

Connecting for high potential

Your Tear and Share Guide

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

This month’s topic: “School’s opening. How do we start off on the right foot?”

In an ideal world, both parents and teachers are united in their efforts for student success. The start of school is often filled with anticipation and, at times, anxiety. This can easily lead to misunderstanding. Read on; you’ll find ideas and resources to help ease the process.

A TEACHER VIEW

It’s 4:00 pm on Friday and you are smiling to yourself about surviving the first full week of school with only a few tears, bumps, and bruises. As you pack your bag with the things you plan on reading over the weekend, you hear your name over the school loudspeaker; a parent has called and asked to speak with you.

What do you do? How do you explain the urge to bolt to the parking lot? You desperately want to start the year off on the right foot but you feel as if you have just run a marathon and may not have it in you to travel another 50 yards with someone at the end of the day.

A PARENT VIEW

I keep reading about the importance of parent involvement for a child’s academic success, but now that my child is starting school, I’m not quite sure what “parent involvement” really means. I don’t want to come off as a pushy parent by asking questions right away, but I do want the teacher to know I’m part of the equation. And, I certainly want to know what’s happening with my child at school.

As a parent, it’s a shaky proposition to balance on the fine line between “involved” and “over-involved.” How can you test the waters without making the teacher uncomfortable?

It’s essential for both parents and teachers to consciously aim for reciprocal, mutually beneficial communication. The following statements, drawn from research results, underscore both the importance of a proactive approach and the difficulty of achieving it. This isn’t an easy task.

Parent involvement is strongly linked to student success. However, here’s the conundrum:

- (a) Teachers consider working with parents to be one of most difficult aspects of their profession; and
- (b) Parents are often uncomfortable in approaching educators with concerns.

We need to be proactive in establishing solid communication because students obviously benefit when relevant information from home and from school is openly shared and discussed.

Of course these points apply to parents and teachers of all students. However, when gifted children are involved, open parent-teacher communication becomes even more critical because modifications are more likely to be required to challenge and sustain high-ability learners.

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✂ Cut and copy this page for other parents and teachers in your community who may find the column useful. ✂

1. Meaningful dialogue leads to shared understanding:

- Research has shown that effective teachers balance each negative classroom interaction with at least 8 positive interactions. Keep this ratio in mind as you work with families to support your students.
- Remember the power of good news as you share homework policies and other important classroom information. If you take the time in the first month of school to be proactive and make positive contact with families first, your students will reap the benefits all year long.
- Pull out your best conversational techniques! Remember, the most effective communication results from questioning and then listening.
- Take time to get to know the teacher as a person. What are his/her interest areas? What does she/he enjoy about teaching?
- Ask how you might best support your child's education. Then let the teacher know the ways in which you are willing to contribute. Be creative in your thinking: For example, volunteer to pull together a list of people and available resources in the community.

2. Be clear about what "parent involvement" means:

- Consider the following: How do you (or your school) define parent involvement? How will you convey your expectations to all families? Do you provide varied options (both in and out of school) that capitalize on different time commitments and skill sets for parents to connect with you, your students, and your program?
- Be creative and welcoming with parent orientations and invitations – consider a game night, a portfolio showcase, or other interactive format. For more suggestions visit, "Welcoming Strategies for Students & Their Families" at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/atyour/school/sept02.htm>
- Some schools welcome parents as helpers in the classroom. Others have a privacy policy that doesn't allow this. Either way, you want to know. Feel free to ask about the school and classroom teacher's expectations in writing. If the policy is not what you anticipated, find out where and why it originated. Maybe you can slowly and carefully work toward change for the future.
- For ideas about how you might make a difference, read about the Appleseed Project at: http://content.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr312.shtml
- Again, volunteer whenever possible.

3. Parents and teachers can model how to be open to and respect input from others:

- Be honest! If it is the second week of school and you are not 100% certain which of the four Jennifers in your class a parent is talking about, you may need to take a little time to get your thoughts together so that you don't provide misinformation. Don't be afraid to ask if you can schedule a better time to talk or meet. Before you hang up the phone, make sure you have a) received complete contact information from the parent and shared any alternate modes of contacting you (an email address for instance), b) established a specific date and time for your follow-up conversation, and c) established an agenda for that call so that both of you can have the information on-hand to answer questions or address concerns.
- Many problems can be avoided by planning ahead. For example, don't just appear at the classroom door and expect to initiate an in-depth conversation about your child. Instead, ask for a time and set a clear agenda. "I would like to show you some projects Sam worked on during the summer. I'm hoping you can offer some suggestions of how we might further challenge him in science. When would it be possible to meet for 15 minutes?"
- It's true that showing respect can help you be treated respectfully in return. By putting your best foot forward right at the start, you increase your chances of being listened to if problems arise. Although you may not always agree, it's helpful to first understand the other person's viewpoint before announcing yours.

Good communication takes careful consideration.

The parent who shows respect for the child's teacher and the teacher who greets the parent warmly conveys an important lesson far more eloquently than anything that can be said.