

Bonus Report

How To Improve Communication With Parents

By Tom Daly

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Excerpted from "The ADHD Solution for Teachers:
How To Turn Any Disruptive Child Into Your Best Student,"
by Tom Daly
<http://www.adhdsolution.com/teachers>

Every teacher should ask herself a series of questions on her effectiveness in dealing with parents. These questions will improve your interactions with parents by acting as a guide:

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How effective am I in communicating with parents?

In the movie "My Blue Heaven," Steve Martin's character makes a good point by noting that everyone *thinks* they have a good sense of humor, but not everyone *has* a good sense of humor.

In a similar way, most teachers think they're effective with parents, but the truth is that many of us leave something to be desired in this area, including myself. **Take a brutally honest look to see how effective you are in communicating with parents.**

For instance, do you communicate with parents on a regular basis? Do you anticipate questions and provide answers ahead of time? Do your students' parents know what's going on at all times when it comes to their children? Do the parents have appropriate access to you?

2. "What are my strengths and weaknesses in dealing with parents?"

- Am I always starting meetings and phone calls with a lot of positives about their child?

- Do I have a well-organized grade book that shows the parent exactly where her child stands?
- Do I have alternative ways of explaining things so that the ADHD child achieves what all the other kids are mastering?
- What might be some of my weaknesses?
- Has the student been failing for two or three weeks and I have not yet spoken to the parent?
- Am I avoiding dealing with an uncomfortable situation regarding this student?
- When a child puts his head down on his desk, is my attitude, “Well, fine, at least he's not disrupting the class today?” Am I neglecting to tell the parent that the child is off-task?

Take some time to assess your strengths and weaknesses with parents.

3. *“What are the concerns of my students' parents? What are some of the best ways to address those concerns?”*

Each school has its own culture. For instance, I once had a parent who was concerned about my showing movies during class. Well, as you already know, when I show a movie, I ask vocabulary questions ahead of time, comprehension questions during the movie, and expansion questions after the movie.

In that way the movie becomes a legitimate learning experience. So based on that interaction with the parent, I decided that it would be a good idea to send home a letter to parents at the beginning of the year that listed the films I planned to show, along with an example of the movie worksheets students would be using in conjunction with the movies.

At every school, teachers need to sit down and ask themselves exactly what the parents at their school are concerned about. And then once they pinpoint that, they need to ask how we can better meet the parent’s needs.

4. *“What are the roadblocks to good communication between parents and their children's school?”*

What prevents you and the parents from talking to each other? Is it the school schedule? Is it the school’s phone system? Is it the email system? Are the parents too intimidated to call you? Do you have a complete list of all the parents' phone numbers? Do you know if both parents are working? Would you know how to contact either parent if you had to? When these systems aren't set up, they hamper communications with parents. Find out what the stumbling blocks are, and then you will improve those areas.

5. *Are you the parent of a school-aged child yourself? If so, what do you like about your child's school, and what methods and ideas foster good communication there?*

Take note of what you like and dislike about your child's school. If you don't have children of your own, talk to the parents of your nieces and nephews and ask them what they like and dislike about the schools their kids are attending. Believe me, they'll tell you!

6. *What systematic plans could you implement that would provide parents with an ongoing appraisal of their child's progress in your class?*

Are you sending home weekly progress reports that must be returned with a parent's signature? If you're sending out report cards every six weeks, **is there a three-week mid-progress report sheet you could send home to parents?** This will prevent the shock that may occur when their child brings home a report card with alarming grades. It may also stop an academic slide in progress. Is there a pre-determined time during your week in which you contact parents about how their children are doing? I knew a teacher who spent every Sunday evening calling all the students' parents. During the first three weeks it took a time commitment, but after that the calls were quick because there was a rapport established. And the other benefit is obvious — when students realize their teacher is calling their homes every week, the classroom behavior improves dramatically.

A systematic way of contacting your students' parents can be pivotal in decreasing disruptive class behavior.

How To Protect Yourself From Parents Who Blame You

First, ask yourself the six reflection questions above and look to improve yourself. That is the best way to protect yourself from parents who blame the teacher.

Okay, let's talk about how to handle unusual situations with parents. Let's discuss a couple scenarios.

The first one is where a parent insists on having many meetings to discuss their child's progress. Something isn't working with their child, and the parent has decided that you, the teacher, are the problem. And let's say the parent not only wants to meet with you, but they want to meet with the principal and just about everyone else, too. Basically, the parent's attitude in this scenario is: *Something's not working with my child, and it must be the teacher's fault.*

How can you handle that type of situation?

The first thing you need to do is document exactly what the student is doing in your classroom. For instance, if he's getting out of his seat 10 times per hour, you need to keep track of that, along with any other problematic behaviors.

This way, you can show everyone involved in the discussion that you've documented not only what the student is doing in your class, **but the specific actions you've tried in remedying the situation** (and the student's behavior in reaction to your attempted remedies). By doing this, you will demonstrate that:

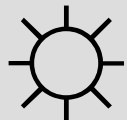
- (a) you have a systematic way of doing things in your class;
- (b) you're being reasonable when you're asking their child to comply;
- (c) their child is not complying with your efforts.

The documentation may not always convince the parent, but it will impress your administrators and focus the discussion on “next steps.”

And the parent may still blame you after the meeting, but at least everyone else will know that you've done all the right things. You've demonstrated that you are a professional educator by pointing out all the reasonable ways in which you've tried to modify the student's problem behavior.

Now you hold some important cards. If you want the student out of your class, you can look at everyone and say, "These are all the things we've tried in the classroom, and it just doesn't look like things are working out for Bobby. I really can't think of anything else to try, and it looks like it's just not working out. I want him to be successful in school, but you can see the situation." What may happen at a meeting like this is an administrator or parent may jump in and suggest something — perhaps that Bobby needs to be placed in a different classroom environment. Maybe he needs to go through what's called a Student Study Team, and go through the Individual Education Plan process . . . or maybe he's already gone through the IEP process, and now he needs to be somewhere else, or needs a one-on-one assistant each day.

Once you've shown that you're being reasonable in your efforts and that the child is not being reasonable, then you will sound justified when you suggest that things are just not



Voices from the field

The single most effective tool that I used was to monitor behavior by jotting disruptive behaviors on a note pad kept in my pocket. It required just a name and the offense. I wrote the exact words yelled out or whatever. The kids would beg, "Are you going to write that?" Of course, I kept the comments to share with the student and with parents. There were no arguments because the kids and I both knew they were things they did. It helped the students accept responsibility for their behavior.

Mary Beth C., Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan

working out. Now keep in mind that at some meetings you can suggest that sort of thing, while at other meetings you should first consider the political situations at your particular school. Consider talking with the school administrator before the meeting with the parent.

Also, sometimes I will bring the student's journal to the meeting, along with the journal of a student who has done a good job of journal writing. This way, the parent can compare her child's effort to what other children are doing.

You Can't Make Me Do It!

A second parent scenario to discuss is a parent meeting for a child who constantly talks in class and is defiant. This is a common situation, as some students consider it a good day when they irritate the teacher. We've all experienced these sorts of kids. They take advantage of the fact that they can act up and you can't physically or verbally overreact.

It's a different situation than what they have at home. That's why you have students saying and doing things to staff members that they wouldn't dream of doing at home, or to strangers out on the street. They're protected by protocol and standards that every school has in place. **We're naturally glad for those safeguards.** But it certainly makes your job as a teacher more difficult and can leave you vulnerable to especially annoying behavior. It can feel like open season on teachers.

Now, at the meeting of a defiant student, expect that the parent will not be on your side right away. **But when you pull out your documentation of what the child did and what the child said, using direct quotation marks, along with the date of these incidents, you will be in an excellent position to gain the parent's support.**

Any human resources expert will tell you that documenting incidents in the workplace is absolutely crucial to solving problems.

How can you do this? An easy method is to use a three-ring binder. And on the first sheet you should list all your students, along with where they are scheduled to be throughout the day. Make it a specific listing so that you know exactly where the child is at every point in his school day. Maybe you have some kids that are in speech therapy at a certain time, or occupational therapy, or adaptive PE; whatever it is, you want to know where each child is at any moment so that if you get a phone call or someone looks for the student, you know exactly where to find him.

On the second page in your binder, you want a master schedule of all the teachers in your school, including their room numbers and prep periods. You also want to have a section for each student. This information will include basics such as telephone numbers, addresses, medications, along with a separate sheet for any communication you have with the parents of that student or incidents you've experienced with that student.

When you have all that information in one handy binder, then it's something you can easily grab when you're summoned to the administration offices for a meeting with a parent or when you call a student's parents.

About The Author

Tom Daly is a behavior specialist who consults full-time with teachers using the strategies in his books to turn disruptive children into productive and happy students. With 15 years of daily classroom experience, he has trained more than 2,200 educators as an adjunct instructor in the Exceptional Children's Department at National University in San Diego, California. He is also the author of "Unlocking The Gifted Student Inside Your ADHD Child." His books have guided thousands of teachers and parents across the United States and 19 other countries.

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