

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

The goal is understanding.

Communication is the exchange of information, ideas and/or feelings from one person to another. The goal of communication is understanding. Without understanding, there is no communication. The communication process consists of verbal and non-verbal communication and listening. The spoken word is self-explanatory. Communication problems between parents and school staff are more likely to occur because of nonverbal communication—*how* something is said rather than *what* is said.



Understanding the Communication Process

Nonverbal signs and gestures (body language) can express the emotional content of a message but also can be ambiguous. Facial expressions, gestures, space, touch and time are all forms of nonverbal communication that can reinforce, contradict or substitute for verbal communication. When there is a discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal communication, most people will go with the nonverbal “message.” And that’s when problems arise.

Remember, nonverbal signs and gestures do not mean the same thing in every culture. An appropriate gesture in one culture may be inappropriate in another. Recognizing and understanding these cultural differences is key to your ability to communicate with parents, co-workers and students.

The other piece of the puzzle is listening, or paying attention to what is being said. It is an active process. Hearing is not listening. The Chinese character that makes up the verb “to listen” tells us that listening involves the ear, the eyes, undivided attention and the heart. Active listening is the practice of paying close attention to a speaker and asking questions to ensure understanding.

Obstacles to Good Communication

The speaking/listening differential. We speak at a rate of 100 to 180 words per minute, but we can listen at a rate of 500 to 600 words per minute. This explains why your mind wanders if you are not paying attention to someone speaking and illustrates the importance of active listening.

“Noise” is anything that disrupts the communication process. It can be environmental, physical, psychological, personal or cultural. Noise can affect the delivery or reception of a message. Noise must always be considered when communicating with parents.

Improving Communication with Parents

Below are some suggestions for simple ways to improve your skills.

When speaking with parents:

- Speak clearly and concisely.
- Be specific.
- Be direct.
- Be polite.
- Be professional.

Employ active listening techniques. Active listening is paying attention to the speaker’s verbal and non-verbal communication and asking questions to ensure understanding. It is full-service listening! When using active listening:

- Give parent(s) your undivided attention.
- Encourage parent’s communication verbally and nonverbally.
- Verify what you hear: Paraphrase.
- Clarify what you don’t understand: Ask questions.
- Validate parent’s feelings: Acknowledge their feelings.

Frame your questions. When asking parents questions use:

- Closed-ended questions for yes- or no-answers. Example: Does your child ride the school bus?
- Open-ended questions to allow the parent to expand his or her response. Example: What type of relationship did your child have with his last school bus driver?
- Direct questions for specific information. Example: Does your child have a food allergy?
- Probing questions for additional information. Example: Why is the after-school program important to you?
- Hypothetical questions to explore a theoretical situation. Example: If you could make changes, what would they be?

Use the “I-message” strategy. A particularly good way to prevent escalation of arguments and avoid putting parents on the defensive is to use I-messages. When there is a conflict between you and a parent, I-messages can help prevent the situation from getting out of control. They also work when you are put on the defensive.

There are three parts to an I-message:

- Problem behavior: When you interrupt me.
- Feelings: I feel that you think what I’m saying is not important.
- Effects or consequences: I would appreciate it if you would not interrupt me while I’m talking.

Recognize and honor confidentiality. Information about students in school settings, which also include the school bus, is confidential information. A breach of confidentiality is a serious offense that could result in disciplinary action or dismissal. Always maintain confidentiality! Seek a private location if at all possible and avoid noisy areas to facilitate good communication.

Respect and honor cultural differences. A lack of knowledge about cultural differences can cause communication problems. A culture is a shared system of beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations and norms of behavior. Members of the same culture have similar beliefs and ideas about how people should behave, think and communicate. When you communicate with someone from a different culture, you do so using beliefs and theories from your own culture, and people from different cultures do likewise. Therefore knowledge of other cultures in your school district is imperative for effective communication with parents from other cultures.

When communicating with a parent from another culture:

- Be respectful.
- Treat people as individuals: Avoid stereotypes.
- Be patient: English is their second language.
- Recognize differences: Their culture is not your culture.

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The Role of Support Staff

The school-home connection is important to successful student learning, and communication is key to building and maintaining partnerships between the school staff and home. School staff—administrators, teachers and support staff—communicate daily with parents and caregivers. Making sure that communication is positive and accurate is a critically important work function for all staff.



School staff generally know if formal communication with parents is a part of their job responsibilities. But whether formal or not, all staff interact with parents. Office employees are on the front lines with parents. Food service workers answer questions about school lunch or breakfast. Bus drivers encounter parents at the bus stop in the mornings and evenings. And security personnel interact with parents in the course of their work keeping schools safe. Paraprofessionals and community liaison workers communicate with parents in both formal and informal situations. And custodians and maintenance workers meet and greet parents in the halls and on school grounds in the course of their workday.

Maintaining confidentiality and privacy of students, other staff and the school program is a legal responsibility of all school staff, whether it's a part of their job or not. If you aren't sure you know the boundaries as they relate to your job, contact your union for guidance.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS *

COMMUNICATION NEVER LAND:

- Never use profanity.
- Never use a threatening tone, posture or look.
- Never talk down to parents.
- Never lose your temper or composure.
- Never gossip.

* LOOK INSIDE FOR MORE PRACTICAL TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS!

YOUR UNION CAN HELP

Your union is here for you. Your union is an advocate for all school staff that ensures they get the training and information needed to be effective communicators. If you encounter a problem, make sure you contact your union representative for advice, guidance and representation if necessary.



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Understanding the Process, Improving Your Skills

