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GENERATING ALLIANCES, NOT LAWSUITS

“I had parents understand that if we both were to help their children that they, the parents, needed to be on the same side as the teacher—to work together in educating and disciplining.”

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The great majority of educators choose teaching because they enjoy working with children and may even feel more at ease with children and adolescents than with their parents (Hancock, 1998). Trained in ideology, pedagogy, methodology, and the most innovative approaches to teaching youth, educators may be surprised at their comparative lack of skills in dealing with parents. Though accustomed to students' problems and teaching dilemmas, teachers may be baffled by obstacles presented by their students' parents. Despite their good intentions, teachers may find their actions questioned, challenged, or even sabotaged by difficult parents.

At the same time, home-school collaboration is increasingly emphasized. For example, the 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) include specific mandates related to increased parent and family involvement. In addition, the school-to-adult life transition initiative stresses collaboration between secondary schools, the family, and the community (Wehman, 1990). Despite already demanding work responsibilities, teachers are being challenged to find ways to boost parent involvement. Having parents in the classroom may seem like more work than it is worth, particularly when teachers feel their attention must be given to the parents rather than the students. Indeed, "it needs to be recognized that parental involvement is actually a very demanding form of curriculum development for a class teacher" (Hancock, 1998, p. 410). Other means of collaborating with parents may be unfamiliar or unclear.

GAINING COOPERATION

Life (and teaching) would be much easier if you taught in a vacuum. But the fact is parents, particularly parents of students with special needs, significantly impact the outcomes of your teaching. You may instruct your students using a certain approach to learning. A parent may disagree and negate your efforts. For example, toward the end of the school year, one mother of a sixth grader with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) felt her son's teacher had been unfair toward her child. As a result, she told her son that he did not need to do any more homework for the remainder of the year, since he had done enough to get a good grade, and he happily complied. Conversely, joint efforts with a parent may lead to a child persevering rather than giving up. The bottom line is we could all use a little help. Wouldn't it be reassuring to know that you have more than 30 teaching partners for your students instead of feeling solely responsible for educating 30 children? Gaining cooperation, particularly from parents who are the most difficult, has direct benefits for your students—and for you.

Obstacles to cooperation can be found on both sides of home-school relationships. Parents may display hostility and mistrust, which immediately impede collaboration. Defensiveness and denial can also make cooperation

difficult. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the teacher, with services for their child, or with the school overall can taint interactions with educators. Noninvolvement, whether actual or perceived, is also a barrier. At the same time, teachers may be resistant to working with parents due to time pressures, may be insensitive to parents' concerns, and may unwittingly alienate parents.

DEVELOPING ALLIANCES

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003) defines *alliance* as "an association to further the common interests of the members." A parent-teacher alliance can be considered as a productive working relationship, deliberately formed to achieve shared goals. The type of alliance you develop with your students' parents depends upon your teaching style and personality. Some educators welcome volunteers in the classroom on a daily basis. For others this might feel disruptive or stressful. Some may prefer to use parents more as consultants for their individual children, seeking guidance for best approaches to their children's struggles. Still others would like parents to be primarily *swing-shifters*, reinforcing concepts learned in school when the children are home through the use of supplemental materials and by using similar teaching approaches.

Whether you have a strong preference for one of the above approaches or would like to engage in a balance of all three, you will need to develop good relations with your parents. This means treating them as equal partners in educating your students. Many parents take offense at being treated like aides who exist to photocopy and collate. Clearly, the classroom is your domain, and you do not need to pretend that it is not. Be up front and honest with parents early in the school year. You might explain your teaching style and then state, "I've found what works best for my students is to have parents be actively involved in the classroom on a daily basis (or reinforce concepts at home or whatever your preference is)." Being forthright in this manner enables parents to know what you expect of them. Their response also provides you with crucial information on whether they will easily follow your lead or have other plans.



Regardless of the type of partnership you form, the most effective parent-teacher alliances are characterized by the following:

- ◆ Mutual respect
- ◆ A clear understanding of one's own role
- ◆ A clear understanding of the other's role
- ◆ Opportunity for feedback
- ◆ Openness to change or adjustment as needed
- ◆ Similar expectations
- ◆ Defined common goals

Giving attention to each of these areas early in your relationship sets the stage for productivity throughout the school year. By the same token, ignoring or overlooking any of these areas will likely cause problems and hinder your effectiveness.

Consider the following scenario. In the hectic rush of the beginning of school, Abigail, a fourth-grade teacher, forgets to send out a welcome letter to parents (a sample letter can be found in Resource A). She meets a few parents at Back-to-School Night and sees a couple more as they drop off their children, but has little contact with the majority of her students' parents. Three months into the year, an incident occurs in which one child hurts a peer. Rumors quickly spread, and soon she is barraged with calls from worried parents seeking reassurance and from others condemning her for failing to properly supervise her students. Because this is the first contact Abigail has had with many parents, there is little history to contradict the rumors. Had she proactively contacted parents in the beginning of the school year and made periodic contact with them, at least some of the parents would have known that Abigail is an experienced teacher, very conscientious and skilled in classroom management. In all likelihood, this information and respect would have quickly squelched the damaging rumors.

A less drastic situation also illustrates the need to define the relationship early on. Mark, a seventh-grade math teacher, is accustomed to having parents volunteer in the classroom but lets them determine what they would like to do. Some immediately inform him of their preferences, while others are less assertive and wait in the wings. Seeking to put one hesitant parent at ease, he suggests that she help collate some worksheets. The parent never returns, offended that "all I did was staple." Had Mark explained his approach to parent volunteering to the parent, this unfortunate interaction would likely not have occurred.

Perhaps you enjoy mutual respect with your students' parents and your relationship has been defined and agreed upon at the outset, yet there is no established method for communicating feedback. Should a conflict arise (more likely than not), this oversight could endanger what you have worked hard to establish. Many people, whether teachers or parents, are uncomfortable with conflict and confrontation. Failing to address underlying conflict, or addressing it in such a way as to escalate it, may cause irreparable damage to the relationship. For example, Catherine, a special educator, enjoyed the respect and classroom involvement of many of her students' parents. One parent, who volunteered on a weekly basis, became bored of her role as a one-on-one reader but was not sure how to approach Catherine, since they had agreed to her job description months ago. As a result, she was increasingly dissatisfied with volunteering, which Catherine noticed as well. Neither was comfortable with openly discussing her concerns. Although nothing disastrous occurred, both teacher and parent missed out on a potentially more rewarding experience.

Ideally, both teacher and parent should feel comfortable talking directly to each other on an informal basis. Some other avenues for giving and receiving feedback can include a volunteer communication notebook, where parents can leave you comments on their experiences during the day (noting whether they would like to talk with you further), and scheduled feedback times. This does not have to be overly demanding of your time, but can be as simple as making sure to ask parents how they are feeling after a specific number of volunteering days or a certain amount of time has elapsed.



Similar expectations of what can be accomplished and a well-defined common goal are equally important. Consider selecting targets from the student's Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and using the mastery criteria defined on the plan. Having quantifiable ways to monitor progress helps both you and the parent to see the results of your efforts. More in-depth discussion of effective partnerships with parents will be covered in greater depth in Chapter 8, "Cultivating Collaborative Relationships."

BEING EMPATHIC

It is relatively easy to be empathic when a misbehaving child looks at you with puppy dog eyes, regardless of the infraction. It is much more difficult, however, to be understanding and compassionate when an adult twice your size threatens to sue you. Yet in both situations, empathy is what leads to a restored relationship. "One might conceive, then, of empathy as a first step to providing aid—a step that turns an individual into a potential helper" (Neuweg et al., 1997, p. 513).

Cognitively, empathy involves taking the perspective of another person, inferring his or her thoughts and feelings (Ickes, 1997). Empathy on an affective level involves experiencing emotions such as sympathy and compassion (Batson & Shaw, 1991). When working with parents, both aspects are desirable. When a parent feels understood, he or she becomes more open to working with you. It is possible to understand another's motives and rationale, but feel absolutely no warmth toward them. Yet it is often the emotional component that reigns (Kerem, Fishman, & Josselson, 2001). Parents may conclude that you do not fully comprehend their view, but desire to help. As a result, they are willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and to work together. In this sense, empathy underlies cooperation.

How can you empathize with parents who complain, badger, make excuses, and generally make your life difficult? The vast majority of parents

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love their children and are doing the best they can to raise them well. "It's not as if they purposely raised a child who can't or won't learn or tried to bring up a child to break all the rules in the book" (McEwan, 1998, p. 43). Certainly teaching students with special needs is challenging. Imagine parenting a child with special needs, trying your best to do what is right for your child. Yet whenever something goes wrong with your child (even when the child becomes an adult), someone will blame you—"What's his home life like," "It's because they never discipline him at home," and so forth. Now picture all of the difficult student behaviors you encounter as a teacher—disorganization, aggressive behavior, forgetfulness, and the like—and imagine dealing with them in the context of a family. Instead of a disorganized desk, there is a disastrous bedroom. Instead of aggression toward a peer, there is aggression toward an infant sibling. While some families report that their child's disability minimally affects their family life, many feel the need for parent counseling and training as well as for practical support (Leyser & Dekel, 1991). Parents of children with learning disabilities and children with behavior problems have also reported greater stress and emotional strain (Lardieri, Blacher, & Swanson, 2000). Being a parent is probably the most difficult but important job there is, but most parents do not have a support staff to help them.

COMMUNICATING WELL

The importance of communication in developing and maintaining good relationships with parents cannot be underestimated. For example, one study found that 40 *seconds* of speaking could distinguish between professionals with and without prior malpractice claims (Ambady et al., 2002). The rudiments of good communication will serve you well. "Communication in this sense means the capacity to listen, pay attention, perceive, and respond verbally and nonverbally . . . in such a way as to demonstrate to [the parent] that one has attended, listened and accurately perceived" (Okun, 1992, p. 23). Helpful verbal behaviors include

- ◆ Asking open questions
- ◆ Being an active listener
- ◆ Clarifying thoughts
- ◆ Responding to the primary message
- ◆ Summarizing important points

Nonverbal behaviors, such as maintaining good eye contact, occasional head nodding and smiling, and an open posture, are also important.

Communicating well also requires that you accurately receive the parents' communication. Nonverbal clues tend to be more reliable than verbal ones. A parent may greet you saying, "It's good to see you," but a

tense stance, rigid posture, and fidgeting hands indicate otherwise. You would be wise to note that the parent is stressed and to try to discover why to put him or her at ease. Hearing verbal messages involves attending to the cognitive content (what is said) as well as the affective content (feelings and attitudes) that may be less apparent (Okun, 1992).

Focusing on one major theme at a time is an effective way to address the cognitive content. For example, a parent may approach you saying, "I'm worried about Jessica's reading. She's falling behind; it's making her frustrated and her friends are teasing her." Choose one area—Jessica's specific reading skills, lack of progress, emotional well-being, or her peer relationships—and discuss it in depth. However, responding only to the words expressed may result in missing an equally important hidden message. This does not mean that you should play the role of a therapist, attempting to get the parent to explore his or her feelings, but that you should be aware of the emotions behind the thoughts and respond accordingly.

Consider the following parent statement: "I don't know why it is so hard to get someone to do something around here. All I'm asking is that someone tell me what's going on with getting accommodations for my child's testing." You could respond in several ways. Focusing only on the verbal message, you could reply, "Ask the special education director, she's in charge." Although the statement is accurate and points the parent in the right direction, it is likely to increase the parent's anger because it ignores the affective element. Responding only to the parent's emotions by saying, "You seem angry, do you want to talk?" is also not appropriate, because it overlooks the parent's legitimate request. Giving weight to both aspects produces a response that will make the parent feel understood and helped. You could say something like, "I know it's been frustrating to not have an answer yet. Come with me; let's see if the special education director is in her office." This response acknowledges the parent's feelings, provides support, and guides the parent to the appropriate solution. Of course, the best answer would be to acknowledge the parent's frustration and give the actual information he or she wants, if you are able to.

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COMMUNICATING POORLY

Just as there are things you can do to communicate well, there are communication blunders that will hinder your alliance regardless of your good

Table 1.1 Effective Communication Skills

<i>Verbal Skills</i>	<i>Nonverbal Skills</i>
Asking open-ended questions	Maintaining good eye contact
Being an active listener	Occasional head nodding
Clarifying thoughts	Smiling
Responding to the primary message	Keeping an open posture
Discussing one theme at a time	Observing others' nonverbal cues
Giving attention to affective and cognitive content	
Summarizing important points	

intentions. Ambady et al.'s (2002) study found that surgeons judged to be more dominant were more likely to have been sued, with dominance conveyed by "deep, loud, moderately fast, unaccented and clearly articulated speech" (p. 8). Such tones tend to convey a lack of empathy and understanding for the listener. Other verbal behaviors can also obstruct communication, such as

- ◆ Using jargon
- ◆ Blaming
- ◆ Interrupting
- ◆ Displaying a patronizing attitude

Nonverbal behaviors such as sitting far away, checking the time, or looking away communicate disinterest and a lack of concern for the parent.

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No one intends to communicate poorly, but realistically fatigue, stress, frustration, and anger sometimes get the best of us. In response to the parent's request above, it is conceivable that one might say out of frustration, "Look, I'm doing the best I can.

Your child isn't the only student I have, you know!" These types of statements should be avoided at all costs. They cannot be retracted and may do irreparable damage to the relationship with the parent. If you think the only response you can produce is one of exasperation, use this response instead: "Thanks for your input." Collect yourself and try talking with the parent at a later date.



Table 1.2 Poor Communication Skills	
<i>Verbal Skills</i>	<i>Nonverbal Behaviors</i>
Speaking loudly and rapidly	Sitting far away
Using jargon	Checking the time
Blaming	Looking away
Interrupting	Displaying a closed posture (e.g., crossed arms)
Being patronizing	Working on an unrelated task (e.g., grading papers)
Talking instead of listening	Avoiding others

One of the worst communication offenses is not communicating at all. While you may not actively try to avoid interacting with parents, it is easy to limit your encounters to required parent–teacher conferences. Because your contacts occur only during these formal conferences, your working relationship is restricted. Opening the lines of communication through brief frequent contacts helps build your relationships with parents. A time-effective way to do this would be to ask each student to provide a few self-addressed envelopes at the beginning of the school year. During the year, you can mail a quick note to the parents, informing them of some accomplishment the student made that day or other positive occurrences. Parents will know that you are thinking of them and taking note of the good (not just the bad) for their child.



STAYING OUT OF COURT

What statement raises more dread than “Indoor recess today”? When an angry parent sputters, “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!” In today’s litigious society, it is quite possible that you could be involved in a lawsuit. Teachers have been successfully sued for a host of seemingly innocuous things. “The bad news is that the number of lawsuits are growing, the amount of compensation asked for by plaintiffs is rising, and even the most conscientious of teachers can make a single, momentary mistake which could result in a successful lawsuit against them” (Greene, 1998, p. 3).

Faced with such ominous news, you may feel like the resource room teacher who felt her “hands were tied” and that she needed to protect herself. Her policy with difficult parents was to never meet with them alone,

so as not to “open myself up to lawsuits.” Thankfully, there are many actions you can take to limit your liability, all of which will strengthen your relationships with parents rather than constrain them.

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Lessons can be gleaned from the medical profession, notorious for its malpractice liability. Overall patient dissatisfaction, not just with the outcome of their treatment, has been found to lead to lawsuits. Specifically, physicians who received more complaints from patients

were also more likely to be sued for malpractice (Hickson et al., 2002a). Shorter office visits and patients’ feelings of being rushed or ignored are also associated with malpractice risk (Levinson, Roter, Mullooly, Dull, & Frankel, 1997; Hickson et al., 1994). The common factor in these studies is the patients’ discontent, a concept that transfers easily to parents’ satisfaction with their children’s education. Dissatisfaction with relationships with school professionals, not just with the child’s poor academic achievement, can contribute to the likelihood of litigation or similar legal proceedings (e.g., impartial hearings). Leading medical researchers assert that “Good doctoring requires time to involve patients, ask open-ended questions, identify needs, and respond appropriately” (Hickson et al., 2002b, p. 1586). The same can be applied to teachers and parents.

Beyond those basics, being savvy about risk management also lessens your vulnerability to being sued. These general principles should be evident in your classroom and dealings with parents:



1. *Document everything.* Every conversation you have with a parent, whether it is a formal meeting, a phone call, or a chance encounter, should be documented. Consider making a communication log for your class, such as a three-ring binder with a page for each student. Have columns for the date, time, and format (e.g., phone call) of your conversation as well as for the content. (A sample is provided in Resource B.) Be careful to record the facts of the encounter only. Do not put in writing any of your feelings, hypotheses, or otherwise subjective information. Keep in mind that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 (also known as the Buckley Amendment) gives parents and students the right to inspect and review any official educational records, files, and data directly related to their children (LaMorte, 1996). FERPA excludes “private notes” from the definition of educational records (Jacob & Hartshorne, 1991), so a communication log is not likely to be inspected by parents. However, it may be called upon in event of a dispute. It is useful for reminding both the parent and the school what has been discussed and decided.

2. *Focus on the truth.* Educators can be accused of slander and libel, or oral and written communications that wrongfully defame the character of another person. "The burden of proof is on the person who made the libelous or slanderous statements" (Greene, 1998, p. 8). It is important to focus on specific verifiable facts. For example, rather than state that the child is unmotivated, it is better to state that a student failed to complete 80% of homework assignments. By the same token, do not repeat questionable information or otherwise engage in gossip. In all likelihood, such rumors will escalate and find their way to their subject.



3. *Go to the source.* Along the same lines as focusing on the truth, it is important to speak directly to important parties whenever possible. Do not rely on another teacher or administrator to carry your message for you, and do not accept crucial information from a third party. For example, assuming that a parent is in agreement with the team's recommendations because a colleague told you so may lead to trouble. If it directly impacts you, confirm it with the parent.



4. *Get help.* Do not attempt to address any conflicts with parents by yourself. Ideally, you would already be comfortable interacting as part of a team based on your experiences with student study teams or IEP/ITP (individual transition plan) teams. As early as possible, involve another professional who can help, such as the special education director. Ask your colleagues for corroborating information (being careful not to engage in slanderous discussions, of course). Inform your principal or administrator of conflicts that you believe may escalate. In addition, "speak to those individuals who can help your case or who have a clear understanding of the situation and how it occurred" (Greene, 1998, p. 15).



5. *Be professional at all times.* Resist the temptation to let down your guard and to speak off the record with parents. This includes complaining about other staff members or work conditions. Things said in these types of situations have the potential to be used against you. For example, the comment, "The new principal is a little disorganized," may be true and may account for some of the problems you are experiencing, but it does not build the parent's confidence in the school or, for that matter, in you. Seemingly innocuous but unprofessional comments only raise the possibility in parents' minds that you are unprofessional in other ways and at other times. It is also very difficult to regain your professional demeanor if the parent has already interacted with you in more informal ways.



6. *Build relationships conscientiously.* Ultimately, people who like you do not sue you. Build relationships with as many parents (and staff) as possible. Do not discount some relationships as unimportant. You never know whose support you will need or who will provide opposition in the future.



These general principles of risk management can be applied to all areas of teaching. Books such as Dunklee and Shoop's *The Principal's Quick-Reference Guide to School Law* can provide teachers with more detailed information on specific legal matters.

KEEPING YOUR FOCUS

With all of this discussion on litigation and conflicts with parents, it is easy to forget why home-school collaboration is important. Although there are benefits for both parents and teachers, ultimately, it is for the kids.

When parents and teachers form home-school partnerships, children are more likely to see a unified front. . . . Children are free to ask their parents for guidance or help without worrying whether Mom or Dad agrees or disagrees with how the teacher teaches. . . . When school and family unite in a partnership for children, their overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1995) foster a positive attitude . . . that helps children learn . . . at school. (Ford, Follmer, & Litz, 1998, p. 312)

In addition to improved attitudes, research has found that parent involvement is associated with students' greater academic achievement, such as in reading (Hewison, 1988), as well as better homework habits (Epstein, 1985, 2000). Furthermore, parent involvement may mitigate the effects of poverty and prevent dropping out of school (Epstein, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1996).

Chances are you do not teach for money, fame, prestige, or power. You spend your time and energy preparing, talking, explaining, creating, and instructing, all in the hopes of helping children grow and flourish. Parents do too. Educators and parents hope for and are working toward the same goal.

REFLECTING ON YOUR TEACHING

For many teachers, actively building alliances with parents is new territory. Use the following questions and activities to reflect on your own teaching and guide you in working collaboratively with challenging parents of students with special needs.

1. What role do you expect parents to play in their children's education? Does this differ for parents of students with special needs?
2. How do you feel about having parents observe or volunteer in your classroom?

3. How do you normally treat parents? As consultants? As helpers? As swing-shifters?
4. What are your preferred ways of communicating with parents? Do parents know how to use these ways to reach you?
5. When was the last time a parent gave you feedback about your teaching?
6. Identify one tangible step to improve your communication with or relationships with parents of students with special needs.

SUMMARY

Working with parents is not only prudent, it is part and parcel of working with students with special needs. The type of alliance, or productive working relationship, you form with parents depends largely on your teaching style and preferences. All successful relationships, however, are characterized by mutual respect, a clear understanding of roles, an opportunity for feedback, openness to change or adjustment, similar expectations, and a defined common goal. Being empathic and communicating well are also important. Among the obstacles to strong alliances put forth by parents are hostility, mistrust, denial, and a lack of involvement. Teachers may also alienate parents due to time pressures and insensitivity. Adherence to risk management principles reduces the likelihood that litigation will result from strained relationships with parents. These include maintaining documentation, focusing on the truth and the source of information, seeking help, being professional, and actively building relationships.