



*A Union of Professionals*

## **Helping Your Child Succeed: How Parents & Families Can Communicate Better With Teachers and School Staff**

Meeting with a teacher, principal or other school staff member makes many parents feel nervous. If you feel this way, you're not alone. Teachers and school staff often feel this way when speaking with parents or family members. That's because most of the times that parents and school staff talk to each other, it's about a problem or another subject that is unpleasant.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed these tips to make it easier for you to talk with a teacher or other school staff person--and also make your discussions more helpful.

### **Share your insights.**

Be prepared to let the teacher or other school staff know about your child's study habits, special interests and any health problems that may affect his or her learning.

You might also want to share any recent experiences (like a death in the family) that could be affecting your child's performance or behavior. This information will help school staff better understand your child.

### **Make a list of questions.**

Start thinking about questions before a meeting or conference at school. One way to get ideas is by talking to your son or daughter.

Make a list of questions and bring it to the school with you. The teacher will welcome this as a sign that you take your child's schooling very seriously. Some basic questions to ask a teacher or school staff are:

- How is my child doing in your class?
- Is he/she having any problems?
- What are the problems and how can I/our family help at home?

### **Consider your children's grade level in asking questions.**

Some questions may be more appropriate for certain grade levels. For example, if your child is in elementary school, you might ask:

- How well is my child doing in reading and math?
- How well does my child work independently? Or with others?
- How does my child seem to feel about school or his or her own abilities?

Other questions may be more appropriate if your child is older (grades 6-12):

- Does this school offer career counseling or classes to help my son/daughter decide on a career?
- How often do you assign homework? Is my child completing homework assignments as expected?
- Where can we get help in completing college applications?

Listen carefully to the reports and statements from your child's teacher, counselor or school staff. This information will give you additional ideas for questions to ask.

### **Let teachers and staff know your concerns.**

Whatever the purpose of your meeting is, feel free to tell the teacher your concerns. (For example, your child doesn't seem to get along with other students or your child seems bored with school work.)

Explain your concern to the teachers and staff at your school. Your child's teacher may have suggestions to address your concerns. The teacher may help you set up an appointment to speak with a counselor or school psychologist who can offer advice.

### **Examine your children's school environment.**

At an "open house" or other school activity, look around you at the classrooms and displays. They are a good indication of the learning that's taking place at your children's school. Here are some things to look for:

- Pay special attention to student work that is shown on bulletin boards or throughout the rest of the building.
- Take note of the special facilities:
  - Is there a library in the school?
  - Is there a computer lab?
  - Are there specific rooms for art, music and other subjects?
- Acquaint yourself with any school policies that you may not be aware of. For example, find out what you need to do if your child is absent from school. For example: Is a written note from parents required?
- Get a sense of your child's daily routine. For example: Where is your child's home-room located? Where do the children go to eat lunch? Where do students gather for the bus at the end of the day?

### **Work through disagreements.**

If you're upset with a teacher about a grade or incident involving your child, don't rush to contact the teacher or school immediately. You may say something you don't really mean.

Try to calm down and *remember*: there are two sides to every story. Don't reach your conclusions before you've had a chance to hear the teacher's side.

Teachers --like all of us --are human and sometimes make mistakes. But it may be your child who is in the wrong. Above all, stay calm and try to work through any disagreement with your child's teacher or school.

**Don't hesitate to contact your children's teacher.**

Don't feel that you must wait for a problem to contact your children's teacher. In fact, teachers appreciate it anytime you make the effort to write or phone them.

The key is to establish a positive relationship with your children's teacher as early as possible. Communicating with the teacher early in the school year will make it easier for you to talk to and understand the teacher when a real concern does arise.