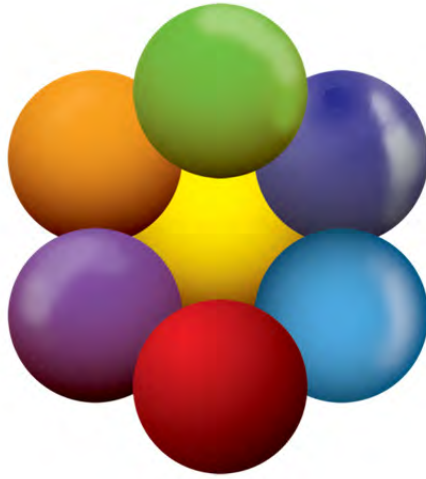


Just ASK's
Parents as Partners

Paula Rutherford



About Just ASK

The Essential Question of Just ASK's Work

What do schools and classrooms look like when they are organized around a commitment to the achievement of high standards by all students?

Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK) is based in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. Established in 1989, Just ASK provides products and services for educators in formats that facilitate a shared understanding and the use of best practice in teaching, learning, and leading in 21st century classrooms, schools, and districts.

Driven by the essential question displayed above, the publications and products developed and distributed by Just ASK are used by Just ASK consultants in their long-term multifaceted work with schools and districts, stand alone for use in professional development initiatives led by district personnel, and are often used as texts for college courses. These comprehensive resources use a common language and concept system that makes the standards come alive. Because they are cross-referenced, administrators, teacher leaders, veteran teachers, mentors, coaches, and new teachers can all be on the same page!

Call us at 800-940-5434 or go www.justaskpublications.com to request a catalog or a consulting services brochure or to subscribe to our free e-newsletters.

Communication with Parents 101

Paula's Picks: Best Sites for Teacher Email Advice

8 Great Email Etiquette Tips for Educators & Everybody

By Vicki Davis in **The CoolCat Teacher Blog**

www.coolcatteacher.com/email-etiquette/

Key Points

- Use their name
- Show emotion in your opening
- Repeat and relate to requests
- See your email through their eyes
- Keep it short but do not be abrupt or blunt
- Use power phrases (See Vicki's examples in her blog.)
- Craft a thoughtful ending that is personal and/or uplifting
- Create templates for common responses and ways to say "no"

Be sure to visit the website for cleverly written details and multiple references to other sources.

Email Dos and Don'ts for Educators

by Suzanne Bouffard in the **Harvard Education Letter**

http://hepg.org/hel-home/issues/29_2/helarticle/email-dos-and-don%E2%80%99ts-for-educators_565#home

Key Points

- Establish relationships with families through other methods first.
- Create an email policy
- Have a plan for managing email communication.
- Use email to provide basic information.
- Keep supervisors and colleagues in the loop.
- Proofread
- Pay attention to tone
- Don't use email as the only method of communication
- Don't use email for negative feedback or sensitive situations
- Don't share confidential information
- Don't get into email battles

Be sure to visit the website to dig deeper

Emailing Parents: How to Avoid Unintended Consequences

By Sarah Brown Wessling

<https://www.teachingchannel.org/blog/2012/09/20/emailing-parents/>

Words of Wisdom and Examples

Email responses to concerns about social or behavior issues, grades, and classroom practice. You can find other examples on the Web, but these are the



Communication with Parents 101

(Beyond Emails and LMSs)

Absolutely, use emails and LMSs. Do, however consider the pros and cons of those communication formats.

What are the potential problems?

- Emails are easily forwarded... Can be changed before they are forwarded... Are sometimes accidentally forwarded to the wrong person... Or worse yet, are published online and even go viral!
- Online grade books and progress reports usually report grades (averaged, of course), but do not usually report what students have actually learned or how engaged and excited they were with the learning experiences you orchestrate.

The most important actions to take are:

- **Asking parents what communication methods would work best for them**
- **Asking yourself what communication methods would allow you to accomplish what you want to accomplish and still maintain a life**
- **Finding common ground**

Quick and easy options include texting and tweeting but please do not use those communication methods while you are teaching as you need to be in the moment with your students and hastily written messages can be off-the-mark and regretted later. In many states, it is illegal to text, write and read e-mails, or tweet while driving. Teaching is just as complex as driving! In both situations, you need to keep both hands on the steering wheel and both eyes on the road!

An interesting option is recommended by Meghan Bogardus Corteza, associate editor of **EdTech: Focus on K-12** (<https://edtechmagazine.com>). She recommends **Bloomz** (www.bloomz.net) saying, “With the vibe of a social networking site, **Bloomz** has teachers invite parents to join the class group. Once there, parents have access to class schedules, photo albums, private messaging with teachers and other parents, and interactive sign-up sheets.” **Bloomz** is free for teachers and parents.

Virtual Office Hours with Video Calling

This section title is extremely important when you consider setting up systems for video calling. Identify and communicate the hours when you will answer calls and ask parents when they are willing to receive calls.

Lance Whitney presents important helpful information about successfully using video calling (<http://time.com/4939252/best-video-calling-apps-android-iphone-pc->



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mac)

Users of iPhones and iPads can use **FaceTime** since those devices, like most mobile devices have a front-facing camera and a built in app. If, however, one party uses an Android device you'll need to investigate other apps that allow you to do between platforms and devices. Options include:

- **Skype** (Accessible free from Apple's App Store and Google Play) gives you the advantage of sitting in front of your classroom monitor with student work and records immediately available.)
- **Facebook Messenger** has the same advantages as **Skype** with the possible downside that parents might be more inclined to check out your Facebook page (if you have one). It requires a little digging to find your Facebook contacts using your browser, but it can be done.
- **WhatsApp Messenger** (This app is free and is very popular in Latin American countries, India, and throughout Asia; that means that if many of the families with whom you are working have extended family and friends in those areas, they may well use **WhatsApp** to communicate with their families so this would be a good tool to consider.)
- **Amazon Alexa** (There is cost involved with this app because you need an **Amazon Echo** smart speaker.)

There are, of course, many other communication possibilities to consider. Other methods may be better matched to the purposes you want to achieve.

Low-Tech Ways to Communicate with Parents

- Phone calls
 - Make early home contact to let parents hear the sound of your voice.
 - Continue to make positive phone calls whenever possible; do not wait for problems to occur to contact parents. (A sneaky time-saving approach: Call when you are pretty sure that no one is home and leave a cheery message about something encouraging or even delightful that occurred during class. That is called "easy home contact!")
 - When small problems begin to emerge, contact parents for their input and support before the situation becomes magnified.
 - When making a call to discuss a problem, always begin with good news first; parents need to know that you have a balanced view of their child.
 - When making a routine phone call, immediately let the parent know that there is no emergency.
- "Refrigerator Postings"
 - Have students complete **Tickets to Leave** to take home; the slips can



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include prompts such as “What I Learned Today” or “What Made Me Proud of My Work.”

- Send periodic postcards with good news about student engagement and learning. Remember that students do not have to achieve “perfection” to warrant a postcard home.
- Create class newsletters with instructional information completed by the students; parents may be more inclined to read communiqués produced by children rather than adults. These are powerful whether digital or in print.
- Make any communication, whether it is a phone call or in a parent conference, a mutual problem-solving session; remember the value of compromise and collaboration.
- Always listen and do not interrupt – even when you not agree with the parent.
- Keep a copy of each school-family communication in a folder (print or digital) or notebook during the first year or two. That way you will have almost everything you would want to put in a “Parents As Partners” handbook by the third year.

Lesson from the Field:

Provide Overviews of the Learning Standards

Several years ago, Heather Clayton, now principal of Mendon Center Elementary School in Pittsford, New York, and the 5th grade team at Rogers School, West Irondequoit Central School District, Rochester, New York, put together a handbook on the 5th grade writing program for parents and students. They included in the handbook a listing of the New York State writing standards and district outcomes for writing. They also included the rubrics they would use to assess student writing, an exemplar of each genre to be addressed, as well as titles of the units and the schedule for addressing each genre. “The Write Stuff” handbook served as an invaluable communication tool throughout the year.

Lessons from This Educator Mom

Make Good News Calls!

They makes us smile all over! When a student has a great moment at school, make a quick call home to let the parents know. Simply say, “I thought you would like to know that...” The great moment could be perfection or progress. The dividends are huge in building relationships, especially with the families of those students who have not had much positive news from school.



Putting Out the Red Carpet When Parents Arrive at School for Back-to-School Night, Open House and Conferences

Back-to-School Nights, open houses, and parent conferences are a part of our professional lives that can be an opportunity to establish or extend a positive and productive partnership in the education of the children.

Plan on putting your best foot forward and be sure that both your feet and the rest of you are clothed in the most professional attire you have in your closet... or that you can borrow! This is not the time for jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes, or any garments in need of ironing!

If people have always said that you have wonderful manners and are a terrific listener, then all you will need to do is continue to use those admirable skills, determine the desired outcomes for the event, and make an agenda for the meeting.

The reality is that while you may be nervous because you are the teacher and want to appear perfectly prepared and professional, the parents are just as nervous, if not more nervous, than you. Keep that in mind when you meet with them! Also keep in mind that they are hoping to hear that either you have already noticed that their child is en route to Harvard or, at the very least, has turned a new leaf and now has the potential to be a superstar student.

Remember each student is someone's baby... even if that baby is 6'5"! Another thought to hold on to is that if it is conference time and you are struggling to work with a particular student, you've had just a few days or weeks to deal with issues the family has faced for at least four if not fourteen years.

Points to Ponder from *Just for the ASKing!* by Bruce Oliver

To involve parents in the education of their children we need to begin with recognizing, respecting, and responding to the variables in today's family formation and structure. The traditional two-parent home may no longer be the norm in many schools; indeed, the family dynamic may include step-parents, single-parent homes, same-sex parents, or multi-generational settings. Today's parents and caretakers differ widely in their ages, races, cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations, and economic standings. Given this diversity, it is necessary for us to be purposeful in deciding how to communicate with and mobilize these unique families that make up our school communities. We need to build repertoires for reaching out to and communicating with these parents.



The Red Carpet Back-to-School Night/Open House

Parents usually come with the following questions

- Who is this person/these people to whom I/we have entrusted my/our child?
- Does this person/these people realize how special my/our child is?
- Does this person/these people know what she is talking about?
- Is this person/these people a good role model for my child?
- Has this person/these people established a safe, nonthreatening, but challenging learning environment?
- And often, what is my child going to learn this year?

Teachers often plan tell parents the following:

- The school rules
- The classroom rules and consequences for not following them
- The forms that need to be completed
- Expectations for parental support at home
- Desires for parental support at school

When you review the two sets of expectations, you can see the potential for a missed connection. It is, however, possible to accomplish both sets of outcomes. Develop a thorough and thoughtful lesson plan that addresses all the important points. Be sure to keep the focus on student learning. If you already had Back-ato-School Night and focused on rules, think deeply about how you can get back to parents and address those questions they brought but you didn't answer.

Miss Manners in the Classroom Says and Communication Skills

Whether or not this is the first big open house you have ever held in your home or in your classroom, it is certainly one of the most important. To get started in your planning, be sure to review "Miss Manners in the Classroom Says" on pages 23-24 and "Communication Skills" on pages 20-21 in *Why Didn't I Learn This in College?*

Personal Invitations

Even though the event is advertised school wide, send an invitation or flyer home to let parents and guardians know how much you are looking forward to meeting them. Depending on the age of your students, you may want to have students write a letter to their parents inviting them to the open house.



The Red Carpet

Maximizing the Effort: Back-to-School Night/Open House

Focus of Information

Focus on student learning rather than on rules and regulations. Prepare a packet of materials on the rules and regulations for the parents to read later at home. During the evening, share orally and in writing an overview of the learning outcomes for the year, the learning experiences that students will be involved in, and how they will be assessed. If at all possible, have student work on display. In the elementary classroom, you can have the students leave a folder of work on their desks. Have copies of the textbooks and supplementary materials used by students available for parent review. A video of students working is a great way to let parents experience classroom life.

Expectations

Given that you are working to establish a partnership, the expectations have to include the expectations of all parties. While you certainly want to communicate your positive and appropriate expectations for both the students and their parents, you need to also clearly articulate what they can expect from you as an advocate for their child's education.

Who Are You?

What are your beliefs about education and learning? Why are you excited to be a teacher? What life experiences or people have influenced you? What are your hopes and dreams as a human and as an educator? You can be really brief but do reveal enough about yourself to let the parents know what you stand for and that they can count on you to be a partner with them in the education of their child. Let them know that you are prepared, positive, and professional!

Student Information

If you have not already done so, this is a good opportunity for you to ask parents to provide information about their child that might not be available from another source. You might ask about interests, successes, fears, concerns, and influential people in the child's life.

Parent Interests

Develop a system for finding out about the interests of the parents and asking them how they would like to partner with you in the education of their child. You may want to develop a survey that asks about their hobbies, their travels, their collections, their careers, etc., and whether or not they are willing and able to share their knowledge and skills with the class.

Bottom Line: Be Prepared, Positive, and Professional!



The Red Carpet Parent Conferences

Before the Conference

- Extend a personal invitation to both parents.
- Check for the need for a translator.
- Be explicit about the purposes of the conference.
- Allow enough time for meaningful discussion, and be sure all parties understand the beginning time as well as the closing time.
- Get your papers organized in advance. This includes student work, rubrics, standards of learning, and assessment results. Copy segments of your grade book, or create a form, so parents cannot see the grades of other students, and remember that they really want to see the numbers/grades you have recorded.
- Make a “conference plan.” What end do you have in mind and what topics do you think would help the team get there?
- Check names. Children's names may be different from parents and if you have more than one “Smith” or “Gonzales” be sure you have the right family matched with the right student.

At the Conference

- Greet parents near the entrance to the school.
- Eliminate physical barriers. Do not sit behind your desk and do not make parents sit in small primary student chairs.
- Be mindful of your body language.
- Open the conference on a positive note.
- Ask for their opinions and reactions throughout the conference.
- Focus on strengths, interests, and anecdotes that capture the learner and the parents “being right.”
- Be specific with your comments.
- Back any generalization up with data or artifacts.
- Listen carefully to what parents say. Pause, probe, and paraphrase!
- Focus on solutions and emphasize collaboration.
- Be careful of the professional language you use with the parents. If there are certain terms you need to use, consider the conference one of many opportunities to inform and educate the community.
- Check for understanding and agreement throughout the conference and at



The Red Carpet Parent Conferences

After the Conference

- Write up a brief summary for your records. You may think that you will remember, but you won't! Jot down any pertinent information or impressions you received from the parents.
- Record and assess your behavior and the results you obtained from the conference. If you are pleased, make a note of what caused that to happen. If you did not obtain the outcomes you wanted, make note of your thoughts on what went wrong.
- If you have any strength left, write a brief thank you note or email message to express your appreciation of their time and interest, as well as the opportunity to work with their child.

*If the conversation becomes confrontational, keep both feet on the ground, use your active listening skills as your default response, and use your assertiveness skills as necessary. See pages 269-270 in *Why Didn't I Learn This in College?* for further guidance in discussing difficult situations with parents.



Working with Parents as Partners

How Am I Doing?

Mark each item: W for Working Well, G for Goal for the Month, or N for Not Yet

- ___ I demonstrate that I consider family members partners in their child's education rather than as subordinates to be directed by me.
- ___ I provide opportunities for families, even those who might not have been active in the school in the past, to feel welcome as participants in the classroom and school communities.
- ___ I do not rush to judgement about the parenting skills of my students' families.
- ___ I am purposeful about using families as sources of information about students' educational, linguistic, and social backgrounds.
- ___ I consistently keep parents informed about the instructional program and the learning experiences I plan for their children through a website, newsletters, and/or evening academic events that feature student work and expected standards.
- ___ I work to develop an understanding of the racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds of my students and use personal practical experience and research to respond respectfully to those differences.
- ___ I am readily available for conferences (virtual or face-to-face) with parents and my behavior indicates that I consider such interactions an important part of my job.
- ___ I plan conferences with an end in mind and I ensure that parents know the outcomes and agenda in advance.
- ___ I seek out parents and make parents feel comfortable contacting me and interacting with me as a partner in their child's education.
- ___ I contact parents with good news as often as I contact parents with bad news.
- ___ I contact parents in a timely manner whenever there is a change in their child's behavior.
- ___ I use discretion in handling confidential information and difficult situations.
- ___ I ensure that supportable facts, rather than rumors or insinuations, are discussion points in conversations and conferences.
- ___ I use clear, concise, and grammatically correct language in oral and written communication.
- ___ I use communication skills that demonstrate an awareness of cultural, gender, and generational differences.

