

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Communicating with Your Child's Teacher

Positive and open communication with your child's school can play a key role in helping your child succeed through his or her school years.

Although this requires some investment of time, ongoing communication can help to head off problems before they become major issues that could require considerably more effort and time to manage. Look upon the time you put in as an insurance policy against problems.

The Essentials

Your child's school is an entire and separate world, complete with its own government—the trustees or private school board, principal and teachers—and its own culture, philosophy and rules.

Before you can effectively deal with this world, it's essential that you get to know as much as possible about it.

In order to work with teachers to ensure your child's succession through school, you'll need to become familiar with:

- **The school layout.** Walk the halls. Visit your child's classrooms. Check out the gym, the library and cafeteria. Walk through the schoolyard. Get a feel for the atmosphere and culture of the world your child will be living in for so much of his or her days.
- **Your child's teachers.** Try to meet them in person to say hello at the beginning of the school year. If this isn't possible, drop off a note. Introduce yourself, offer to volunteer, invite the teacher to call if the need arises and let him or her know the best time to reach you. Use this first conversation or note to briefly describe any issues around your child or any recent or upcoming home events that could affect your child's mood or academic progress.
- **Your child's guidance counselor.** Again, try to meet in person to say hello when school begins, or send the same sort of note that your child's teachers will receive.
- **School rules and philosophy.** Understand the issues that are important to the school. Familiarize yourself with the rules so that you can help your child to follow them.
- **Homework policy.** Find out how much time the school expects your child to put in each night and on weekends.
- **Other parents.** Try to attend the parent-teacher associations (PTA) meetings. If this isn't possible, call and introduce yourself to the parents of your child's key school friends.
- **Trustees or private school board directors.** Get a feel for their background and philosophies. Introduce yourself if the opportunity arises. You never know when you might need their involvement.

Get Involved

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Teachers pay more attention to parents who seem to be interested in the school and its programs. Volunteering in the classroom can be an excellent way to build a relationship with your child's teachers and give you a real understanding of the way the classroom functions. Consider:

- Volunteering to help with fundraising efforts.
- Volunteering to drive to and from away games or other school sporting activities and events.
- Attending parent-teacher association meetings.

Throughout the school year, continue to keep your child's teachers informed about any changes in home circumstances that could affect your child's behavior or academic progress.

Make Parent-Teacher Interviews Work for You

These scheduled meetings usually occur every term and are a good way to maintain ongoing contact with your child's teachers. However, most allow only a short period of time for each interview. This can limit their productiveness, unless you go prepared.

- Write down key topics that you want to discuss with each of your child's teachers. Write down any questions you want to ask or points you want to make. Refer to your notes during your meeting.

- Remember that this is not the time to discuss major issues—there is simply not the time for teachers to focus seriously on any one child during the evening. Instead, mention the issue and tell the teacher that you would like to arrange a separate meeting to discuss it.

- Make it clear that your objective is to work with the teacher at all times. Ask what you can do to help your child maintain his or her good standing, or improve behavior or academic progress.

- Be open to teachers' comments and suggestions about your child. Try not to become defensive or critical of the school in your response to negative comments.

Dealing with Conflict

Encourage your child to talk about school and about any issues he or she may be facing. Show your child that you are supportive, but try to remain positive about the school and the teachers.

If there is a problem relating to one specific teacher, arrange to meet with the teacher to discuss how you can work together to resolve the issue. Arrange to meet with your child's guidance counselor if you cannot resolve a problem with a specific teacher, or if several teachers or classes are involved.

If you feel your concern is not being taken seriously by either teachers or the guidance counselor, write a note to the principal. In the note, praise teachers' or counselors' efforts where possible but make it clear that the situation has not been able to be resolved. Request a meeting with the principal. You may find that the note itself will resolve the situation. Parents who get involved tend to be taken notice of.

Whether it's your child's first year of school or if he or she has been in school for years, it's never too late to get involved. As a parent or guardian, you can help your child to succeed by actively participating in his or her education. From meetings to events and open communication with school staff, you can rest assured that there are plenty of ways to get involved. Speak with your child's teacher if you require more information on the participation opportunities available for parents.