

Do's and Don'ts of Effective Communication With Parents

DO ...

Provide a translator if parents' primary language is not one that you speak fluently. There is likely nothing more important to parents than their child's education. The nuance and detail necessary to convey how parents might best engage in the student learning process should be communicated in the parents' primary language. Internal school or school district assets may be available, such as bi-lingual teachers and paraprofessionals, in addition to possible volunteers from local businesses, community centers and nonprofit organizations.

DON'T ...

Use the student as the translator. Even if parent-teacher conferences are student led, they may well become misled if parents and teachers are unable to communicate independently. The student's role as student is of paramount importance and encumbering them with translation responsibilities impedes open and honest teacher and parent communication. Using the student as the translator can put the student in an awkward, untenable position where loyalty and respect for both parents and teachers can feel contradictory.

DON'T ...

Assume that any bi-lingual adult will do. Using parents of other students, or other students, compromises the privacy of both the parents and the student who is the topic of discussion. What is gained in increased clarity and effective communication will be lost if families feel embarrassed or disrespected.

DO ...

Acknowledge parents and the perceived power differential between parents and teachers, especially when working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Negative past experiences (as either a student or a parent), immigration status, different cultural norms and expectations, and lack of English language fluency, among other things, can exacerbate parental discomfort and the inclination to disengage from the school context. Off-site meetings, the use of parent advocates, or community liaisons can offset some the perceived power differential, as can acknowledging the many barriers and constraints that parents may have to overcome just to make it to a parent-teacher conference.

DO ...

Use terms that everyone understands. If there are some concepts or terms that need explanation, provide necessary detail and consider providing additional preparatory materials to families in advance of the scheduled meeting.

DON'T ...

Use unidentified or unexplained acronyms. Most parents don't have degrees in education or familiarity with acronyms and jargon that may be second nature to education professionals. Avoid education jargon whenever possible.

DO ...

Be clear about the purpose of the meeting, set goals and communicate them prior the meeting or conversation so that parent and teachers have shared, realistic expectations.

DO ...

Start the meeting on a positive note. Try to find an area where the student is doing well academically, socially, athletically, etc. Positive attention indicates care, concern, and genuine regard for the student. Beginning the meeting with what is wrong or what needs improvement can make parents defensive and protective, but rarely proactive. Parents who are proactive and supportive of teacher suggestions do so in furtherance of the best interests of their child.