

The Parent-Teacher Connection

The power of building a positive relationship with your child's teacher

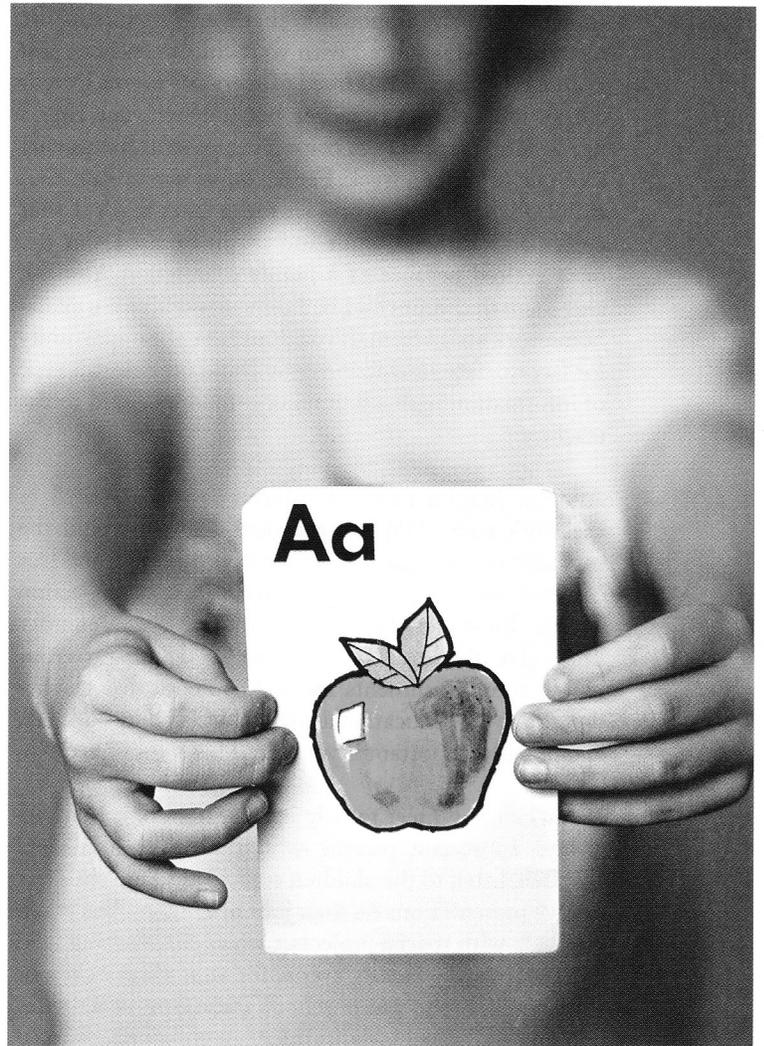
BY LYNDA VAN KUREN

One of the best things you can do to ensure your child has a positive educational experience is to develop a good relationship with his or her teacher. At a minimum, you will know what your child is working on in school so you can reinforce those skills at home. But having a positive relationship with your child's teacher reaps rewards far beyond homework help. It gives you the opportunity to share in the planning of your child's instruction, and you and the teacher can identify potential problems or areas that may need extra work. When you and the teacher work as a team, it lets your child know that "we're all in this together" and that everyone is working for his or her success.

Getting Started

You shouldn't wait until a problem develops to get to know your child's teacher. Call and ask for an introductory conference. At the conference, share information about your child such as:

- Your child's successes
- What your child enjoys
- What your child has difficulty with
- Any situations at home the teacher should be aware of, such as a grandparent that is ill
- What extracurricular activities your child is involved in (dance, soccer, gymnastics, swimming)
- If your child has a medical condition and if he or she needs to take medication at school
- If your child has a disability. The school usually informs teachers of students who have disabilities, but sometimes the communication can break down.



You can also ask what your child will be studying in the upcoming weeks and if there are any activities you can do at home to reinforce lessons. Finally, establish a way for the teacher to contact you: best hours to reach you and whether you prefer to be contacted by phone or e-mail.

This initial conference serves multiple purposes. First, it lets the teacher know you are interested in and will be involved in your child's education. Second, it gives the teacher insights that can be used to adjust your child's educational programming as well as peak your child's interest in subjects and motivate him or her to achieve tasks. Third, it gives your relationship with your child's teacher a positive basis, from which it can grow—even if problems should develop later in the year.

Maintaining the Relationship

It is extremely important that you maintain the relationship you started with your child's teachers. Just keeping the teacher informed of every day events in your child's life helps the teacher better meet your child's needs. Find some way to communicate with the teacher a couple of times a week. For example, if you walk your child to school, stop in and let the teacher know if your child had a difficult night and might be tired that day or is excited because of a family celebration. You can also share that your child had difficulty with a particular homework assignment. If you don't have the opportunity for face-to-face interactions, you could provide this type of information with a journal or e-mail you send to the teacher.

Another helpful piece of information is a record of the work your child has completed at home and the methods you used to help and motivate him or her. This can be done with graphic organizers and data collection sheets. These can be valuable tools for conferences. They give the teacher additional insights into your child's accomplishments and help you and the teacher determine new educational goals for your child. This data is especially important if your child has a disability.

If you can, volunteer to help in the classroom. Teachers always appreciate parents who can tutor individual children, listen to the children read, read to the children, or give presentations on their jobs or hobbies. You could also help with special projects, such as chaperoning field trips or chairing family events for your child's class or fundraisers for the class or school. These types of activities give you additional insights into your child's educational programming, class, and school. At the same time, you further your relationship with your child's teacher and show your child that his or her school activities are important to you too.

Remember, you are the common thread that is woven throughout your child's entire academic career. Together, you, your child, and your child's teachers can create a synergy that raises academic achievement. With your involvement, your child can gain an intrinsic love of learning and experience educational success from kindergarten through high school graduation. ¶

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When Problems Occur...

If you don't feel your child's needs are being met in a particular program, set up a meeting with the teacher as soon as possible. Don't wait for problems to resolve themselves! Enter the meeting with the goal of collaborating with the teacher to solve the issue. Some strategies to help you ensure the meeting goes smoothly and you achieve your objectives include:

- Show compassion, sensitivity, empathy, and respect for the teacher. All parties should try to understand the other's perspective.
- Approach disagreements in a manner that encourages mutual problem solving. First, you should state the problem. A good approach is to explain that you have some questions or concerns. You might say, "I'm not seeing X. How will you approach that?" If the teacher's response meets your concerns, you can move on. If not, you and the teacher can brainstorm ideas and then develop a solution.
- In the discussion, ask questions about strategies, terms, or behaviors you don't understand. This is an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings, and possibly, hard feelings.
- Focus on the best interests of your child. Although it can get lost, you and the teacher want the same thing.
- Prepare a list of questions beforehand. This helps keep emotionalism from obstructing your goal and ensures you will get answers to your most important questions.
- Give suggestions. You know strategies that work with your child at home that could be equally successful at school. Also, ask for suggestions from the teacher that you can try at home.
- Share the information with your child.
- Set up a procedure for follow up.
- Summarize the information, as this will be the basis for the next meeting.
- Express appreciation for the teacher's participation in the conference.
- Never criticize the teacher in front of your child. Your child should believe you and the school are working together for his or her benefit.