

Messages for Parents and Teachers

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Both teachers and parents have similar agendas when it comes to children: the fulfillment of academic potential and the creation of lifelong learners who are well-adjusted, productive members of society. However, basic communication between parents and teachers is often difficult. When children are exceptional, problems with communication are only magnified (Penney & Wilgosh, 2000; Alsap, 1996).

The solution is to intentionally facilitate communication (Bauman, 1988). To develop strong communication between teachers and parents, ask the members of each group what they would like the other to know, and record the answers. By sharing the responses with both groups, a picture emerges that reveals much, not only by what is stated, but also by what is *not* stated.

As a consultant for Lacey, Washington’s North Thurston School District, I conducted two meetings to strengthen communication between teachers and parents of students in the highly capable programs. At the end of the teachers’ staff development meeting, teachers were asked to process in small groups what they wanted parents to know from their point of view, understanding that their anonymous messages would be given to parents. After the group process time, they shared their thoughts with the whole group which were recorded on an overhead projector. The same exercise was conducted later at the end of the parent presentation. Comments were added to the messages and sent to Shirlee Lehnis, program coordinator, so she could share them with both the parents and teachers.

Messages for Parents

Some of the teachers sending these messages were teachers in a pull-out enrichment model; some were cluster teachers; some were teachers in a full-time, self-contained model. All teachers were responsible for at least some identified gifted students and had been trained in differentiation. Students were routinely pre-assessed with curriculum delivered at the child’s level of need. While this certainly changes the content of the conversation, there remains a tension between the two groups.

The main topics teachers emphasized were:

- **Be sensitive of teacher time. It helps when talking to the teacher if you are**

- **prepared with what you want to say, and stay on the topic.**
- **Be careful to treat your children as children first, not as mini-adults. Sometimes sensitive highly capable children come to school emotionally or physically exhausted.**
- **Be aware that your child is not the only child in the class.**
- **Being smart only means potential, and without effort, it means very little.**
- **“Bored” can be a buzz - word, used to get attention, or even to signal that work is too difficult. Ask your child for specific information when hearing this.**

If you are hearing about boredom AND seeing signs of genuine distress at home – headaches, stomachaches, sleeping or eating problems, depression – be sure this gets communicated to the teacher and perhaps the school counselor or other professional.

- **Be sure to help your child find balance in his/her life.**
- **Be careful when wanting more homework. Think of other kinds of learning projects you might like to involve your children in.**

Messages for Teachers

Because the parents surveyed for this exercise had their children in special programming already, their comments were very focused and specific. Many of the messages from parents with children in a special program to teachers were questions:

- **Are teachers evaluating homework? How do parents know when work has been evaluated by the teacher and when the work is done?**
- **What work needs to go back to school? If work isn't always marked in some way, we can't tell.**
- **How much homework time should my child be spending? Some parents reported not enough, some too much.**
- **Homework assignments are vague.**

The messages from parents were given to the teachers for discussion and thoughtful processing.

The homework plan suggested for the cluster and full-time self-contained teachers was one where a homework log is given on a regular, weekly basis. (Figures 1 and 2) It specifies the amount of time for homework, and it lists required work for the week. There are places for recording time spent and work done each day. The homework and homework log are returned together to school weekly.

Because communication is vital, this plan provides both a place for parent comments and a place for weekly notes and news, reminders, etc.

Of course the plan would work in general education classrooms, too. There are also a number of other ways a good homework plan might look. A good plan should include some means of two-way communication, learning options, and clear time limits/requirements. If it is given out and collected in class at regular intervals, parents know when to expect it at home, and students build a habit of getting it back to school (Cooper, 1989).

Conclusion

As the case of North Thurston School District clearly shows, even schools with good programming, trained teachers, and involved parents can benefit by focusing on communication between parents and teachers. Finding a way to enhance communication was a means of exposing problems and finding solutions. By communicating openly two issues emerged: parents wanted some fine-tuning of homework policies; teachers wanted to remind parents about balance in their children's lives.

It can be equally important to acknowledge what was *not* stated. The North Thurston teachers did not need to remind this group of parents about participating at school for these parents were involved. And parents did not have to question whether their children were being appropriately challenged because their needs were being met.

Sometimes the underlying respect parents and teachers have for each other gets lost in the day to day challenges of raising good children. When there are strengths on both sides, it can be important to point this out to groups. When tension gets high, pointing out areas of strength, support, and mutual agreement can be used as a reminder preceding the activity to open up positive communication channels.

The format of this exercise works well because it is *not* set up as a conversation, and no opportunity is afforded to respond immediately to the other group. It is simply a way to say something to the other, to lay out a feeling or frustration without fear of rebuttal or retaliation.

This activity might be varied by using a non-interested party within the school district as the intermediary rather than using a hired consultant. Because programs for gifted students are typically small, it is best if messages are addressed to all teachers from all parents and to all parents from all teachers to protect confidentiality.

When both groups keep in mind that there is an opportunity for children to benefit, it can be a powerful way to begin to solve problems – large and small.

Figure 1

Homework Log

Name _____ Date _____ Time _____

Required Homework:

Weekly News and Reminders:

Monday:

_____ **time**

Tuesday:

_____ **time**

Wednesday:

_____ **time**

Thursday:

_____ **time**

Friday:

_____ **time**

Student signature _____ **Parent signature** _____

Total time: _____

Comments:

Figure 2

Home Learning Choices

Use these ideas when the required work doesn't take all of your homework time:

- Home projects - cooking and building
- Arts - museums, art exhibits, recitals, and concerts
Also – crafts, music composition, performance
- Educational hobbies - chess, model building, dramatics (creating and producing plays), story telling
- Collections - stamps, coins, rocks, etc.
- Math - puzzles, practical problems, fact practice, budgeting
- Language Arts – writing a story, keeping a diary, letters, reports, creative writing, foreign language books or tapes
- Reading – free choice, alone or with an adult, silently or aloud
- Science – experiments, models, exhibits, demonstrations
- Current events – writing a report, editorial, news article, letter to the editor

Note: Time spent for other classes, practice for other classes, and organized group activities are excluded, except by special prior permission. For example, piano lessons and practice are excluded as are scouting activities. However, special prior permission may be requested for a recital practice or a specific badge being earned. Television programs and computer games are also excluded, except by special prior permission on topics relevant to classroom learning.

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