

## Working with Teachers and Schools -- Helping Your Child Succeed in School

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Many teachers say that they don't often receive information from parents about problems at home. Many parents say that they don't know what the school expects from their children—or from them. Sharing information is essential and both teachers and parents are responsible for making it happen.

The following questions and answers can help you to get the most out of talking to your child's teacher or with other school staff members.

### **Q: What do I do first?**

Learn everything that you can about your child's school. The more you know, the easier your job as a parent will be. Ask for a school handbook. This will answer many questions that will arise over the year. If your school doesn't have a handbook, ask questions. Ask the principal and teachers, for example: What classes does the school offer? Which classes are required? What are your expectations for my child? How does the school measure student progress? Does it meet state standards? What are the school's rules and regulations?

Ask about specific teaching methods and materials—are the methods based on evidence about what works best in teaching reading or math? Are the science and history textbooks up to date?

Ask if the school has a Web site and, if so, get the address. School Web sites can provide you with read access to all kinds of information—schedules of events, names of people to contact, rules and regulations and so forth.



Sharing information is essential and both teachers and parents are responsible for making it happen.

Keep informed throughout the school year. If your schedule permits, attend PTA or PTO meetings. If you are unable to attend, ask that the minutes of the meetings be sent to you. Or, find out if the school makes these minutes available on its Web site.

### **Q: When should I talk with my child's teacher?**

Early and often. Contact your child's teacher or teachers at the beginning of the year or as soon as you can. Get acquainted and show your interest.

Tell teachers what they need to know about your child. If she has special needs, make these known from the beginning.

If you notice a big change in your child's behavior, school performance or attitude during the school year, contact the teacher immediately.

Report cards are one indication of how well your child is doing in school. But you also need to know how things are going between report cards. For example, if your son is having trouble in math, contact the teacher to find out when he has his next math test and when it will be returned to him. This allows you to address a problem before it mushrooms into something bigger. Call the teacher if your son doesn't understand an assignment or if he needs extra help to complete an assignment. You may also want to find out if your child's teachers use e-mail to communicate with parents. Using e-mail will allow you to send and receive messages at times that are most convenient for you.

**Q: What if my child has a problem, such as with homework or not understanding what's happening in class?**

Contact the teacher as soon as you suspect that your child has a problem with his schoolwork. Schools have a responsibility to keep you informed about your child's performance and behavior and you have a right to be upset if you don't find out until report-card time that your child is having difficulties. On the other hand, you may figure out that a problem exists before the teacher does. By alerting the teacher, you can work together to solve a problem in its early stages.

Request a meeting with the teacher to discuss problems. Tell her briefly why you want to meet. You might say, "Tim is having trouble with his social studies homework. I'm worried about why he can't finish the assignments and what we might do to help him." If English is your second language, you may need to make special arrangements, such as including in the meeting someone who is bilingual.

Approach the teacher with a cooperative spirit. Believe that the teacher wants to help you and your child, even if you disagree about something. Don't go to the principal without first giving the teacher a chance to work out the problem with you and your child.

**Q: How do I get the most out of parent-teacher conferences?**

Be prepared to listen as well as to talk. It helps to write out questions before you leave home. Also jot down what you want to tell the teacher. Be prepared to take notes during the conference and ask for an explanation if you don't understand something.

In conferences, the teacher should offer specific details about your child's work and progress. If your child has already received some grades, ask how your child is being evaluated.

Talk about your child's talents, skills, hobbies, study habits and any special sensitivities such as concern about weight or speech difficulties.

Tell the teacher if you think your child needs special help and about any special family situation or event that might affect your child's ability to learn. Mention such things as a new baby, an illness or a recent or an upcoming move.

Ask about specific ways to help your child at home. Try to have an open mind.

At home, think about what the teacher has said and then follow up. If the teacher has told you that your child needs to improve in certain areas, check back in a few weeks to see how things are going.

Be prepared to take notes during the conference and ask for an explanation if you don't understand something.

**Q: What if I don't agree with a school rule or with a teacher's assignments?**

First, don't argue with the teacher in front of your child. Set up a meeting to talk about the issue. Before the meeting, plan what you are going to say—why you think a rule is unfair or what exactly you don't like about an assignment. Get your facts straight and don't rely on anger to win your argument. Try to be positive and remain calm. Listen carefully.

If the teacher's explanation doesn't satisfy you, arrange to talk with the principal or even the school superintendent. Do not feel intimidated by titles or personalities. An educator's primary responsibility is to ensure the success of each and every student in his classroom, school or district.

**Q: What's the best way for me to stay involved in my child's school activities?**

Attend school events. Go to sports events and concerts, attend back-to-school night, parent-teacher meetings and awards events, such as a "perfect attendance" breakfast.

Volunteer in your school. If your schedule permits, look for ways to help out at your child's school. Schools often send home lists of ways in which parents can get involved. Chaperones are needed for school trips or dances (and if your child thinks it's just too embarrassing to have you on the dance floor, sell soft drinks down the hall from the dance). School committees need members and the school newsletter may need an editor. The school may have councils or advisory committees that need parent representatives. If work or other commitments make it impossible for you to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home. For example, you can make phone calls to other parents to tell them about school-related activities or maybe help translate a school newsletter from English into another language.

**Q: What if I don't have time to volunteer as much as I would like?**

Even if you can't volunteer to do work at the school building, you can help your child learn when you're at home. The key question is, "What can I do at home, easily and in a few minutes a day, to reinforce and extend what the school is doing?" This is the involvement that every family can and must provide.

If work or other commitments make it impossible for you to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home.

The schools also need to take steps so that parents feel good about what they're doing at home and know they're helping.