
The ABC's of Staying in Touch with Your Child's School

Tips and Techniques for Serving Children through Great Communication

from

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) and its nearly 2,000 members, building strong ties between schools and communities throughout North America. For more information on NSPRA services or membership, e-mail us at nspra@nspra.org or call 301-519-0496.

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A

Ask questions whenever you have a concern.

Good schools want involved parents who know what's going on in their schools. They know that sound support for their effort grows out of a solid understanding of what's happening and why. Never feel like you're intruding or interrupting when you have something to ask. Make a call. Visit your school. Send an e-mail. However you do it, ask about whatever's on your mind.

B

Build your child's confidence with regular communication.

Ask questions about what's going well and not so well in school. Compliment good effort. Encourage questions. Make conversation about school progress an every day ritual.

C

Clarify language you don't understand.

Schools can have a way of making the simple sound complicated. Don't be intimidated by jargon or confusing abbreviations. Ask questions until you're comfortable with what's being said. Examples: "When you say _____, what do you mean by that?" Or, "Can you give me an example of what you mean by _____."

D

Dig deeper into your child's schoolwork and understand what is going on.

Partner with your child and with teachers to build a home-school learning team. Understand the short- and long-term learning objectives for assignments. Read over assignments. Review homework. Getting involved communicates to your child and to teachers that you care.

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E

E-mail your child's teacher or principal.

More and more schools are turning to e-mail as an efficient way to stay in touch with parents. Check into what your school offers. Make sure you're on the e-mail list to get school info, if your school maintains one. But use e-mail wisely. It works best for short, uncomplicated exchanges. It's not good for resolving concerns. Personal meetings still work best for more serious matters.

F

Follow up with teachers and others at your school.

Good communication is an ongoing process. Develop a good working relationship with those working with your child. Don't let issues build and build until they become more complicated than they have to be. When you have a question, no matter how small, ask it right away.

G

Gather information on how your school works.

Keep handbooks or calendars close by. They can be good sources of names, phone numbers or basic info when you have questions. Note school meetings and events on your home calendar and try to attend as many as you can.

H

Have patience when trying to reach teachers.

Remember that teachers often start work very early in the day – and they are usually in class much of the day. Leave voice mail messages or send e-mails. Expect timely but not immediate responses. Of course, do call the principal or a counselor in an urgent situation — or if you feel that someone is not responding appropriately to your requests.

I

Inform your school and teacher about issues important to your child.

Teachers and others in your school want to know as much as possible about your child. Keep them up-to-date on issues and information that might be important. Explain special situations or events that might be influencing behavior or performance.

J

Join parent organizations and school committees.

Parent groups and advisory committees play essential roles in linking your school to the communities it serves. Without good, representative input, any school can make bad decisions. It takes only a few hours every month to make a difference by working with groups like these. Don't know how to get started? Call your principal or teacher and simply ask how you can help.

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K

Keep up to date on technology.

More and more schools are maintaining their own web sites offering everything from the latest news to lunch menus, student handbooks, class calendars and more. Make sure you know what's available and use it to stay in touch. Can't find something you're looking for? Call or e-mail the school and ask. Schools need to hear what works and what doesn't from people using their communication technology.

L

Let teachers and principals know that you appreciate good communication.

Send a note of thanks or appreciation when you get a note, newsletter or some other message about events in the classroom. Let them know you're reading what they're sending home, and what you find helpful. Feel free to suggest improvements or other issues you'd like to hear more about. Good feedback helps people communicate more effectively.

M

Meet people whenever you can.

Nothing is more important than developing personal relationships with people at your child's school. Your child's teachers can do a better job if they know about any concerns you have. And you'll feel better about your child's school if you understand what's happening there. To communicate effectively, people have to spend some time getting to know one another.

N

Never go away feeling confused.

Schools and the parents they serve can get involved in many complicated issues and situations. At times, stress and emotions can get in the way good communication. Take the time yourself — and make others take the time — to reasonably and rationally discuss any matter of concern. Don't look for instant solutions. Sometimes events may take some time and numerous discussions to resolve to everyone's satisfaction.

O

Organize your thoughts and questions before attending school meetings.

Make the most of meetings with teachers and others by thinking about issues before you arrive. Consider making a list of key questions for you to discuss so nothing gets overlooked. When possible, let others know in advance what you'd like to discuss, so they can do their best to answer your questions.

P

Provide a good example with good communication.

What you say and how you say it has a tremendous impact on the attitude and outlook your child brings to school. Use open communication to show that you're concerned about quality and performance from everyone when it comes to schoolwork — including your child. Be careful about making offhand remarks or comments when talking about schools and teachers — children sometimes can easily misunderstand what parents really mean.

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Question school officials about special programs that may be available for your child.

Schools today offer a variety of special programs and services responding to all kind of needs presented by students. You should know what all these programs really offer to your child — and how you can make the most of them. Never assume you know all there is to know about your school.



Read and respond to those many notices your child brings home.

A top communication concern held by many teachers: Parents often miss key information sent home. Sometimes children forget to pass on the information. Other times parents forget to respond to it. **Try this:** Think of your child's homecoming the same way you think of your phone answering machine. Most people check for new messages when they walk in the door. Do the same when you see you child after school. Always ask: What messages do you have for me today?



Spend time learning with your child.

Learning together adds to the fun — and it helps your child achieve even more. Good classrooms help students support one another in the learning process — and a good learning environment at home does the same. Some tips: Focus your questions on asking about specific things your child found interesting, exciting, fun or new. Ask questions in ways that express interest in your child's feelings and thoughts — not just progress and performance.



Thank your child for sharing.

Children like to get thanks too. Take the time to express your appreciation for information and insights that they share with you. Make sure they know that helping you stay in touch makes you feel good about them and the work they're doing.



Understand school rules — and why they're important.

Schools and teachers have many rules. Good rules help to foster fairness, safety and cooperation. Good up front communication with your child and teacher can help to avoid all kinds of potential problems when it comes to following school rules. You can't over-communicate when it comes to rules. Ask when you have a question.



Voice your concerns only with people who can your solve your problem.

Don't waste time complaining to people who can't fix your problem. Ask questions to find out who can help, and then make your request directly to that person.

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Wade through the red tape if it appears.

Good schools are run by good people who want their schools to be responsive. Still, bureaucracies can pop up even in the best systems and the resulting red tape can entangle good intentions. Recognize that non-responsiveness isn't personal. Be persistent. The best defense against organizational inaction is parents and teachers who keep communicating until they get results.



X-out what isn't essential when communicating with others at school.

Remember that old line from the TV-show *Dagnet* when communicating on school issues: "Just the facts." Debates and disagreements are a natural part of open communication, but they shouldn't get personal. Take the high road even if someone else gets personal with you. **Remember:** The goal of good home-school communication should always be keeping a focus on the success of children. Use that as your benchmark to keep your messages focused.



Yearn to help others help your child succeed.

Many people at home and school contribute to a child's ultimate success. How well all of these people share information and get along with each other will have a great deal to do with just how successful a child's school experience will be. Use sound communication to build relationships to serve your child.



Zero in on the positive messages essential to a great school experience.

Don't let your communications be sidetracked by outside issues. Keep people and conversations focused on outcomes that will mean the most to your school and child. Use communication to bolster what's right and what's working. Don't use communication to dwell on what's wrong.

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