was reporting, because she knew that the resolution of this problem would be found in the details. They reminded her of the day she asked Malcolm to be the class leader. Malcolm interpreted his assignment as a punishment, even though Sophie had seen it as a classroom privilege. The grandparents offered several other examples of miscommunication. This conversation proved enormously useful to Sophie in her developing relationship with their grandson.

In the days that followed, Sophie had lots of opportunities to talk with Malcolm, "sharing their different perceptions and admitting their mistakes." She promised, for instance, to praise him more when he was doing things right, and he said that he would be more respectful of the rules that she expects everyone to follow in the class. Malcolm relished the attention, his grandparents were grateful for Sophie's immediate and specific response, and they reported a "huge change" in Malcolm's demeanor at home.

Sophie closes her eyes as if she is searching for an accurate image of how she feels most of the time when her work with parents is collaborative and mutually appreciative, when they have found common ground. When parents and teachers begin to trust each other and recognize the mutuality of their concern for the child, she says, it is like "close neighbors chatting over the back fence." It is a conversation that is embracing, not adversarial; collaborative, not competitive; and a bit casual, not too proper or formal.

A New Way of Communicating

Sophie's image of neighbors talking at the fence is a powerful one. Another teacher pictured positive communication with parents as "sitting on the same side of the table," another as "walking in the other's shoes." Each of these images suggests a dialogue that develops out of a growing trust, a mutuality of concern, and an appreciation of contrasting perspectives. All of the images suggest the risk-taking, courage, and grace such dialogue requires. In seeking meaningful alliances, parents and teachers must build bridges and mark boundaries, they must find points of mutual identification and, at the same time, hold fast to their different perspectives.

How Three Teachers Build Relationships

"I try to call each parent at least twice a year and leave a quick, positive message about their child, such as a great score on a test or an act of kindness. It's important that parents not fear phone calls from school,"

--Jonathan Awe,
3rd grade, Appleton, WI

"The year starts with a "Getting to Know You" Open House. Then, we hold five "Information Nights," during which we teach parents things their children are learning in class. Parents are then better able to help kids with homework and projects. It has been very successful."

--Denise Jett, 5th grade, Louisville, KY

"When conflict arises with a parent, what works is to be strong and firm, and as understanding as you can, It is a hard combination to achieve, but most parents respect you for it."

--Neatha Wyatt, Bowling Green, FL

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