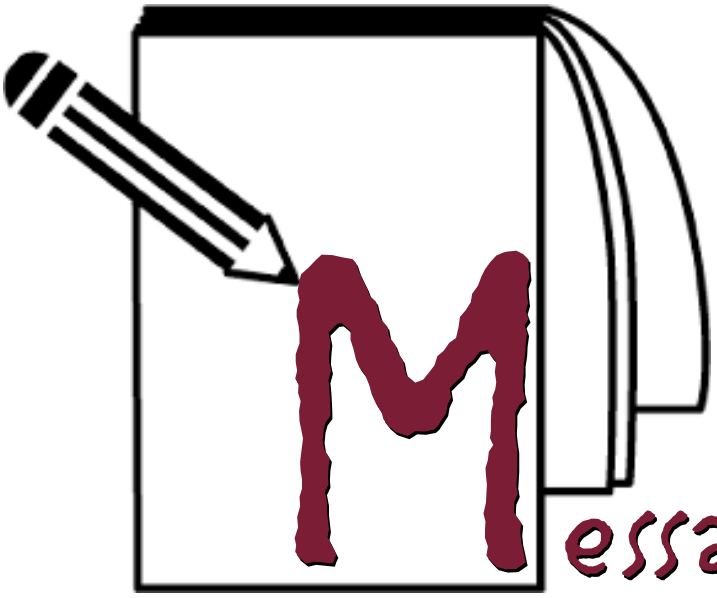

Messages for Parents and Teachers

by Charlotte Akin

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 (Alsap, 1996; Penney & Wilgosh, 2000).

The solution is to facilitate communication intentionally (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 the program coordinator so she could share them with both the parents and teachers.

Teachers' Messages for Parents

Some of the teachers sending these messages were in a pull-out enrichment model; some were cluster teachers; and 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 preassessed with curricula delivered at their level of need. While this certainly changes the content of the conversation, there remains a tension between the two groups.

According to the teachers, they would like parents to do the following:

- 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 miniature adults. Sometimes, sensitive highly capable children come to school emotionally or physically exhausted.

"Even schools with good programming, trained teachers, and involved parents can benefit by focusing on communication between parents and teachers."

- 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 buzzword 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, stomach aches, 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 or her life.
- Be careful when wanting more homework. Think of other kinds of learning projects in which you might like to involve your children.

Parents' 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.

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: (1) Parents wanted some fine-tuning of

homework policies, and (2) 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 because 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 noninterested 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. GCT

References

Alsop, G. (1996). Coping or counseling: Families of intellectually gifted students. *Roeper Review*, *20*, 28–34.

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 1
Homework Log

Note. Created by Daune Spritzer, 1995

Bauman, P. L. (1988, March). *Expectations of educational programming and parent-school relations: A comparison of parents of gifted and talented learning disabled children and parents of other gifted and talented children.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children, Washington, DC. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED296558)

Cooper, H. (1989). Synthesis of research on homework. *Educational Leadership, 47,* 85–91.

Penney, S., & Wilgosh, L. (2000). Fostering parent teacher relationships when children are gifted. *Gifted Education International*, *14*, 217–229.

Appendix

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. (see 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, and so forth.

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).

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), storytelling
- Collections
  stamps, coins, rocks
- 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 Scout 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.

Figure 2
Home Learning Choices

Note. Created by Daune Spritzer, 1995