

# Genuine, Personal Parent Engagement

I frequently hear teachers expressing the sentiment that we need to encourage the sharing of information with parents, rather than feeling we are being hounded for it. We are all familiar with so-called “helicopter parents,” who have gained the reputation for being overprotective and overinvolved—even at the middle level. Here I identify ways to enhance communication with those parents, while giving their adolescent children much needed autonomy.

**Find ways to share tidbits about each child.** Parents would love to be a fly on the wall and see how their child is reflecting family values in the classroom. I have seen teachers make valuable connections by sending “Happy Grams.” These simple, quick messages share something noteworthy such as “your daughter helped pick up wrappers from the overflowing recycle bin today at lunch” or “your son helped me when I was juggling my book bags when I walked in our classroom.”

I have students design stationery to help simplify this task for faculty. Teachers have reported back that they jot these notes while waiting for their own children during music lessons or sports practices. Over the years, I have heard of these notes being shared with relatives and neighbors and ending up posted on refrigerators.

This strategy can work wonders to bridge the school/home gap and help offset monosyllabic answers students may give to questions about their school day. It also promotes our school’s goal of being seen as positive and inviting, and breaking the ice for further discussion about how students are doing during the period between progress reports and report cards.

**Periodically communicate academic information, not just at Open House or Parent-Teacher Conferences.** Encourage teachers to share their syllabus or curriculum maps so parents can anticipate what is happening later in the month or year. For example, one of my teachers felt frustrated when he heard parents say,




“Our son never knows what’s going on in your class.” Rather than trying to explain away the parents’ concerns, this teacher shifted the discussion to what he would do differently, suggesting that he would share information about the next three topics to be covered in science class.

The conversation revealed the parents’ anxiety about science in general. Having the list of topics to be covered in the next three months helped this family better anticipate how they could help their child, laying the groundwork for the family and school to work together for future comfort and success.

**Invite parents to serve as guest speakers in the classroom.** Sharing a syllabus or other academic information also gives teachers the opportunity to solicit parent volunteers as first-hand “expert” guest speakers. One of my most memorable breakthroughs helping a family feel comfortable with their daughter entering sixth grade was when I realized from a bumper sticker on their car that they had vacationed in Costa Rica. As a result, I introduced them to the Spanish teacher so that they could share their adventures from this trip with the other sixth graders. The parents ended up coming to school and staying all day, delivering an engaging mini-lesson to all four blocks of students.

During the next faculty meeting, we discussed the power of parents in the classroom, after which several teachers formally invited other parents to speak in their classrooms. They communicated to parents the pending lesson topics and asked for volunteers. Parents matched their experiences to the topics, and then shared in a similar way.

Every day, parents are sending us the most valuable thing in their lives and teachers are practicing their art and craft with passion and professionalism. Our task, as principals, is to support and ensure that teachers are sharing information a family can work with.

These suggestions can also help lay the foundation for a deeper flow of information if academic performance or behavior issues arise later in the school year. I have found that focusing on very real and personal elements—such as inviting parents to visit and participate in class, as well as the touch of a handwritten note, will sway the bull’s-eye and power the true stimulation and interaction students and families need to thrive. 

**Cris Blackstone** is principal of Alton Central School in Alton, New Hampshire.