

Two-Way Communication for Teachers



COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

Communication is the foundation for establishing positive relationships with families that support students' learning. Communication with families may take the following forms: in-person interactions, phone calls, emails, and text messages, etc. It's important for educators to establish a consistent system of communicating with families (*see also - Home Visit Form*). Here are some key points highlighting the importance of quality communication.

1. Authentic Communication. Communication conveys interest in students and their families and that you welcome them into the learning community. For example:

I am so glad to be David's teacher this year. If, at any point, you have questions or suggestions on how to best support him, I would like to talk with you so that we can work together to ensure his success.

2. Building Trust and Respect. Communication helps to build the trust and respect necessary to sustain a positive and meaningful learning environment. For example:

Josiah told me that you enjoy photography. Would you like to take pictures during family presentations of our All About Me Books?

3. Reciprocal Relationships. Effective communication affirms that the relationship is reciprocal and, therefore lends itself to collaboration that mutually benefits you, students, and students' families. For example:

I am interested to hear more about the strategies you've tried at home.... I have some time now, what about you? If not, I can call this evening or when it's best for you.

4. Understanding Each Family. Communication allows you to see and understand each family as unique. It's important to learn about and celebrate the diverse cultural values, behaviors, and beliefs associated with cultural communities from which your students and their families come.¹ For example:

Our first homework assignment is for you and your child to write a story or a song, or even draw a picture, that tells their classmates about something important to them, such as an interest, tradition, or family story. We have supplies that you can take home and use if you'd like.

5. Partnership Orientation. Communication enables you to alleviate parental concerns. Families who are historically underserved may have experiences in which their children have access to fewer opportunities inside and outside of school; a

This resource is designed for teachers to read and reflect on how communication and language impacts relationships with families.

Recommendations

- Implementation Settings
- Planned individual time
 - Teacher collaboratives
 - Professional learning communities
 - Professional development days

Planning Time: None

Implementation Time: 45 minutes

Principals can introduce and distribute this resource to teachers during professional learning or grade level meetings or collaboratives.

perception that their child's teacher doesn't believe in a child's potential; and a sense that their cultural history and traditions are not included in the school culture.ⁱⁱ For example:

Tell me about your hopes and dreams for your child. What resources does your child need to accomplish these hopes? How can we support your family in getting those resources?



6. Focus on Listening. Communication affords you the opportunity to practice a relational approach in which listening is a tool used to understand rather than form an opinion or pass judgment. A relational approach helps to honor the voices and identities of the students and families enrolled in your classroom and to create solutions together when needed.ⁱⁱⁱ For example:

After listening to your story, it seems important that we come up with a different strategy to support your child. Do you have some ideas about what we might do?

7. Strengths-Based Perspective. Language, a facet of communication, shapes whether and how information is received. Language that is strengths-based conveys the understanding that students' learning is dynamic, complex and holistic; that students demonstrate their learning in different ways and it always emphasizes existing strengths and looks for opportunities to complement those strengths. For example:

Instead of saying:

"Xavier is a special needs student,"

say

"Xavier receives special education services."

I noticed that Sophia told her classmates how much fun it was to read books with you over the weekend. She even shared a song your family sings at celebrations. Our class is headed to the library to find other books about celebrations.

8. Putting People First. Language that recognizes people first is respectful and reinforces the notion that a single descriptor does not define a person or a family. This applies to language that refers to disabilities and other descriptions of people, as well. When you refer to an individual as a person with a disability instead of a disabled person, you are providing an objective description instead of a label. By placing the person first in a statement or comment, there is no longer one primary, defining characteristic of an individual, but there are several aspects contributing to the description of the whole person or family. For example:

Instead of saying:

"Maya and her family are homeless,"

say

"Maya's family is in transition, and they don't have stable housing right now."

9. Adopting An Inquiry Stance. Language that is respectful supports a partnership approach. Teachers who incorporate an inquiry stance into their communications help to validate information and experience that families bring to the conversation. For example:

Let's think about how to solve this problem together.

10. Accessible Language. To ensure full understanding of your message, avoid using jargon and acronyms.

II. Being Descriptive. Address problems and concerns as they come up by using specific descriptors and avoiding judgment. For example:

Throughout the year, we are going to be working with the children on giving their full effort when working to complete an activity. Children's ability to stick with a task will change depending on whether it's something they've done before or if it is new and challenging.

Joshua is working on developing his writing skills. Now that he is revising his own work, we are focusing on moving from writing general statements to those that include more descriptive details. I'd like to set up a time to meet and brainstorm some ways you can help him practice while doing everyday activities at home.

Self-Reflection on Communication and Language

Ongoing communication that meets the needs of a diverse group of families requires using a variety of methods for communication, as well as being intentional about your ongoing efforts. As teachers thoughtfully manage communication, it is important to strike a balance between verbal, written and visual approaches to communicating with families about their child's learning and including information about how to support their child's learning process. "When teachers reach out to parents, parents are more likely to make reciprocal efforts to engage with schools."^{iv}

General Reflections On Communicating With Families In a Variety of Ways

What steps can I take to establish a manageable routine for communicating?

Are the student's best interests evident in the conversations taking place with the family members?

How am I responsive to the different needs of families and their preferences for communicating about their student's learning goals and progress?

How did I intentionally show respect to the families' culture and opinions about their student's education, behavior, etc.?

Self-reflection is a valuable resource for strengthening your communications with families, including two-way exchanges on formative assessment. If Parker Palmer's observation that "we teach who we are"^v is true, it's essential that we "hold a mirror to our souls" and become clearer on the cultural, social, and psychological influences that inspire our teaching. Palmer underscores the recognition that "knowing (thysself) is as crucial to good teaching as knowing ... students or (a) subject."

Reflections On My Own Experiences

What are my memories of my family's involvement with my elementary education?

How do my experiences shape my expectations for families with children enrolled in my classroom?

What behaviors do families exhibit that create strong emotions in me? How are my responses related to behaviors with which I am familiar and those with which I am less familiar?

When a student is not demonstrating progress, do I take the time to identify what strategies have worked and consider how I might adapt my teaching practices? And, do I explore a range of resources to offer to families?

After answering the above questions, how does this impact my vision of family engagement in the formative assessment process?

Resources

ⁱ Maloney, R. 2009. Forty Percent French: Intercultural Competence and Identity in an Australian Language Classroom." Intercultural Classroom 20 (1): 71-81.

ⁱⁱ McDermott, D. (2008). Developing caring relationships among parents, children, schools, and communities. Los Angeles: Sage.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barrera, Isaura and Kramer, Lucinda (2012) Using Skilled Dialogue to Transform Challenging Interactions Brookes, 4-10

^{iv} Seitsinger, A.M., Felner, R.D., Brand, S., & Burns, A. (2008). A large-scale examination of the nature and efficacy of teacher's practices to engage parents: Assessment, parental contact, and student-level impact. Journal of School Psychology, 46, 477-505.

^v Palmer, P. 1998. The Courage To Teach. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.