

Would you Like To WOW Parents All Year Long?

You won't likely WOW parents by sharing the classroom rules and procedures. You will, however, WOW them by sharing valuable information about their child. How do you do this effectively if you have to discuss lack of progress or less than acceptable behavior? What if I told you there is a research-based strategy for establishing a positive relationship between parents and teachers? *Way to Go* includes the theory, the research, components needed for you to implement the strategy, comments from experienced teachers who have implemented the strategy, and even the survey for you to replicate to determine your own results.

The success of the *Way to Go* strategy hinges on two points. The first point being that collaborative communication between parents and teachers will produce positive outcomes such as accurate information, rapport, and confidence in the mutual support of each other. While, on the other hand, one sided communication will most likely yield to accusation, assumptions and even gossip to gain support against the other party, and lack of mutual support (Schumacher, 2007). The other point necessary for the successfulness of the strategy is the depth of implementation on the parts of the school and individual teachers. Successfulness of the *Way to Go* strategy will depend on the school's taking responsibility for initiating the communication and that it must be positive. Parents already expect that the school will contact them when their child is misbehaving or falling behind. In fact, the expectation is so strong that the very appearance of the teacher's name on their caller ID is grounds for many parents to experience an elevation in their heart rate (DeBruyn, 1999.)

There are four distinct parts to the *Way To Go* strategy. Because I am an educator by profession it helps me to remember them with the use of the acronym, “TELL:”

- T Tell the Teacher More Day
- E Engage in the best avenue of communication for each family
- L Listen without defense to the parent
- L Lead as the professional.

“*Tell the Teacher More Day*” is the single most effective piece of the strategy that leads to positive communication throughout the remainder of the school year. The day needs to take place before school starts, by individual fifteen minute appointments with the teacher. To help the teacher stay on time and to collect consistent data on each student, parents asked to complete a form prior to their appointment with the teacher and then after using it as a springboard for conversation, surrender it to the teacher. The most important information to gather is the way in which the parents want to communicate. Teachers were instructed how to direct this meeting process and should parents digress the teacher would bring the parents back to the topic of the child. When teachers were asked about their experiences with “Tell the Teacher More Day,” they responded,

“Loved it! It really gave me a chance to attend to the needs of the student with the parent one to one. We had a great foundation before the school year even began.”

“At first I was skeptical about how effective this strategy would be. I wasn't sure how honest parents would be about their child.”

Engaging in the best avenue of communication for each family can be overwhelming. But if the teacher clearly knows the expectations of how and what the parent wants communicated, then information regarding anything besides forward progress and good behavior becomes less of a stressor. I agree whole-heartedly with *Master Teacher*, DeBruyn, when he writes that "...too much goes on in a good classroom these days for it to be regarded as an isolation ward...we should develop a partnership (with the parents) out of desire to do so not because it's the law. After all, the children in our classrooms are more than just our students- they are their parents' children. Their education needs to be a shared responsibility. We don't have the right to exclude parents – when things are going well or when they're going badly." What did the teachers have to say regarding this portion of the strategy?

"Having already established a relationship with the parents made it much easier. I have a student with a severe behavior disorder. When a problem arose I felt very comfortable talking to the parents."

"Personal emails about family issues and social issues were just easier to follow up on."

"It was clear that many parents wanted to be kept in the loop about any and all problems their child might be having. This made it easier to ask for a short conference early in the year to nip any potential problem in the bud."

The third point, *Listening to the parent without defense*, can be perhaps the most difficult to learn. "Lumps in the throat" still occur for many of us who receive a message that says a parent wants to speak with us immediately. We may feel a need to become defensive even if we don't know the reason the parent needs to talk. There is no reason to fear a conference with a parent but there might be a reason to feel guilty – if the student's academic performance or behavior was something that you should have told his parents

about before they contacted you! It's normal to feel anxious, because we care, but we can control our defensiveness toward a parent. Our attitude toward a parent should be one of warmth. Avoid taking a stance. We need to be empathetic, placing our opinions aside. When we do, parents will believe we are easy to talk with and will communicate more easily and freely with us. DeBruyn concludes "...a cold, hasty or matter of fact attitude will not secure the trust and confidence of any human being. Sometimes we think these attitudes prove our objectivity and professionalism. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The image you project as a teacher and as a human being reflects upon you, your teaching and your entire school." What did teachers say about this point?"

"One parent whom I met at the beginning of the year still seemed to have her guard up. As the year progressed, we've been able to build a strong relationship. At this point we email or talk daily as needed."

"I've had more communication with all my families this year. I feel those students with learning issues, who have low benchmark scores, or needed more than just a classroom approach have been better served this year by the number of conferences held with parents."

"Parents realize that I have the child's best interest in mind."

The last point in implementing the strategy, *Leading as the professional*, involves taking ownership for the positive communication. If schools were hospitals, then teachers would be the doctors- diagnosing, treating, adjusting treatment, monitoring progress, etc.

Statistics from our research indicate that parents are more satisfied with the school as a whole if the lines of communication are open and effective. The benefit for the teacher is simple: happy parents are far easier to work with! So, if issues arise, wouldn't it be

beneficial to communicate with the parents sooner rather than later? Parents deserve regular updates concerning their child's academic and behavioral status. By providing the regular updates, the teacher continues the rapport-building process well into the school year, having begun it on a positive note with "Tell the Teacher More Day."

Granted, achieving a positive communication relationship takes a concerted effort from both teachers and parents. We do our best to listen and respond with clarity in a positive tone to our parents. We are the professionals. We have a service to deliver and we know parents have a choice. But the best reason to invest in positive communication is because we have children in our midst. If they are to become the leaders of tomorrow- a multi-faceted, global, technological world- then they will need to have been mentored in these very skills we are practicing with their parents- responsive listening, nonverbal communication, and simple eye contact. To my knowledge, these can't be taught through the use of technology or by socializing online. Parents will always be their child's most impactful influence, and as long as students are still learning in classrooms, teachers are the second most important. We finally found a way to partner successfully with parents, to discover their expectations, and to WOW them- by talking with them about their children! We found the *Way to Go!*

Way to Go! A research-based strategy for establishing a positive relationship between parents and teachers is now available through AuthorHouse www.authorhouse.com
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Schumacher, R. (2007). *Bridging the Communication Gap: The Value of Intentional Positive Teacher- Initiated Communication*. (Available from the Lutheran Educational Journal Volume 142, No. 2.. 104-125.)

DeBruyn, R. (1999). *Understanding and Relating to Parents ...Professionally*. The MASTER Teacher, Inc., Manhattan, Kansas.

