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PARTNERING WITH PARENTS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL Math

A GUIDE FOR
TEACHERS AND
LEADERS



CORWIN Mathematics

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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Partnering with Parents in Elementary School Math* by Hilary Kreisberg and Matthew L. Beyranevand.

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TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATION AND WHEN TO USE THEM

When we talk about *how* to communicate, it is necessary to recognize that communication is a two-way street. Simply informing parents with one-sided communication is not enough to move the pendulum. We must ensure that parents have an opportunity to respond to our information so we know they read and understood it and what we must do next to further the learning.

Years ago, teachers and school leaders had few ways of connecting with families other than through in-person conferences, phone calls home, or hard copy assignments and letters shipped via students' backpacks. Today, we are blessed to find ourselves loaded with options, both traditional and technologically enhanced. Now there are many different ways school leaders and teachers communicate with parents, whether via traditional methods (e.g., phone calls or hard copy correspondence) or digital methods (e.g., emails, texts, applications, or websites). No matter which tools you use to communicate, it is pivotal to recognize when it is best to use which tool and to ensure there is a two-way system built so parents can respond to the information provided.

Traditional Communication

There are many ways to communicate with families without making use of technology, or what we call "traditional communication." These types of communication are phone calls and hard copy correspondence that tends to go home through a student's backpack.

Phone Calls

The old "phone call home" goes a long way, especially in today's society where socializing often occurs through a written or digital platform. Phone calls are a quick and easy way to ensure two-way communication, and they are a great tool for building and maintaining relationships with parents.

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TIP!

Many different family structures exist, and it is essential that leaders, teachers, and other educators respect the various family make-ups. Be sure that all mathematics communication includes all individuals who have custody of a child (e.g., students who live in more than one home).

In one study, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) found that “improved teacher–student relationships are facilitated by frequent, proactive calls made by teachers rather than reactive calls that focus on problems in the classroom” (p. 199). The authors note that having schoolwide consistency in place, such as providing teachers with a minimum expectation about call frequency and call content, would help ensure that phone calls home actually take place. If you teach in a school without schoolwide structures in place to support this, consider creating a schedule of frequency so that each parent receives a certain number of phone calls home (in particular about mathematics) per year.

We suggest using a phone call to open the lines of communication and share positive news about the child’s math learning. Given that many adults fear mathematics, hearing something positive may help put them at ease. For teachers, consider calling parents between the second to fourth week of school to introduce yourself and share some positive information about the child’s math learning. Using strengths-based language will model for the parent high expectations and how to praise effort and process. Look at Figure 4.7 to see some examples of how you can use general mathematical habits and behaviors (like those in the Standards for Mathematical Practice or Process Standards; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) that we hope to see students exhibit to guide your conversations.

Be sure to document all phone calls home in a log—even positive phone calls. We suggest keeping a log that shows the date of the call, time, with whom, purpose of call, and brief comments about the exchange. Here is an example of documentation of one phone call. The next phone call would be listed directly under the first entry.

Date	Time	Spoke To	Purpose of Call	Comments
9/10/2019	3:30–3:43 p.m.	Nadia Valencia, mother of Ana	Introductory call home; I called her.	She didn’t know about the classroom website, so I let her know how to access it. I also told her how Ana has been brave during math class by explaining her thinking and asked her to share how proud she is with Ana about that.

Figure 4.7 – Example of Mathematics Phone Calls Home

Example Mathematical Habits	Examples of What You Could Say
Persevering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ “I was really impressed today when [Name of Student] took their time through a really challenging task that on other days they might have given up on. Will you let them know you are proud of them for persevering through a challenging task?” ♦ “I was so proud that I had to call and share with you this moment of success for [Name of Student] during math class. We were working on a pretty challenging word problem and initially, they got frustrated and needed a break, but then came back and said, ‘I’ll try again’ and was able to show their thinking. They showed true perseverance.”
Making Sense of a Task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ “I wanted to tell you about how proud I was today when [Name of Student] made sense of a math task we were working on. They must have listened closely when we taught about how to be a problem-solver because they followed the steps perfectly. First they read the problem. Then, they asked themselves what the story is about and were able to retell the story. They rephrased what the question was asking and ultimately used what information was given to be able to solve in a way that made sense for them.”
Attending to Precision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ “Today was such a successful day for [Name of Student] in math class. As you know, we have been working on our accuracy and today they found an error on their own and were able to figure out how to fix it without any support. They were very proud of themselves, and so I hope you can share at home how proud you are that they were paying attention to their accuracy during math.”
Using Tools Strategically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ “I had to share with you about how [Name of Student] used math to help another student today. We did not have enough rulers for everyone, so they offered to give their ruler to someone else and strategically used a piece of paper as a straightedge. If you want to praise them at home, I suggest sharing that you are glad they acted kindly and that they were able to use math to solve a real-life problem!”
Constructing Mathematical Argument and Critiquing Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ “I am calling to tell you about how [Name of Student] has done an incredible job this week explaining their thinking and helping others to understand how they solve problems. I think it would help them communicate with others more if you also share with them that you are proud that they are justifying their thinking.” ♦ “I wanted to let you know that [Name of Student] did an incredible job today disagreeing with someone in a respectful way and helping the class to see a different perspective. It was brave! Do you mind reinforcing at home that you are proud that they were able to help others see a different way of thinking in a kind manner?”

Example Mathematical Habits	Examples of What You Could Say
Self-Identifying as a Mathematical Thinker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ “I wanted to tell you that over the course of the past few weeks, [Name of Student] has started to really own their place as a mathematician in our classroom. In the beginning of the year, they were shy to share their thinking in front of others, but lately they have been saying things like, ‘I am not sure if I am correct, but I know mathematicians make lots of mistakes before they get to the right answer.’” ♦ “I just wanted to let you know how impressed I am that [Name of Student] took the work we are doing in math class and during art class today noticed patterns and helped others see that art includes math. I wonder if you could also praise them for thinking like a mathematician?”

TIP!

Parents do not need to know the language of the Standards for Mathematical Practice or any other process standards. Instead, they should have an understanding of general habits of mathematical thinkers. This might mean changing the writing style of the practices or processes from eduspeak to parentspeak.

Phone calls are a great way to build personal relationships with parents and to touch base about timely information that is better said orally than through writing.