



# Did You Know...?

# # 25

## Communicating with Your Child's School

You want your child to be successful in school. Working as a partner with teachers and the school administration is a good way to make sure that our children have the support and learning opportunities to prepare them for the future. One of the biggest barriers to successful partnerships is **communication**—especially when it comes to concerns or problems that involve our children. We've gathered some tips that may help you when you are communicating with your child's school.

**Getting Started.** *First, understand that your role as a parent is unique. No one knows and loves your child the way that you do. You are the expert on your child. And, while you may not have all the answers, you want your child to be successful in school and in life. Your passion, as a parent, can help you communicate brilliantly, and sometimes, it can overtake you.*

**Step 1.** *Keep your focus positive.*

Keep thoughts of past (or present) problems at school and other negatives from creeping into your mind. Focus positively on your goals and the view that the school wants to do their best for your child. If you expect to have difficulty when meeting with school personnel, your mind and body will be primed for battle. Take a deep breath. Don't let your frustration or anger get in the way of your efforts to share your ideas or concerns for your child's success.



**Step 2.** *Prioritize and plan.* What's the most important thing that needs to be accomplished for your child? Make a list of the issues, questions, and possible solutions. Rank them. Decide if there are any you can pass on and which one(s) must be addressed. Plan how you are willing to give and take in order to achieve the higher goal. Map out what you need to say and practice, if that helps.

**“What's most important for Jordan right now is . . . We need to focus on . . .”**

**Step 3.** *Actively listen to understand the other person's perspective.* If you don't understand what someone is saying, tell him or her. Be direct: “I just don't understand what you are saying. Can you explain it in a different way or give me some examples?” “Is there something you can show me, in writing, so I can fully understand?” Keep asking and wait for responses until you do fully understand. Resist any temptation to answer your own questions or put words into someone else's mouth.

**Step 4.** *Clarify your statements if you see a puzzled expression on someone's face and ask for clarification in return.* Restate your issue so that you and others are clear in your understanding. Getting a clear picture of what someone is saying may help correct information that is important to solving a problem.

**To be understood:** “I must not be explaining this clearly, what I'm trying to say is . . .”

**So that you understand:** “It sounds like you're saying . . .” “If I understand you correctly, you're saying . . . Is that right?” “Is that written down anywhere so I can read it?”

Make sure that the focus stays on your child and meeting his or her needs. As a parent, you have information about your child that you can use to present alternative solutions that might not occur to those who work for the school system. (*“Sometimes you just can’t see the forest for all the trees.”*)

**“Let’s brainstorm on possibilities and see what we can come up with.” How about . . .?”**

**Step 5. You’re only human.** If someone has been particularly helpful, acknowledge their efforts. Sometimes, especially when frustrations rise, acknowledging what has gone well, and how hard everyone has worked, sweetens the air a bit and makes it possible for everyone to feel better and push towards the finish line! If, by chance, you make a mistake, or cause offense, say you’re sorry. Making an apology says that you’re only human and sends the message that you can be forgiving of others’ mistakes as well. “Please and thank you” also go a long way in keeping conversations civil, and not surprisingly, helps everyone say “yes.”



**In the end, ask for the “yes.”** As you communicate and negotiate, you will uncover areas where you and the school are in agreement. You may agree on the issue that must be addressed, but not be in full agreement on how to address it. This is when it can be especially helpful to restate and discuss options in a problem-solving way. This means presenting and fully analyzing proposed solutions on their own merits. It also means asking some direct, yet polite, questions such as:

*“I’m still puzzled. Why isn’t this an option?” “Felipe needs this. Who has some ideas on how we can make it happen?”*

Additionally, words that recognize the desires and the difficulties for schools to meet every child’s needs, while refocusing on your child, can lead to a greater willingness to put forth extra effort and think more creatively about ways to say “yes” to and for your child: *“I know that there’s a way for us to work this out, together, so that Janey gets the support she needs. How are we going to do this?”*

**Talking the talk.** So, in a nutshell, when talking with staff and administrators at your child’s school, you’re likely to be successful if you can:

- ✓ Keep your cool.
- ✓ Focus on the positives.
- ✓ Be clear about your goals.
- ✓ Listen. Ask questions. Clarify.
- ✓ Keep the focus on meeting your child’s needs.
- ✓ Present options in a collaborative way; for example, say, “we can” instead of “you should.” Say, “yes, and. . .” instead of yes, but. . .”
- ✓ Ask for the “yes.”

Adapted from CADRE (Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education)

For more tips and tools on communication, contact Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone assistance, workshops and publications in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico.

*“Did You Know...?” fact sheets are developed by Parents Reaching Out in collaboration with the New Mexico Public Education Department. This publication was produced in whole or in part with funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Parental Information and Resource Center program, under Grant # 84.310 - U310A060090. The content herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Education, any other agency of the U.S. government, or any other source.*