

Today's Parent

How can parents and grandparents help get the school year off to a positive start? With pure joy I share answers to this question from a very personal perspective. Two days ago my mother passed away after several years of suffering. Up until her arthritis prevented her from doing so, she and my father attended ball games and school programs involving their great grandchildren. When my daughters, her grandchildren, were in elementary school, she volunteered every day in the school cafeteria as the cashier. It was a pleasure for her to be there and she became an active participant in the school environment. She saw her granddaughters daily along with two hundred other children whose names with which she became familiar as they went through the cafeteria line. Was she directly involved with what was happening in her granddaughters' classrooms? No, not really. But she was significant in helping to create a school climate of caring and consistency. She was an active participant in the school lives of her grandchildren.

Grandparents have a distinct advantage in that from life experience - they can parent from a generation away, knowing the environment in which the child is surrounded is often as important as the direct experience (like between the teacher and child in the classroom). Process that above statement with me for a moment. Why do grandchildren simply enjoy just being with and around their grandparents? Grandparents often exude love and acceptance just by being nearby, or by providing a caring environment where the grandchildren feel loved and special. How about the fresh supply of homemade cookies or the favorite ice cream in the freezer? Grandparents have a stake in the experience without always being directly involved.

The same is true for parents. Whatever time is available to become involved, do so. Whether it's a long term commitment or working with a one time project, getting involved is the point. Long term research is consistent in that student success is directly related to parent involvement at school. In fact, many work service programs requiring that parents volunteer a specific number of hours, are founded on this research. Often times when parents become involved at school they became sources of support for the personnel and the programs within because they see first hand the dedication of the faculty and the staff and better understand the environment in which their children are immersed. Making a difference for your child is what matters. By getting more involved, parents and grandparents often become "raving fans" of their children's schools!

The beginning of the school year also brings with it an extraordinary opportunity to establish a positive year long relationship with your child's teacher. *Master Teacher*, Robert DeBruyn, writes "Once we open the school and classroom doors...we need to move into the larger community that involves parents...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 parents) out of desire ...not because it's the law. After all, the children in our classes are more than just our students- they are their parents' children. And the education of these children is a *shared* responsibility."

For the most successful parent-teacher relationship, it's essential that the parents (or grandparents) meet the teacher before school starts (or soon after). This isn't an open house affair, but rather a face to face fifteen minute conversation sharing what makes your child tick- family dynamics, motivation, stressors, how and what kinds of information you want the teacher to share and how often, and the most important piece of information - the way in which you want to communicate. If the school or the teacher doesn't offer a strategy to meet, ask for an appointment. When you share your expectations honestly and respectfully and the teacher shares the reality of what can be accomplished, you've established common ground. When the teacher feels the need to share not so nice news, like a poor behavior choice or a lack of academic progress, she already knows how to share it. Knowing this information takes the fear out of sharing information with parents for the teacher. Being kept in the loop adds value to the parent's partnership in the education of their child. To be successful, communication must be collaborative.

Get over to your child's school and get involved. Meet the teacher. You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain for the sake of what really matters – your child's educational success!