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AUTHOR Lillie, Timothy
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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the research literature on the best ways for teachers to communicate with parents of children with disabilities. The relatively scanty empirical research suggests that what actually works with parents is not always what teachers expect. Findings suggest that research-tested methods of communication with parents of children with or without disabilities center around the following: (1) frequency (communication ought to be relatively frequent); (2) methods (effective communication may involve several methods including newsletters, telephone conversations, etc.); (3) content (communication content should focus on the child's progress and exactly how parents can help their child learn); (4) process (communication is ongoing and sometimes requires longer, rather than shorter, meetings). In regard to report cards, research suggests that teachers of children with disabilities need to go beyond the legally-mandated minimum contacts of report cards and that such contacts might show where a child is in regard to his/her IEP (Individualized Education Program) goals. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

What research says about communicating with parents of children with disabilities and what teachers should know

by

Timothy Lillie, Ph.D.

The University of Akron
127 Carroll Hall
Akron OH 44325-5007
tlillie@uakron.edu

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Introduction

For the past few years, great stress has been laid on the role of the family member, in the life of a student with a disability. Turnbull and Turnbull (1997) have shown that the expectations for parents and other family members of people with disabilities, in particular students with disabilities, have changed substantially over the years. In the past, parents were "receivers" of the professional wisdom and advice of teachers and other professionals and were expected to react to formal teacher and professional advice, not to be a creator of programming. Under the terms of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, however, it appears that the role and power of the parent has increased dramatically. The parent's role has changed from that of recipient to that of partner and, in some cases, the parent has great power, if he or she decides to exercise it (for instance, in being a part of the evaluation team) (IDEA, 1997).

A number of authors and other authorities have provided some support to teachers on how to communicate with parents as part of collaborative teams (see current textbooks on collaboration, for example), but most of this appears to be in the form of "good ideas" from teachers and others, rather than from research. That is, most of the information available to teachers is anecdotal or based on the idea that the schools are in primary control of the student, with parents in a subsidiary position. For instance, one teacher of this author's acquaintance told in great detail of her efforts to involve parents of infants and toddlers with disabilities in the lives of their children -- she even set up basketball games for the men in an effort to get the fathers involved. She was quite upset at the low turnout of parents and felt betrayed by them. This is a

not unknown situation: dedicated teachers and administrators work hard to develop a program or other opportunity, which they feel will be useful to parents, and find that parents seem to have other things to do.

The problem

As noted, the new IDEA gives a great deal of power to parents and mandates their involvement with the assessment and education of their children in ways not earlier seen. Teachers (including general and special educators), and administrators, will want to be on as good terms as possible with parents, since they will be working closely with them in a number of areas. Until now, teachers and administrators have not had to involve parents in assessment (though they were allowed to do so), for example, so parent involvement in this area will be a new experience for all concerned. Of course, it must be stated that there is no way (as of this writing) of knowing just how these new requirements of the law will be met, as the final regulations implementing IDEA '97 have yet to be released. Still, it seems clear that there will be a substantial and direct need to be more closely involved with parents.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the research (as opposed to the "how -to") literature on the best ways to communicate between teacher and parent, so that teachers may benefit from knowing what has worked in other places. This is not to say that specific teachers (who may have developed effective programs for working with parents in their own school districts) have to change what they are doing or even should change what they are doing, in terms of working with parents. The research notes is that published; much good practice by dedicated teachers and other

professionals never gets into the professional literature, though it may deserve a place there.

What the research says

While there are many suggested ways of how parents and teachers "ought" to communicate with each other, including the now-familiar procedures such as sending journals home, for parent review and, perhaps, comment; phone conversations; and other procedures, there is remarkably little actual empirical research on this issue. What there is suggests that what works with parents is, in some ways, different than what teachers may have thought works best.

Griggs (1990), in a study of how parent involvement affected attitudes of parents toward teachers and teachers toward parents began with the assumption that teachers sometimes see parents as critics rather than supporters. In an effort to establish regular two-way communication, to counter the view of parents as critics only, the teachers involved in this study sent home a homework response form to some parents (others did not receive the form and served as controls). The hypothesis was that frequent communication would make a difference in how parents (and students) felt toward the school and how parents felt about teachers. When the researcher compared (on pre and post tests) the two groups (one using the response form; one not) she found that there was no statistically significant difference between the groups. That is, in this study, frequency of contact by itself (this study saw communication as two-way, involving an exchange of information between the teacher, who sent home the homework form, and the parent, who was to fill it out and return it) made no difference. The researcher did find that some parents specifically liked activities that promoted

discussions with their children and that they appreciated specific directions, when these were sent home with the child. Later, it will become clear that frequency of contact is important, but needs to be combined with other things in order to improve parent/teacher communication.

In another study, Sawyer and Sawyer (1981) studied how to best prepare teachers for initial contacts with parents of students with disabling conditions -- including how to respond to such concerns as overprotective behavior on the part of the parent, how to deal with parental denial of the existence of limitations, parents feelings of anger, and parental silence, among other issues. Obviously, the initial contact with a parent by a particular teacher is critical to establishing the tone of further contacts, as well as establishing a positive relationship. They found that teachers learned best how to deal with these issues when they engaged in a microcounseling training session (as compared with didactic lecture procedures); that is, teachers learned how to communicate effectively with parents by talking over their responses with other professionals. The authors comment that the teachers in the study were similar in their responses on the pretest but differed dramatically on the post-test. This suggests that during pre-service training, a case method with discussion between students might be the best way to teach students how to deal with parents. In the field however, this study would suggest that a discussion between peers (e.g., teachers), before formally responding to parent concerns, would improve the response. It may be that the longer time needed to do this would result in better parent-school communication.

Walker (1989) performed one of the first (and perhaps the only) empirical study of informal contacts between parents of students with disabilities and teachers. Two groups (one experimental, one control) matched on a number of variables of interest, were set up. The control group teachers completed teacher logs that described daily contacts and recorded and coded teacher-parent telephone conversations, as did the experimental group. Pre-test data described what the researcher called "typical" informal contacts. The experimental group, receivers of the intervention, received individual instruction and a number of forms designed to improve cooperative home/school communication. The study found that student-progress and social/personal discussions improved significantly, in the experimental group, and that the length of contacts (though not the frequency) increased and, perhaps best of all, parents in the intervention group had stronger perceptions of the importance of parent-teacher communication.

In the event, the Walker (1989) study indicated that most of the parent-teacher contacts were individualized (rather than formalized), that most (2/3) were initiated by the classroom teacher or other classroom staff and that most were under 15 minutes in duration. This suggests that good parent-teacher informal contacts are not unplanned, since the intervention group, which benefited most, received special instruction and specific forms. In addition, it suggests that good parent communication is not initiated by parents as often as by teachers -- meaning that there is no equality of time or effort in this communication effort.

An early (1972) study by Blowers revealed that parents, teachers, and principals differ seriously in what they each see as important. Parents had serious disagreements

with teachers and, in particular, principals, in what they thought of as being important, while teachers and principals tended to agree on what was important, in terms of student or parent variables. Further, parents generally thought they were well-informed about their child, whether or not they actually were. Finally, the reasons parents had for not attending school-called meetings were (to them) just as important as the reasons why the school felt the meeting should be called in the first place. Specifically, these parents (low SES parents of low SES students) were unable to attend meetings due to their difficulty in finding transportation to school, to a lack of frequent-enough communication from the school, and due to their inability to find baby-sitters.

This study would suggest that teachers and administrators might want to examine ways in which their views of school and of the future of the student with a disabling condition might vary from that of the parent. We might assume that parents who do not contact the school avoid that contact not because they don't' care about their child but because they may believe that the child is doing well, so far as they are concerned. Thus, it might be necessary to issue multiple invitations to school functions and/or arrange for baby-sitters during the time of the parental visit.

Bruneau, Ruttan, and Dunlap (1995) have identified -- in a research review -- some of the communication barriers that exist between parents and teachers. The barriers (mostly from the perspective of the teacher) are:

- Teacher perceptions of traditional home-school boundaries
- Teacher negative perception of parents and especially those who are "different"
- "Problematic" (from the teacher perspective) parental communication styles.

These authors believe that the model for working with parents of young children must change from one where teachers instruct parents and families to one in which they provide family support. In particular, these authors feel that the following are particularly important areas for teachers to examine:

1. Parents often want to develop partnerships with the schools while the schools resist this, being more comfortable in the drivers seat.
2. Teachers and administrators need to work more on developing parental feelings of efficacy and these feelings seem to support positive relations with schools.
3. Teachers are typically critical of poor parents, divorced parents, and according to the authors, working mothers.
4. Teachers often don't know what it is that parents actually do when interacting with their children and often seem (to parents) to be stuck in insisting that there are things that parents "ought" to do.
5. Sometimes, the communication problem is not the teacher but hostile parents; sometimes it is parents who thought they knew what learning is supposed to look like and are confused by new, particularly constructivist methods.
6. Teachers are often unwilling to learn from parents, believing themselves to be the experts.

The value of this study, to the present question, is that it allows us to consider in one place areas where there may be barriers between parents and teachers which may be consciously, but more likely unconsciously, maintained in spite of the research and allow teachers to consider whether they need or want to address these barriers, if they exist in their particular circumstances.

In a report on parent involvement published by the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, Ames, Khoju, and Watkins (1993) found that the frequency and content of school-to-home communication appears to be most important. When parents are given information about their children that influences their perception of their child as a learner, their own sense of efficacy is increased; when the communications make the parent feel comfortable with the school, their involvement may be enhanced. These authors have summarized some of the literature in this area and have found that most school-home communications are negative in tone, carry little information about what is going on in the classroom in terms of content, and generally fail to establish meaningful communications between the school and parents. In addition (as in the Bruneau, et al., 1995 study), teachers often seem to show biases related to how they see parents being involved with their children, rating parents whose children do well in school as being more involved than parents whose children don't do well. These authors suggest that parent perceptions may actually, for those reasons, be a more accurate assessment of their involvement with their children then those of their children's teachers.

Ames, et al. (1993) also found that parents and teachers appear to see the same thing (in this case, self-reports of their communication with each other) in different light, with parents being generally more positive than teachers. Though this may be due to teachers who are not positive not responding to requests for information, it may also be due to a strikingly different way of looking at each other. There seemed to be a relationship between teachers who felt a high level of efficacy and frequent use of a variety of communication practices; that is, teachers who felt good about their

effectiveness tended to communicate more often with parents. Parents, in turn, thought that those teachers who used more frequent communication strategies with them tended to be better teachers. In fact, parents whose children were in settings where the teacher was a high user of communication strategies tended to view their own ability to influence their child as higher, they viewed their children as more motivated, and they reported more involvement with their children, all positive outcomes. Teachers (again, in turn) tended to view themselves as more effective, when parents viewed them favorably -- thus suggesting a strong reciprocal relationship.

Ames, et al. (1993) found that particularly positive reactions were received from parents who used "classroom newsletter," "information about classroom activities," and "progress reports." In short, parents wanted to know in general how things were going (the newsletter), specific activities their children might be engaging in and how well their children were doing. Parents, in this study, were thought to be more involved with their children who were doing well either because the parents needed a "sense of hopefulness" (p. 15) or because actively involved children draw their parents along.

Summary

In general, it would appear that research-tested methods of communication with parents of children with or without disabilities center around the following:

- Frequency -- communications ought to be frequent, relatively speaking.
- Methods -- it appears that there are several ways in which communication can be done, including newsletters, but also including telephone and other methods.
- Content -- research seems to show that parents and their children (and teacher-parent relations) prosper when the communications' content has to do with the

progress of the child in question. Parents want to know specific ways in which their children are learning and want to know exactly how they can be involved.

- Process -- good parent/teacher communication is a process, on-going, and sometimes seems to be best accomplished in longer, rather than shorter, meetings.

What about report cards and students with disabilities

The newest version of IDEA mandates that parents of children with disabilities receive reports, at least as often as parents of typically-developing children, of the progress their children are making toward their goals and the expectation they will be able to meet such goals. In addition, the same law mandates teacher/parent partnerships in a number of other areas of the child's life.

This author suggests that teachers may want to go beyond the legally-mandated minimum contacts (e.g., every 9 weeks) in order to develop a positive relationship with parents, based around the skills, capabilities, and progress of their children on IEP goals. That is, more frequent "report cards," specifying the progress the child is making and specifying ways in which the parent and family can be involved with their child's progress may lead to greater parent effectiveness, greater student achievement, and better teacher/parent relationships.

Besides the standard "report card" format -- with grades, perhaps; one could also use a "Goal Attainment Scale" method of showing where a child is in regard to his or her IEP goal (Simeonsson, 1985). Additionally, periodic telephone contact about specific goals and objectives, along with general newsletter-type information about programs and processes would appear to be what parents and their children like and respond to.

In the end, the goal of teachers, parents, and students with disabilities is to help students learn how to achieve well enough to function in society with needed support but in the most independent way possible. It appears that paying attention to how parents and teachers best get along can move students forward.

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For a copy of the Goal Attainment Scale form see:

Simeonsson, R. (1986). Psychological and developmental assessment of special children. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, page 351.

Possible report card format; goals and objectives are from the IEP, while the Progress column is a narrative, describing specific progress and letting parents know how their input helps.

Goal	Objective	Progress
1. The student will....	1 a. The student will....	Johnny has made good progress toward his goal; he has achieved his interim goals each week and seems to enjoy the opportunity to compete against himself. He reports that he learns best when he has the chance to work with his parents.

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Univ. of Akron
Akron OH 44325

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