

Tackling Your Parent Problems

Teaming up for Success

By Judy L. Shull

Whenever teachers get together, one subject is sure to come up: *problems with parents.*

But teachers and parents need not be adversaries. They want the same things for their children. They can work together to create a team that will coach, train, and encourage each child to succeed.

My goal is to get each student's parents to work with me to help their child succeed in school. The brief twice-yearly parent-teacher conferences are not enough. Nor do other school activities provide much opportunity for team-building. So I try to build a teacher-parent team by seizing every opportunity that I have.

I experienced a paradigm shift a few years ago. One set of parents would not come for a conference. They had made two appointments and missed both. Time to give up? The need to speak with them was too great. Finally, I suggested, "I'll wait at the school until you arrive, no matter how late."

An hour and a half after our scheduled time, they entered the classroom, saying sheepishly, "We didn't think you'd still be here." We sat down, and I

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went through the usual conference rituals. Then it was my turn to listen. They really opened up. After listening for an hour and a half, I had learned a lot. My entire perspective on their child's school difficulties changed. In fact, my entire perspective on parent-teacher conferences changed! The secret is to take time to really listen—to catch a glimpse of what life is like for the child outside of the school or church environment. This has helped me create that long-sought-after bond with my students' parents.

In the Book of James, we are reminded: ". . . don't ever forget that it is best to listen much, speak little, and not

become angry" (chap. 1:19, *The Living Bible*). Centuries later, Steven Covey echoed this concept in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The fifth habit is "Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood." Covey explains that "We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply" (p. 239).

Developing Trust

Learning to listen to parents is only the beginning. Sometimes, communication is difficult. Some parents are intimidated by teachers because of their own experience as a student or their problems with their child's former teachers. Whatever the reason, some parents may need more time to develop trust. Encourage them to talk. Suggest that they feel free to telephone you at school or at home. Remind them that they can make an appointment to see you after school. If they are happier communicating in writing, they can send a note. The goal is to find ways to make each parent feel comfortable communicating with the teacher.

Once parents learn that the teacher is on their side, they can form a team that helps the child become a winner. Teachers have to work to keep those lines of communication open. One com-

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munication method that works well for me is to prepare a large, sturdy envelope for each child. On each envelope, I put a label with the child's name and address, and attach a piece of paper that shows percentages and their connection to letter grades. After I accumulate five to 10 days' worth of papers, the students sort them and place them in their envelopes. (Papers needing correction are returned to each child immediately.)

By using a computer grading program, I can easily generate a grade report to include with these papers. I use a program that prints information on each subject, percentage scores, and any missing assignments.

I also include a note to the parents about the assignments for the next week or two in the various subjects. Parents like to know about any memory work

such as Bible texts or spelling lists for which their child needs to prepare. They want to know when tests are scheduled, and what projects their child will be working on. Parents say they are pleased to receive a checklist of my expectations for projects, written and oral reports, and creative writing exercises—anything where requirements could be different from teacher to teacher or grade to grade.

I include a list of supplies that will be needed from home, and each project's due date. I can also let parents know when I am trying something new, such as a simulation or a different teaching technique.

When beginning a new unit, I give the parents a general idea of the scope of the material. For example, when students begin a science unit on rocks and minerals, I tell them in advance so stu-

dents can bring samples from home.

When parents know what their child is about to study, one or more of them may offer to teach a "mini class" on those subjects. Recently, after finding out that the class was studying how the human body moves, a mother who is a physical therapist asked if she could teach a class about bones and what it means to be paralyzed. She brought a skeleton from work for the children to touch.

"Parent-Friendly" Packets

It helps to make the take-home packets "parent friendly." An easy way to help parents find notes from the teacher is to always put them on colored paper. Using a different color for photocopied tests also makes them easy to find in the pile of student work.

The students put the date on the envelope before they take it home. Parents must sign the envelope next to the date to indicate that they have seen the work. To have recess, the students must return the empty envelopes to school within two days. Seldom do they miss this deadline. The child motivates the parent to look at the work. If a parent wants to send the teacher a note, he or she can put it in the envelope to be returned.

Many parents are relieved not to get handfuls of papers to look at every day. They also like to watch their child's progress. They appreciate the frequent updates, so at report-card time, there are no surprises. Instead of explaining why their child got a particular grade, I can spend the precious minutes in parent-teacher conference cooperatively developing a plan to help the child do better during the next grading period.

Since I have gone to this extra communication effort, parents say they are better able to talk to their children about what they are learning at school. The children then come back to school and share with the rest of the class what they've learned at home.

When a child experiences a difficult day at school, without an obvious reason, it may be time to talk to the parents. Something may be occurring in the home that is causing problems in the classroom. Finding this out will help

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you determine how to deal with the school problems.

Field Trips

Parents may offer to make the arrangements for an appropriate field trip when they know what their child is learning. In student packets, I include a note to alert parents about upcoming field trips. Usually, some parents will volunteer to go with us. Parents have expressed appreciation in knowing about trips as far ahead as possible because of the need to schedule time off from work. For the most part, parents really do want to spend time with their child and become more involved

in his or her school life. They need the teacher's frequent guidance to know what they can do.

For parents to be allowed to drive children (other than their own) on a field trip or outing, they must meet the local legal requirements. A minimum amount of insurance is usually required for the car and driver. Drivers should also fill out a form allowing for a personal check of their driving history. All drivers must be listed on children's permission slips. Parents can then approve of the drivers collectively, or they can note if they do not wish their child to ride with a certain person. Parents who want to be included in field trips must provide this information at the beginning of the school year. If parents don't fill out this form and get approval, they can drive only their own child.

One teacher says she never turns down a parent. If parents show up at the last minute, they can drive their child or ride with another approved driver. The goal is to reassure parents that they are a welcome part of their child's school experience.

Promoting Teamwork

When there is trust and teamwork between home and school, parents will frequently feel comfortable sharing a home problem that is causing stress—

before it creates problems at school. This helps a lot in classroom management decisions.

Problem Parents

Sadly, this method will not solve all your parent problems. We all have to work with the self-centered parent. This is usually a mother, but sometimes a father who has not found a sense of self-fulfillment and therefore takes out his or her frustrations on the teacher. Many times, this person is having marital problems and hopes the attack on the teacher will cause at least a temporary bonding with the spouse.

At the beginning of the school year, seek advice from your support team—the principal, school board chairperson, pastor, and superintendent. They should help you formulate procedures for dealing with parent disruptions before they occur.

To help parents understand the teaching environment, it's useful to send out a general information letter before school begins, letting them know what you expect good parent behavior to look like. For example, request that conferences not be held before or after school, and explain why. Ask that students be allowed to work during the day and not have their schedule interrupted, except for an emergency. Tell

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parents that you do not wish to talk about school work on Sabbath. Using kindness and humor, make your point in writing. Some people won't see this as applying to them, but it will help with most parents.

Disruptive Parents

An occasional parent will try to control the teacher or classroom. When a parent disrupts the class, let the office know immediately. Most schools will have the principal come and escort the parent to the office so the teacher can continue teaching. Teachers in small schools should have a plan to follow if a parent becomes disruptive. Ask for advice from your school board, and consult your local conference office. If you anticipate a problem, ask the pastor, school board chairperson, or elder to spend some time at the school to act as a buffer if an angry parent tries to interrupt the class.

If a parent comes in unexpectedly, quickly ask him or her to step out of the classroom. Explain briefly that your job

during school hours is to teach and supervise children. Tell the parent that if he or she would like to speak to you, it will be necessary to make an appointment outside teaching hours. After giving this explanation, return immediately to the classroom.

If a parent will not step out of the classroom, dismiss the students for recess and go supervise them. If the parent follows, have your student secretary—usually an older student who helps with telephone duties—phone the local police.

Be sure you discuss this procedure ahead of time with your support team, and let the parents know about the policy in your general information letter. Parents do not have the right to steal learning time from children. When an angry parent interrupts class, the students may be in danger, and you must get help.

Parental Accusations

Certain parents will accuse the teacher of doing things that harm their

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child. They often don't have any proof, just a feeling. Invite them to visit as often as they would like and quietly observe from the back of the room. Remind them that they are there to watch, not interfere. Most parents will not want to spend the time, but if they do, you may be able to relieve their concerns. If the problem persists, it's time for a conference. Include a third person, such as the principal or pastor. Listen. If it appears the parent is going to continue to be at odds with the school, it is time for the pastor or principal to recommend that the child be transferred to another school.

There is no all-purpose solution to every problem. Some parents are unwilling to change or to cooperate. The only ones we can change are ourselves. Remember, Jesus had to deal with a lot of irritating people and, as workers for Him, we will also.

It is the sacred ministry of each Adventist teacher to lead students closer to heaven. By learning to listen to parents, we help parents learn to listen to us. Listening helps parents feel that their concerns are being heard. This is good practice for hearing the still, small voice that is trying to help us come closer to the peace of heaven. ✍

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