

# Working with Parents: New Teachers' Greatest Challenge

**W**ith all the challenges facing teachers in their first years on the job, it may surprise many educators that “Communicating with and engaging parents is the most frequently cited challenge among new teachers,” according to the 2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher.

If you believe some of your teachers (both new and veteran) find interacting with parents daunting, here are 10 suggestions to pass along:

## 1. Make personal contact with the parents of each student.

Do it by telephone, note, or in person as early in the school year as possible, and preferably when the child is doing well. This sets the stage for teamwork in case difficulties arise later.

**2. Contact parents immediately when potentially serious problems occur with their child.** Don't let concerns grow too big to be corrected. Parents will (and should) be angry if they hear about issues after they've become overwhelming.

**3. Call at least two parents a week with good news.** The first call is the hardest, but the payoff becomes so great—in ego-boosting feedback about teaching, better parent and student cooperation, and ideas for effective lessons—that you'll wonder why you didn't start calling earlier. (Teachers who also make home visits report even more dramatic results.)

**4. Send “quick notes” home to acknowledge something special.** For example, if parents helped their child with a school problem and the child shows improvement, shoot home a note or e-mail the same day to say, “It's working!”

**5. Put the greatest strength of parents to work for you.** Parents know their children best. They know their strengths, needs, interests, hopes, fears, and what makes them unique—things that would take teachers years to learn. All you have to do is ask parents questions and listen carefully to their responses.

**6. Learn how to deal with angry parents.** React calmly. Separate the parent from his or her argument. Rephrase



what the parent says to ensure you understand and to gain time to think. If confronted with a dubious suggestion, say, “I'll certainly keep that in mind.” That commits you to nothing. Studies indicate that parents are often satisfied simply with being heard, even when there is no agreement. Emphasize what you have in common: “We both want your child to do well.”

**7. Don't make quick judgments about parents' level of interest.** You'll probably be wrong. Studies have found that most parents, no matter what their economic or educational background, love their children and want the best for them. What may look like apathy could really be end-of-the-day exhaustion.

**8. Have children write notes to their parents on school papers, surveys, or invitations, and watch parent response soar.**

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**9. Use an academic skills checklist to build at-home support for what you are teaching.** When parents see the link between homework and school lessons, they are more likely to review assignments with their children. Students will then get a consistent message from parents and teachers: “Homework is important.”

**10. Let parents contact you after school.** You work hard at school and then bring work home. Your free time is precious. But if you can accommodate parents' difficult schedules by letting them contact you after school, you will find that it makes teaching more rewarding and less stressful. In practice, parents contact teachers at home only when it's critical. But they appreciate the opportunity and become more supportive.

Schools cannot do their job without strong parent support, and it's worth every principal's time to help teachers work cooperatively with parents. ■

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

This column is adapted from The Teacher Institute's 16-page booklet, *Working With Parents: Practical Ideas to Improve Student Learning*. For a free copy, e-mail your name and mailing address to [jhw@parent-institute.com](mailto:jhw@parent-institute.com) with the message, “Please send me the free booklet for teachers.”

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