

ESTABLISHING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS



By: Belinda Webb

Establishing healthy relationships with parents is important to a child's success.

The establishment of a healthy relationship with parents is one of the most important elements of being a teacher. Jane Hull has written, 'at the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the involvement of parents' (cited in Sprowl 2010, p. 1). It is this notion of ensuring the involvement of parents that drives teachers to build effective partnerships with families, and those teachers who do this well, have will generally have success with the education and learning of the children in their classroom.

The importance of parents to student learning

The teacher demonstrates that they care about the family and that their opinion matters

One of the most important aspects of my teaching practice has been building relationships with parents. (I use the word parents in this article but keep in mind that could include a single parent, grandparents, guardians or caregivers.)

It is always my goal to establish respectful and healthy relationships with all parents, for the benefit of the students in my classroom. It provides support for my teaching, and the learning of the students. Parents can provide valuable insights to their children's learning. Appreciating the importance of parents and working hard to develop a relationship with them will help unlock this knowledge. The development of respect and a two-way engagement when discussing learning strategies is more likely to develop when parents believe the teacher genuinely cares about the family and values their opinion.

Valuing the importance of parents enables a consistent approach to the learning and development of the child. The creation of learning partnerships between teachers and parents are more likely to achieve successful outcomes for students. The Department's [Framework for Improving Student Outcomes \(FISO\)](#) states that 'Parent and carer involvement in their child's school contributes to improved student learning, health and wellbeing'. There is clear recognition by the Department of the parental role in the enhancement of student learning outcomes.

How to build a healthy relationship with parents

Always conduct yourself in a professional manner

In any relationship there is an element of time involved in getting to know each other. It is important to allow time to build trust and develop an understanding of the other's needs. As a teacher, this is always a professional relationship, and the way you converse, communicate and engage with families is important. An effective relationship with parents requires a teacher to actively facilitate parents' involvement in their child's learning. This includes seeking answers if you don't know them and anticipating tasks or solving problems that a parent may face.

Sometimes there are days where families have forgotten to provide basic daily needs for their children at school e.g. lunch. As a parent, this happens from time to time, so remembering to be empathetic and considerate to this situation is important. Edwards and Da Fonte (2012) discuss the importance of ensuring that you are always thinking positively and taking proactive steps to find solutions to problems. Consider a situation where a child has forgotten an essential item such as their lunch or spare clothes. As a teacher you have a few options. You can call the parent and ask that they return to school and bring the missing item, or you can call the parent to discuss options that you have sourced, for example, a lunch order, or a change of clothes from lost property. The latter approach tells the parent that you respect their daily tasks away from school and understand that in many families both parents work and have busy lives. You can show that you are willing to go above and beyond to support them.

Teachers can be faced with parents who ask too much or require a greater level of support. Whilst as teachers we support a range of families in a variety of different situations, there are times where there might be questions above your ability or skill as a graduate teacher. It is important to be supportive of families, however at times you may politely let them know that you will refer them to the Principal or a member of the leadership team who can best support them. Remember, you do not have to have the answers to everything and it is alright not to know how to answer a parents' question, however, assuring a parent that you will follow up, and then making sure you do follow up is the best way to provide support here.

In developing effective relationships with parents, I focus on three things - respect, communication and involvement.

Build respect

Respect for families is an integral part of the partnership. Respecting values and cultural backgrounds and appreciating how these may affect a student is very important. This includes being mindful of cultural sensitivities, discussing school events with parents and sending home information about activities that you might be doing within your classroom. This also relates to being respectful of the family circumstances, whether related to socio-economic status, family or social problems that could be occurring, and always showing empathy during these times.

One of the biggest challenges that I have faced and overcome in my teaching career has been the capacity to develop empathy and understanding without judgement. As a graduate teacher you don't have to agree with everything that families do, in fact there will be many families, or situations that you don't agree with. As a teacher you are called to be respectful of the decisions a family makes about raising their child. There are many factors that influence parenting decisions and for some families these are often coping mechanisms to deal with the daily pressures of raising a family. It is important to remember that there can be a lot more to a family than what is presented on the surface at school. A good tip is to always focus on what you can do to support, rather than judge their parenting decisions and work on building connections with them. Reflecting on your own background and values will help you to appreciate the differences between yourself and the families of the students that you are teaching. You will find that when you provide a, respectful and trusting approach, families are more likely to communicate openly and ask for help.

However, if at any time your understanding of a situation with a family makes you uneasy or you have warning signs or red flags concerning the safety or care of a child, then always talk with your mentor or school leadership.

Effective communication

There are many ways that parents receive information. Some families are wonderful at reading and returning notices, responding in diaries, remembering to pack the right clothes on sports days, and there are others who just aren't. Think creatively about how you can support families to ensure they are getting the messages. Provide a range of different communication strategies. Some examples include, creating a weekly newsletter or

timetable with highlighted pictures depicting special requests or days. You can also use a communication diary, phone calls to parents, e-mails or communication through an App.

Remember to celebrate the positives. Avoid only contacting families to discuss problems. It is important to identify positive reasons to communicate with families. Send home daily or weekly celebrations or positive messages to families or make time to call families when a positive event occurs with their child. Take the time at the beginning of the year or term to send home a welcome letter, introducing yourself or the team to the parents and outlining how, and when they can communicate with you. You may also ask your parents to do the same, asking them what their preferred method of contact is, for example, in person, on the phone, via e-mail or written.

Get families involved

Families can provide powerful support for their child's learning. Creating opportunities to include family members in your classroom can build authentic learning partnerships. There are many ways families can be involved, from parent helpers with listening to children reading, skills-based teaching experiences (i.e. teaching music, dance, cultural experiences & cooking), excursions, invitations to visit on their child's birthday or attend student presentations. There is a wide range of opportunities where you can showcase the wonderful work that you are doing with their children. When we open our classrooms to parents, we not only strengthen relationships but also enlist parents as partners in their child's learning.

Questions for discussion with your mentor

1. One of the most commonly asked questions that I discuss with graduates is, 'How do I tell a parent that their child has been hurt or has exhibited disruptive behaviours within the classroom?' i.e. How do I pass on bad news? These conversations can be challenging for all teachers and knowing what to say or how to approach a difficult discussion with a family member can be quite daunting. This is a good discussion to have with your mentor or leading teacher and if needed, ask them to sit with you while you make this first phone call.
2. You might also like to raise the following questions with your mentor; 'What do I do if I have a parent who has significant problems in their home life, such as mental or physical health concern? What do I do if this requires adaptations to the types of support the school needs to provide?' Ask your mentor how this would be dealt with at your school.

Top takeaways for graduate teachers

Every great teacher has a wonderful group of parents supporting them

Remember to try to be supportive of all parents regardless of their situation. Provide opportunities for them to be involved or for you to offer them positive information about their children. Consider multiple means of communication with families. Relationship and rapport building with families is important in ensuring that the students in our classes are supported by home and school. This will maximise a child's success at school. Being kind and supportive goes a long way!

You are an advocate for your school. The image that you portray in your classroom influences how parents think about the school. Your diligence, respect, communication and engagement with families, extends beyond your own classroom to the wider community. A simple hello or smile towards any family at your school goes a long way toward building a positive attitude to the school.

Your capacity to work effectively with parents impacts on your effectiveness as a teacher. This may include extra support while they cry on their child's first or last day of school, reassuring families again and again of your level of care toward for their child or supporting a family through a tough time or a difficult behaviour. It is this level of personal touch that leaves parents feeling reassured that nothing is too big, that their child is in the best hands and that you will do everything in your power to focus on continually building and supporting their journey through their child's education.

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