

Home-School Communication Workshop

Home-School Communication – What’s All the Commotion?

This workshop will help teachers understand different approaches to home-school communication and how these shape relationships with families.

At the end of the workshop, teachers will:

- *Be aware of different communication approaches*
- *Recognize how different communication approaches can strengthen or weaken teacher-family relations*
- *Gain practice in employing different communication approaches under varied circumstances*

Trainer’s Guide: How to Use This Workshop

Quite simply, communication is a message sent and a message received. Ideally, the message received by the listener matches the message intended by the messenger. But this is not always the case. Teachers are in the communication business. They must convey knowledge to children, discuss and interact with professional colleagues, and communicate effectively with families. This workshop offers pre-service and in-service teachers an opportunity to become more aware of different approaches to communicating with families. It is based on research with first and second grade teachers who reported their experiences with and feelings about home-school communication.

The workshop is divided into different parts: a review of research, a typology of communication approaches, an activity section, and a list of resources. These workshop modules are meant to serve as a guide for developing a series of seminars and follow-up activities about home-school communication. We know from two early pilots of the workshop¹ that home-school communication is a complex and challenging issue for teachers, requiring ongoing professional development opportunities rather than a single session. In these early pilots, teachers posed a number of questions about home-school communication that were not easily answered in one session, such as: How do I break bad news? What do parents really want us to tell them? How do I ask more questions without being nosy?

¹ We would like to acknowledge Joel Nitzberg for his help in coordinating the pilot workshop with the Cambridge Public School teachers.

The pilot experiences also suggest other tips for workshop facilitation:

- *Warming up to the subject matter.* Teachers and other professionals who work with children are often not prepared to work with families. For some workshop participants this may be their first exposure to the content and issues. Be prepared to provide a lot of explanation. For the situations in the exercise below, we suggest the following readings:

Situation 1: Bloom, L. R. (2001). I'm poor, I'm single, I'm a mom and deserve respect: Advocating schools as and with mothers in poverty. *Educational Studies*, 32, 30-316.

Situation 2: Alleksaht-Snider, M. (1995). Teachers' perspective on their work with families in a bilingual community. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 9(2), 85-95.

Situation 3: Lopez, G. R., Scribner, J., & Mahitivanicha, K. (2001). Redefining parental involvement: Lessons from high-performing migrant impacted schools. *American Education Research Journal*, 38, 253-288.

- *Handling diverse reactions.* Working with families is deeply embedded in one's beliefs and experiences. Some teachers who are well-meaning nonetheless hold negative perceptions of and attitudes toward families, and are apprehensive about their interactions with them. Professionalism is often on the line. It is important to come prepared to help reframe extant beliefs in a positive way.
- *Keeping on task.* Teachers rarely have opportunities to talk with their colleagues. It is important to keep the group on task, while at the same time, facilitating discussion that allows people to share their experiences.
- *Graduating to next steps.* As stated previously, one workshop is often not enough. Come with follow-up activities or "next steps" to suggest to the group. This might mean assigning one of the activities for participants to do on their own, helping the group to think about action research (see www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/fineforum/forum3/teachertalk.html) and asking the group to reflect on their own learning through journal writing, or the development of self-assessment tools.

This workshop offers the trainer flexibility. The trainer can choose the order and level of the workshop based on available time and participants' level of familiarity with the topic.

Finally, interpersonal communication is affected by the larger context in which it takes place, such as the culture of the school. Although the exercises in this workshop focus on the direct experiences of teachers with families, you may also

explore the types of systemic changes that facilitate open communications between teachers and parents.

Reviewing the Research

Home-school communication is among the most important factors in developing strong relationships between teachers and families (Epstein, 1996; Christensen & Sheridan, 2001). Information from school is the primary means parents have to understand their children's level of success or failure in school (Helling, 1996).

Research on home-school communication examines the types of information communicated, methods of communication, and the benefits of and challenges to communication. Common types of information sent home include:

- Notices about school events, school programs, and reports of children's progress
- Information about the school's overall performance on standardized tests
- Basic information about the goals of instructional programs
- Parenting information related to child rearing, daily activities, and behavioral issues (Carey, 1998; Kessler-Sklar, 2000)

Many methods of communicating with families, both formal and informal, also exist:

- Personal notes to parents, phone calls at home, and parent-teacher conferences (Elman, 1999; Epstein, 1996)
- Phone calls on the job (Gutman, 2000) and conversations during drop-off and pick-up times
- Information gained by teachers from other parents who work at the school (Helling, 1996) and by parents from other parents (DeMoss & Vaughn, 1999)
- Information conveyed by a child to both teachers and parents (McNamara, 2000)
- Email and voicemail messages and information posted on the Internet and school websites (Bauch, 2000)

The benefits of effective home-school communication are many:

- Parents and teachers consider communication the number one factor to increase trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000).
- Strong communication can also encourage higher and realistic parental expectations. When teachers and parents are on the "same page" they can engage in more individual and concrete discussion around student progress and develop realistic goals and plans of action that are linked to student achievement (Drake, 2000; James, Jurich & Estes, 2001).

- Parents who receive more consistent information about their children's school performance report a higher degree of commitment to helping children improve (Helling, 1996).
- Parents view effective communication by a new school as a quality that makes the transition from preschool to kindergarten positive (Rimm-Kauffman, 1999).
- Communication serves as the first step to other types of parent involvement to follow (Elman, 1999).
- Parents seek good communication skills in their children's teachers, citing it as one of the most desirable characteristics a new teacher could have (Lupi, 2001; McDermott, 2001).

However, challenges and obstacles to home-school communication also exist. These include pragmatic, cultural, and institutional barriers:

- In general, parents' work schedules and lack of time, transportation, and economic resources interfere with their ability to communicate with teachers and school staff.
- Teachers also face time limitations and class schedules that may conflict with parents' availability for communicating.
- Language barriers may also limit the degree to which schools and family members interact.
- "Fortress" schools, or ones that do not welcome and conduct outreach with parents, may inhibit home-school communication (Scribner, 1999).
- Involved families tend to agree that the level of their involvement depends on outreach from teachers and administrators (Urban Institute, 1999).
- Power differentials that often exist between families and schools may affect home-school communication. Some schools tend to hold negative stereotypes of poor single minority mothers and communicate with them in controlling, disrespectful, and demoralizing ways (Bloom, 2001).
- Teacher preparation and knowledge may be lacking in how to partner and communicate with parents (Alleksaht-Snyder, 1995; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997).

Practicing Communication Skills: A Framework

There are many ways to communicate. For instance, language, facial and body expression, and pitch and tone of voice, are all ways of transmitting a message. This section focuses on the process of language communication and the way we go about communicating verbally with someone. Although most communication occurs spontaneously, the following communication skills can be helpful in all situations: 1) identifying the goal and reason for the communication, 2) considering one's audience, and 3) choosing a communication approach that opens rather than blocks a two-way conversation.

Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What message do you want to convey? • What do you want to happen?
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who am I talking with? • What is our degree of familiarity? • What style of communication am I comfortable with? How might it be different—or the same—than the family I am communicating with?
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What approach will open and enhance communication?

1. Goal

Consider the content of your message. Ask yourself: What message do I want to convey? What do I want to have happen as a result of this communication?

2. Audience

Good communication requires knowing not only what words to use and what message to send, but also how to communicate in ways that opens communication, helps the people involved explore the situation, and generate options for change.

In general, conversational styles are influenced by a) familiarity with one's audience and b) communication habits that are rooted in language and culture (McKay & Hornsberger, 1996). As such, good communicators need to consider:

- Who their audience is
- Their own language, style, and habits of communication
- The language, style, and habits of communication of their audience

3. Approach

The next step is to choose a home-school communication approach that will convey the message meaningfully. The table below identifies seven approaches that teachers use to open communication with parents. These have been distilled from interview research with first and second grade teachers in public school settings. This emerging typology can be used as a guide to identify appropriate approaches to communicating specific messages with families.

Approaches to Open Communication With Parents

Communication Approaches	Definition	Examples*
Instructing	Explicating and elaborating	“I have his mother listen to him read out loud at night and I’ll show her reading activities to do at home. Often I’ll give her suggestions about discipline. For example, I might explain time outs, consequences, and follow throughs.”
Following up	Reminding and monitoring	“I might follow up with a parent about a child’s absences to find out why the child didn’t come to school. I’ll also remind parents about homework assignments or about scheduled conferences and field trips. I might follow up on advice I’ve given earlier in the year to see if it’s working.”
Asking for help	Looking for assistance	“Often I’ll go to a parent for assistance. Parents often come to me looking for help in discipline, staying informed, and with questions on how to better help their children with homework. It’s my job to go to a parent and seek their help as well. For example, it’s a great way to open a conference and start a conversation. I’ll ask what parents do at home that works.”
Revealing	Sharing information openly	“I’ll share very openly my goals and thoughts on a child in my classroom. I’ll share my concerns—both academic and social—because I want to give a total picture of what is going on at school. I don’t want parents to have to find out in bits and pieces. I’d rather share it all. Hopefully then families will be more open too, but at least it’s all out there.”
Informally exchanging	Having a reciprocal dialogue	“I like to make time to just sit down and chat with no real agenda. I like to have a dialogue. Talk about things we notice in a face-to face situation in an honest give and take. That way our impressions come across. That way I find out just what it is they’re concerned about and figure out where to go from there.”
Active listening	Listening and paying attention	“We went over the child’s report card and talked about her language and math skills. But the biggest part of the conversation was listening to the mother’s concerns about her child’s relationship with another child in the class. I had to long ago learn that while I may have an agenda for the conference, I have to let the parents have their agenda too.”

* Adapted from interviews with first and second grade teachers.

The teacher interviews on which this research is based come from the School Transition Study, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood, with partial funds from the W. T. Grant Foundation.

Taking Concrete Steps: Activities and Exercises

Activity 1: Teachers Voices: Role Playing

The approach one takes to home-school communication can shape a teacher's relationships with families. Each of the communication approaches above can be used in many ways with room for individual expression. Consider the following three situations. For each situation, put yourself in the teacher's position. Describe the teacher's goal and the audience. Then, using the communication approach framework, choose one or more approaches to take.²

Situation 1	What is the teacher's goal?	How do you think parents may feel about the behavior notebook and the IEP meeting?	If you are this teacher, what approach will you take?
<p>This quote is from a rural New England school that has a predominantly Caucasian population.</p> <p>“We were running a notebook back and forth—a behavior notebook—and I would write each day how the child did in class. We had come up with this together, but it wasn't working and the child was having a lot of behavior issues so we had another meeting with the whole IEP team. The parents came in and they immediately got very upset saying they warned me he would be so much trouble. Usually my interactions with parents are positive, but immediately I was on the defensive.”</p>			

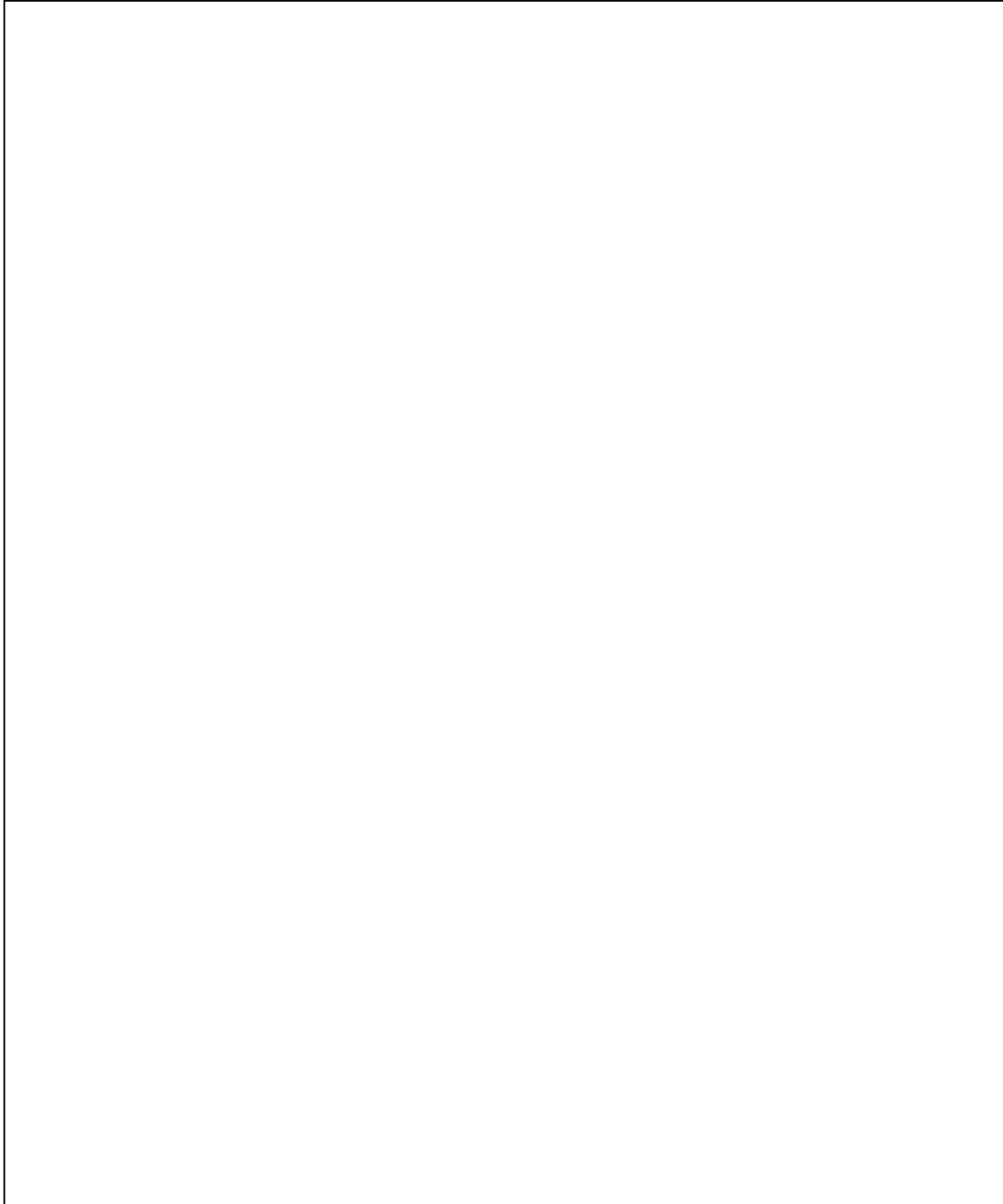
² All of these situations were taken from interviews with first and second grade teachers and document their voices verbatim. The research from which these interviews were taken was supported by the John D. and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood, with partial funds from the W. T. Grant Foundation.

Situation 2	What is the teacher's goal?	How do you think parents may feel about the school system and its teachers?	If you are this teacher, what approach will you take?
<p>This quote is from a teacher in a large city on the West Coast. The majority of parents in the school speak Spanish. This teacher has learned Spanish and considers herself proficient in the language.</p> <p>“I have a sense that his parents would never want to bother me. I don't think they feel comfortable coming to me if they have a problem or question. Their child was sick one day and I walked him out to the car and [the mother] just placed him in the back quickly and said, 'I'm so sorry teacher that I bothered you.' I'd love to open up the conversation more.”</p>			

Situation 3	What is the teacher's goal?	How do you think parents may feel about the school system and its teachers?	If you are this teacher, what approach will you take?
<p>This quote is taken from a teacher in a large industrial city in the Northeast. The school has a predominantly African American student population, but the teachers are predominantly white.</p> <p>“Parents aren’t always open with us about what’s going on in their home life or what’s really occurring. This mother has shared some basic things, but that’s basically it. I’d love to get a better sense of the home life to better understand what’s going on.”</p>			

Activity 2: Learning from Stories

Write a story about a time when you had a very positive communication with a student's parent or family member. Why do you think it worked so well? What was your goal? Who was the audience? What approach did you use?



Source: This activity idea was taken from Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community: Communicating with Parents. This guide is available at: www.headstartinfo.org/cgi-bin/pubcatstore.cfm?CatID=97&do=detail.

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