



Resolving Differences Between Teachers and Parents

(ERIC/EECE Newsletter: Spring, 1996, Volume 8, Number 1)

"Your teacher said what?" exclaimed Suzie's mother.

"Oh, dear," groaned Suzie's teacher. "Here comes Suzie's mother again, and she doesn't look happy."

Disagreements over what is in the best interest of a child are inevitable between teachers and parents during the course of a child's education. Teachers and parents share responsibility for the education and socialization of children, and it is important that they be mindful of the impact of their interactions as a model of problem-solving behavior. It is necessary for both teachers and parents to be discreet and respectful in expressing their thoughts and feelings to each other, and to avoid involving children in their disagreements.

On the one hand, it is useful for teachers to keep in mind that, for parents, being their child's strongest advocate is intrinsic to the parenting role, regardless of what the teacher thinks may be best for the child. Teachers should be aware that some parents may be reluctant to express their concerns for fear of possible negative repercussions for their child's relationship with the teacher, or may lack knowledge of appropriate ways to express their concerns. On the other hand, it is helpful for parents to consider that some teachers may be anxious or fearful of encounters with parents. While it is up to teachers to set a respectful tone in their relations with parents, it is up to parents to express concerns directly to their child's teacher and to avoid destructive criticism of teachers and schools in front of their children.

Strategies for Teachers

There are several strategies teachers can use to establish a climate of open communication with parents.

Let parents know that they can contact their children's teachers. As early in the school year as possible, teachers can take opportunities to let parents know that they are eager to be informed directly should questions or concerns arise. Teachers can let parents know the best ways and times to reach them and have an appointment book ready at hand to set up meetings. In early fall, some teachers send home in early fall a newsletter containing their teaching philosophy, a discussion of class rules and teacher expectations, and a message encouraging parents to stay in touch which includes a phone number or an electronic mail address.

Invite parents to observe in the classroom. Teachers can invite parents to visit the class to monitor their child's perceptions of a situation and to see what teachers are trying to achieve

with students as individuals and as a group. Elicit expressions of parents' concerns and interests. Early in the school year, teachers can ask parents what their main concerns and goals are for their child. Brief questionnaires and interest surveys make good bases for meaningful discussions with parents as teachers are getting to know each child. It is also helpful for teachers to initiate contacts with parents as frequently as possible.

Know the school policy for addressing parent-teacher disagreements. It is a good idea for teachers to check school and school district policies about handling conflicts or disagreements with parents, and to follow the procedures outlined in the policies.

Involve parents in classroom activities. Teachers can let parents know how they can be helpful in general, and should use opportunities as they arise to solicit their help with specific activities.

Be discreet about discussing children and their families. It is important to resist the temptation to discuss children and their families in inappropriate public and social situations, or to discuss particular children with the parents of other children.

Strategies for Parents

When parents perceive that children are having difficulties at school, there are steps they can take to investigate and hopefully help to alleviate problems.

Listen to the child. Paying close attention to children's comments about what is going on at school is vital to staying aware of difficulties children are experiencing. Parents can solicit more information from their children. It is important to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude while listening to the child's side of a story, realizing that there may be aspects to the situation that are still unknown.

Decide if a call to the school is necessary. It is helpful for parents to decide whether the issue is serious enough to warrant contacting the school. A cooling off period may be appropriate before making this decision. Parents should keep in mind that the end of the day, when they are picking up their child, may not be the best time for a discussion involving strong feelings. With an older child, it may be useful to ask if he or she wants the parent to discuss a difficult issue with the teacher.

Talk directly with the teacher. Parents should contact the teacher directly in person or by phone. Sometimes the teacher is unaware of the child's difficulty. Sometimes a parent hears a report from the child that seems outlandish. Sometimes a child misunderstands a teacher's intentions, or the teacher is unaware of the child's confusion about a rule or an assignment. It is important to check the facts with the teacher before drawing conclusions or allocating blame. Direct contact with the teacher helps to define the problem accurately and to develop a solution. Failing a resolution of the problem, it may be necessary to contact other school personnel.

Avoid criticizing teachers in front of children. Criticizing teachers and schools in front of children may confuse them. Even very young children can pick up the worry, frustration, or disdain that parents may feel concerning their children's school experiences. In the case of the youngest children, it is not unusual for them to attribute heroic qualities to their teachers and overheard criticism may put a child in a bind over divided loyalties. In the case of older children, such criticism may foster rudeness or defiance to their teachers. Besides causing confusion, criticizing teachers in front of children is not conducive to solving the underlying problem.

Help children cope with disappointments and negative feelings about their school experiences. While it is inevitable that almost all children will encounter teachers whom they do not especially like, parents can help their children cope with their disappointments. It is highly unlikely, after all, that children will like all of their teachers! Parents are most likely to help their children by pointing out that throughout their lives they will have to work with people they may not especially like or enjoy. Parents can encourage their child to focus on what must be done, to concentrate on what can be learned, and to keep his or her sights on the larger goals of learning and strengthening the competencies essential for a productive and satisfying life in the future.

Model effective problem-solving behaviors. As children grow older, they are generally aware when their parents are upset about the teacher or a school-related incident. As parents discuss these incidents with their children, they provide an opportunity for their children to observe effective and appropriate ways to express frustration with the problems of life in schools and other group settings problems they are likely to face throughout life. Approaching these problems with good humor and respect for all the persons involved increases children's ability to cope with such situations throughout their lives.

For More Information

Katz, Lilian G. (1995). *Mothering and Teaching: Significant Distinctions*. In Lilian G. Katz, *Talks with Teachers of Young Children*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Willis, Scott. (1995). When Parents Object to Classroom Practice. *Education Update* 37(1, Jan): 1,6,8.

Lilian G. Katz, Ph.D., is Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of Illinois, and Director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary & Early Childhood Education. Amy Aidman, Ph.D., Debbie A. Reese, and Ann-Marie Clark are on the staff of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary & Early Childhood Education.

For more information contact:



The Center for Parent Involvement (FCPI) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education; Goals 2000, Educate America Act from 1994-1999. Guided by an advisory board of parents and professionals, the FCPI's goal was to tap the power of parents.

The FCPI gathered information on parent needs, coordinated the information, and created a series of resources organized by theme, including fact sheets for parents and professionals, "Beyond the Basics" resources, and resource identification lists. Many of the resources have been translated into Spanish language versions, and every effort has been made to preserve the meaning and flavor of the original English documents. This series of materials provides a wealth of current information for both parents and providers; the complete set of resources can be obtained in PDF format on the Department of Child and Family Studies Website at www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi. The staff of the FCPI are hopeful that their work will continue to help children get ready to learn for many years to come.

The series' themes include:

- Family Empowerment
- Parent Involvement
- Parenting Support
- School Readiness
- Violence in the Lives of Children
- Transition to Kindergarten

The Center was one component of a project led by Hillsborough County Center of Excellence in collaboration with the Department of Child & Family Studies at USF's de la Parte Institute and the Florida Children's Forum. Other project partners include HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters), Hillsborough County Head Start and Hillsborough County Even Start. For more information about these projects, call 813.974.4612.

Parent Involvement, Beyond the Basics: Resolving Differences Between Teachers and Parents

© 1999, Tampa, Florida

This is a publication of the Florida Center for Parent Involvement which was funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The opinions contained in this publication are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Education. All or portions of this work may be reproduced providing the Florida Center for Parent Involvement, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida is properly credited on all reproductions.

Events, activities, programs and facilities of the University of South Florida are available to all without regard to race, color, marital status, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, Vietnam or disabled veteran status as provided by law and in accordance with the University's respect for personal dignity.

**University of
South Florida
USF**