

Create great working relationships with parents



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The best way to develop a great working relationship with parents is to anticipate issues and be prepared before the year gets too far underway. Early planning should include getting to know parents, educating and reassuring them about common parental concerns for the year level and providing a structure that outlines how you can best work together to meet their children's needs. This will make it easier for everyone involved to be able to manage their emotions and agree upon a workable solution if problems arise.

Introduce transition programs for students and their parents

You can help create a great working relationship with parents by letting them know what to expect from children, and the school in the coming year. This includes informing parents about behavioural and academic expectations, and potential difficulties faced by children of their age group. This is particularly important to discuss if you teach a class that involves one of the four major transitions a child faces at school. These are:

- Preschool to school
- Junior primary to middle primary
- Middle primary to senior primary
- Senior primary to junior secondary school.

Schools may wish to implement information sessions and transition programs in the latter months of the preceding year as a way to assist teachers, parents and children to cope successfully with the changes involved.

Inform parents about the school's expectations

Getting to know your students' parents and communicating a structure around how you teach and work with their child is important from an early intervention viewpoint. Principals and teachers can also use this time to 'spell out' to parents the school's expectations - when teachers are available and not available to meet with parents, the importance of checking with teachers or clarifying information before believing everything their child might tell them, and some of the key social competency and organisational issues that can confront children at each stage of schooling.

A little bit of extra time and effort before or at the start of the year or new semester can reduce hassles and stress throughout the year. See the table on page 3 that outlines the typical issues, questions and concerns of parents at each stage of schooling.

Anticipate issues and plan as a department

Identify potential issues and concerns. This will enable you to have a planned approach with key strategies ready should the need arise. Utilise parents' and other teachers' knowledge about each child and their family situation, and inform yourself about common academic, social competency and organisational issues that occur among children at your year level.

It can be helpful to brainstorm, research and plan strategies and solutions for potential issues with your team or department. Develop a department or school-wide approach to what you say to parents about key issues, so parents receive consistent messages throughout the school.

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Suggested strategies for planning the year

- **Meet with at least one parent** or carer in the first few weeks of term, either privately or at a school get-together. If it is not possible to meet face-to-face, try to speak to a parent by telephone. During these meetings, you could ask these types of questions:
 - What are your child's strengths?
 - Are there any issues, which may impact on your child's learning and wellbeing?
 - Are there any ongoing school issues or concerns about your child, which worry you?
 - What are some of the things that work best for your child?
 - Does your child have special interests?

During this time, enquire about the parent's preferred method of communication such as face-to-face meetings, telephone, email and preferred contact times. Record this information for each child and use it as needed.

- **Be clear about your availability.** Tell parents about your preferred methods and most appropriate times for communication. Display this information in a prominent place outside your classroom and send it home to all parents in a letter early in the term. Explain to parents why you are unable to meet with them in the 10 minutes before the school bell unless the meeting is pre-arranged or urgent. This time is important in establishing a quiet, calm and safe start to the day and allows students to interact with their teacher if required before the school day begins.
- **Educate the parent community about anticipated issues.** Inform parents about issues that frequently arise at this year level. Topics may include social competency, friendship conflict, playing with younger or older students, typical student misunderstandings, uneven academic progress, and lost or misplaced belongings. It is important to convey that all students are still learning about being learners and about getting on with others. Remind parents regularly about these issues through various communication channels such as parent meetings, classroom notice boards, newsletters or the school's website.
- **Educate the parent community about developmental expectations.** For example, in middle primary grades students are expected to use their own pencil case, start to learn about using a diary or timetable and take greater responsibility for homework and belongings. Once again remind them that all children are learning, and that the timing and pace will vary between children.
- **Document or record communications with parents in a designated exercise book or electronic document.** Allocate two pages for each child to record information about meetings, including the time and date, what parents have said, actions taken and planned actions. These notes can remind you about the content of previous discussions with the parents and can be used in future meetings as evidence of what has occurred. It is important that these notes remain confidential in a locked filing cabinet or password-protected computer and do not contain defamatory language. Parents will have a clear memory of what they believe occurred during interactions or meetings about their child. Since you are dealing with many children, the log will support your memory.
- **Know where parents can go to for help.** Developing a parenting resource kit of brochures or quality websites that parents can access for common issues can be valuable. If necessary, refer parents to the principal, school psychologist or special needs coordinator for further assistance.

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Table: Typical issues, questions and concerns of parents

School level	Issue/question/concern
Beginner's grade (Foundation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I 'let go' now that my child has started school? I don't know how to let go. • Shouldn't my child be taking more readers home? • What is the right amount of food for my child to take to school? • My child does not get enough time to eat lunch. Teachers need to give more time. • I worry about my child's ability to eat lunch independently at school. • My child has no friends.
Junior Primary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is my child reading at the right level? I think my child's level is too low. • My child's writing, particularly spelling and handwriting, is not up to standard. • My child's work is too easy. Children need to be extended. • My child keeps losing belongings at school. • Is my child's health okay? My child has missed some school and visited sickbay. • Teachers need to help my child with friendships.
Middle Primary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I help my child move from the junior school to the middle school? • I'm worried about my child's friendships. My daughter is playing with older kids, being bullied, having fights and there is talk of 'bitchiness'. • I believe everything my child says about school and I am worried about friendships. • My child is not as capable as other kids. • Homework is 'doing my head in'. Finding time is a major problem. • My child should learn things more quickly. • My child is disorganised and needs to use a diary and manage books better.
Senior primary and junior secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My child is having friendship issues. Is my child fitting in? • There are girlfriend/boyfriend issues. • My child got 'bullied'. I see disagreements as bullying. • There is cyber-bullying at this school. • Is my child 'up to scratch' academically? • How will my child cope next year? • My child is getting too much/not enough homework. • My child keeps losing their diary or won't fill it in.

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