

## CHAPTER 2

# PROACTIVE WAYS TO GET AND KEEP PARENTS ON YOUR SIDE

*There is no substitute for having a detailed plan as you head into any high-stakes, stressful, and complex endeavor, whether it is the first 3 weeks of a school year [or a meeting with a dysfunctional parent].*

—Elaine K. McEwan (2006, p. 3)

**T**he most effective way to deal with all parents is proactively. Don't wait for the storm clouds to gather. Get out ahead of parent problems by implementing some of the more than two dozen tips found just ahead. There are too many to implement all at once. But, if you choose one or two of the tips and consistently follow through with

them from the beginning of the school year to the end, your hard work will pay off in positive and productive parent relationships.

### **1. Do all you can to establish a cooperative relationship with parents.**

Students are more successful in school when you work cooperatively with their parents.

Parents will be more supportive and willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, even in stress-filled and emotional encounters, when you have established a history of working together from your very first encounter with them. Contributing educator Tresa Watson recommends,

When dealing with families that you suspect might be a bit dysfunctional, always reach out from the perspective of seeking their support, affirming that they are the experts and advocates for their children, even when it sometimes doesn't seem they are. Parents will be more supportive and willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, even in stress-filled and emotional encounters, when you have established a history of working together from your very first encounter with them.

### **2. Cultivate administrative support.**

If you are concerned that a certain parent may pose a problem to you, talk to your administrator as soon as possible to make sure you are clear on the relevant school/district policy. You and your principal should present a united front. Potentially difficult parents take their concerns to the principal rather quickly, so make sure that whatever you told the parent will be confirmed by the principal. There is nothing more demoralizing than being undermined by your supervisor. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Jillian D'Angelo)

### **3. Drop a postcard in the mail to your students during the first three weeks of school.**

Before the school year begins, address a postcard to each student. You can buy postcards in packs at teacher supply stores. As the school year begins, look for students doing something exemplary. The minute you spot a noteworthy action, take that student's preaddressed card from the pile, write the note, and mail it immediately to the student at home. For example, you might write, "I noticed you cleaned up the book corner without being asked to do so. Thank you for taking the time to invest in our classroom." Parents will see the postcard and immediately feel (a) that you recognize the value of their child and (b) that

you care. When they have that first impression of you, future meetings are more likely to be characterized by trust. The added benefit is that kids love getting their own mail. Try to get all students' cards sent by the third week of school.

To set the stage and prime the pump for students on the first day of school, post classroom jobs with a short description of what each job entails. When you introduce the various jobs, explain to students that even if it is not their job that week, if they see something that needs to be done, they are expected to complete that task. The postcards are not just for reinforcing housekeeping chores. They can also be used to encourage particularly shy students to participate. For example, "Dear Julie, when you shared that story about your family vacation in class, all of the students were able to see the connection to the book we are reading. I can't wait to hear more of the wonderful things you have to say this school year."

#### **4. Proactively seek counsel and support from your principal and colleagues as well as the specialized personnel in your school or district, such as the psychologist, a counselor, or a behavior management specialist.**

Don't ever think you need to handle a problem all by yourself, or subscribe to the mistaken notion that you should know all the answers. The wisdom of others can help relieve the burden of dealing with a particularly difficult parent on your own. It really does "take a village."

#### **5. If at first you stumble a bit, pick yourself up and try again.**

Although you may be reluctant to reach out to parents after a less than successful first meeting, do not hesitate to do so. After a week or two the parents may have calmed down and will appreciate that you made the first move.

#### **6. Give a rapid but thoughtful response to what you think is a communique from a "blow everything out of proportion" parent.**

Dealing with parents in general can be tricky, but dealing with difficult parents can be like walking through a mine field. I find that being as proactive with positive communication as possible is helpful with "blow everything out of proportion" parents, since it often keeps them from going there. Rapid but thoughtful responses (whether via phone or email), and efforts to work with the parent to join your team with the best interest of the child in mind, are helpful tools. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Robyn Ross)

### **7. Start early and be persistent.**

Establish contact with parents early in the school year. For example, send a letter to parents before school starts. Welcome them and their child to your “classroom community.” Introduce yourself by including a few details about yourself (e.g., you have two rescue dogs, or you play in a weekend soccer league, or your favorite food is fried chicken), and tell them how eager you are to meet them at the Back-to-School open house. Make sure you have extra letters prepared to give to families who register after the preregistration process. Then have a file in which you place important memos and explanations for families who may move in during the school year.

### **8. Be prepared with data.**

Be sure to have concrete data to rely on when parents’ perception of their child’s performance is very different from yours. Data can be the difference between a “my way”/ “no, my way” discussion and a productive meeting that benefits the student in the future. It is better to inundate parents with information than to surprise them with concerns halfway through the year. Make sure to regularly update the class website and newsletter, call or email parents of more difficult students to check in, and set up meetings with parents when you have concerns in advance of parent-teacher conferences. A parent should never hear a serious concern for the first time at a conference or read about it on a report card. These official forms of communication are more formal and are often seen as “high-stakes” by parents. Hearing bad news when weeks of the school year have already gone by will more likely elicit backlash and defensive behavior. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Jillian D’Angelo)

### **9. Build rapport.**

The teacher who has a close and meaningful connection with every student is more likely to have a very successful year. Teacher contributor Justin Gremba explains rapport in this way:

As a parent, when I attend a school function for my kids, I only care about one thing. That “thing” is the well-being of my child. I am always impressed by a teacher who says or does something that indicates that the teacher has developed rapport and is focused on the well-being of my child. As a teacher I make it my number one priority to build rapport and make connections with my own students. I make it a point to find out what they like to do, what their favorite games or movies are, and what goes on in their lives.

### **10. On your mark, get set, go.**

This is a strategy contributing educator Jillian D'Angelo adapted from the book *Teach Like a Champion 2.0* (Lemov, 2014). She teaches it to her students at the beginning of the school year, and it becomes an everyday routine. The concept is that there is a set expectation for what a student's desk and/or locker looks like before class starts (pencil out and sharpened, homework turned in, notebook open to new page, etc.). In a self-contained classroom, you can either do this at the beginning of each new subject, or use it like I did at the beginning and end of the day. In the classroom I had pictures and a list of descriptions of not only what the students' individual work spaces needed to look like, but what the whole classroom needed to look like before class could start, and again before students could leave at the end of the day. (The descriptions included things like classroom library in order, construction paper organized and put away, coats hanging neatly in lockers, etc.) Practice this often enough, and the only cue the students need is "You need to be on your mark in five minutes," or "I see three students who need to be on their mark," and the students know to check the list and make sure they are completely ready for the day. Having the list and pictures posted for reference (or you could have it taped to each student's desk) allows them to independently take responsibility for maintenance of the room.

### **11. Implement an open-door policy.**

Implement an open-door policy when it comes to parents volunteering or visiting your classroom. Often just knowing they are welcome at any time will put parents at ease and prevent "hovering" that may become an issue for student and teacher. Be sure to clear this policy with your principal and school safety officer (if you have one). Also, make clear to parents that your school has firm rules about first going to the office to sign in and receive a visitor's badge. Parents who refuse to follow those simple rules will lose their visitation privileges.

### **12. Check my spelling and grammar, please.**

Ask a trusted colleague or the office secretary (if the weekly memos are always perfect) to proofread a communication before sending it out. In addition to checking for inadvertent spelling and grammar errors, a pair of more experienced eyes can alert you to some policy or procedure that clashes with the content of your email.

### **13. Invite students to be part of your parent-teacher conferences.**

When you invite students to be a part of your first parent-teacher conference, you will accomplish two things. Parents will hopefully be on their best behavior in the presence of their child. And, if there are academic or behavioral issues that need to be resolved, all of the key players in solving the problem will be sitting around the table. If you do need to discuss anything of a private nature, you can always ask the student to step out of the room and wait in the hallway.

### **14. Offer parents a menu of communication options.**

In today's world you have multiple options to offer parents concerning how they want to receive information from you: via email, a post on social media, a text message, or a paper copy of some critically important policy that needs a signature from the parent. Consider the purpose of the communication you will be sending: general information sent to every parent, information that is private and related to a specific school problem, or a special alert bulletin to every parent concerning a classroomwide issue, like a serious outbreak of head lice or the fact that the boiler that heats your classroom will be down for repairs tomorrow, and if your child gets chilled very easily, send extra clothes or pile on the long underwear.

### **15. Send home a parent survey at the beginning of the school year.**

Give parents an opportunity to enumerate their child's strengths as well as share any pertinent behavioral or academic areas that are of concern. Ask questions about activities their children like to play or equipment they like to use in recreation, how they like to play, and what extracurricular activities or sports they may engage in outside of school.

### **16. Develop specific agendas for various types of parent meetings.**

There are three possible types of parent meetings you will no doubt hold: (1) regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, (2) a meeting with parents that you have requested to discuss specific issues and problems you are having with the student, and (3) a meeting with you that the parents have requested.

1. The first type of meeting is the regularly scheduled parent conference usually held in the fall and spring of the school year. You are expected and required to meet with

parents to report a student's progress during the first quarter of the school year. There may be a standardized agenda that you are expected to follow in the conference as well as a form to complete to take notes about any critical information exchanged or decisions made about a new direction for the student.

2. The second type of meeting is one that you have requested. You want to talk with parents about an academic or behavioral concern that needs a face-to-face discussion. Sending emails about sensitive concerns can cause parents to worry needlessly or spiral into an angry tirade.
3. The third type of meeting is one that the parents have requested. Prior to the meeting, attempt to find out the purpose of the meeting. If the parent has not been forthcoming about the purpose of the meeting, do a little detective work. Speak with the previous year's teacher to see if there were any issues or hot buttons that popped up during the year. Ask your administrator if he or she knows or has been contacted by the parents and has suggested they ask for a meeting with you. If you don't know what the reason is, be prepared to have some nice things to say about their child. And then be ready to listen.

### **17. Give advance warning.**

Give parents ample warning if you plan to make any changes in your classroom procedures, schedules, or grading requirements. For those parents who didn't have a chance to read the first memo you sent, consider giving parents several warnings. If available, print the notice on neon paper that will get their attention. If you have children of your own, you *do* understand the chaos that can ensue at home when you find out that you fell asleep reading your email, or threw away the important notice in the trash. Avoid relying completely on students delivering the notice.

### **18. Respect parents' schedules. Start and end meetings on time.**

Rehearse your agenda before the first parent-teacher conferences. In your rehearsal, hit the main idea of each agenda point, and keep on schedule. There is nothing more frustrating to parents on their lunch break than to have the previously "scheduled" parent-teacher conference run well over the allotted time. If you sense that the currently scheduled parents are talking as though they have the whole day free for this conference and intend to take it, politely remind them that you have parents waiting in the hall. Suggest that they schedule another appointment to discuss a problem that has nothing to do with discussing the report card.

**19. Recognize the special needs of single-parent families.**

Be willing to set aside your traditional notions of a “good” family to benefit children who are being raised in more “contemporary” families. Provide child care for social events and parent-teacher conferences so that single parents can more easily attend.

**20. Breaking up is hard to do.**

Accommodating the needs of divorced parents often means going out of your way to provide dual report cards and separate parent-teacher conferences, but the payback in good will and support for a child already torn between mom and dad is worth it. Some districts are even willing to ease residency rules while families are in transition. That, of course, is a matter of policy.

**21. Be sensitive to the cultural nuances in the families in your community.**

Understanding the cultural contexts of students and families is especially important for building strong teacher-family bonds. Be sensitive to nonverbal communication cues, such as eye contact, personal space, and personal touch. Enlist the help of community and religious leaders to build bridges with the cultural or ethnic minorities in your classroom.

**22. What’s in a name?**

Learn as many students’ and parents’ names as you can. Practice pronouncing them correctly as preferred by the student and the parents. Consult individuals on your staff that speak the language to help you. If you need reminders about the pronunciations, include a phonetic pronunciation guide in your list. Put name tags on tables and desks, so you can immediately start associating students’ names and faces. After you’ve learned all of your students’ names, learn something unique about each one. I have learned from doing countless presentations that there is no accounting for the unique names that mothers (or others) have conferred upon their children. Clearly some parents have completely broken through the conventions of grammar and spelling. However, honor those names and spellings. Learn to say and spell them the way the child and parents prefer, and don’t stumble over that pronunciation every time you call on this child in your class. That qualifies as an insult every time you do it.

**23. Say something nice.**

Of course, you will be primed and ready to offer affirmations and compliments at the beginning of each regularly scheduled parent conference. However, also be prepared to

offer the same kind of feedback when you run into a parent at the deli or coffee shop. Don't duck into the next aisle when you see parents at the grocery store. Use this encounter to build rapport and deposit a little cash in the "Relationship Trust and Savings Bank." Whenever you meet with a parent, hand out a compliment or two. Nothing will bring a smile and a glow to parents' faces faster than good news about their child.

#### **24. Honor extended families.**

Designate days on your calendar for grandparents' day or science fair displays, or use any other opportunity to bring extended family members into your classroom. Take care to choose these dates at the beginning of the year so that parents and extended family members can plan. Some people will need to request a personal day at the place of employment. Some grandparents (the fortunate ones) will have to book expensive plane reservations and need time to save for that expenditure. It's better not to plan such a day at all than to suddenly get a brainstorm two weeks before and blindside parents.

#### **25. Put out the welcome mat.**

Make your classroom an inviting place to visit. Let parents know that there will always be chairs available just inside the door. Display student artwork and other class projects in the hallway outside your door, and try to communicate the emphasis on learning that is present in your classroom.

#### **26. Have a classroom open house.**

In addition to schoolwide social events and informal gatherings, plan regular open-house events in your classroom to communicate important information about curriculum and to show off student work. Science fairs, art shows, young authors' conferences, and musical concerts give students an opportunity to shine. These events that do not require a sit-down meeting with the teacher—and will feature some art work, poetry, or science experiment—may be just the incentive a reluctant and missing-in-action parent might need to show up in your classroom.

#### **27. What do your students need to know and be able to do?**

What do you expect your students to know and be able to do when they exit your grade level? How well have you communicated that information to parents? Consider publishing a booklet that sets forth the expectations for your grade level or course.

## **28. Explain your behavioral expectations during your Back-to-School night.**

In addition to sending home a paper copy of your behavioral expectations for parents to sign and return, consider sharing and explaining these expectations at your Back-to-School night. Contributing educator Susan Biltucci has two general rules in her fifth-grade classroom: *Respect yourself, others, and property*, and *Take responsibility for your choices and actions*. The terms *respect* and *responsibility* are big concepts, and many parents need more than just two words. In her plan, she spells out what each of those concepts entails, but she gives parents an opportunity to ask questions about her plan and how it works.

## **29. The dog ate it.**

Install a homework hotline where students and parents can verify homework assignments. The same system can also accommodate absentee calls and include a calendar of upcoming events.

## **30. What kind of work do you do?**

Invite parents to your classrooms to talk about their careers. Encourage them to bring along several items they use in their work and to come in their work clothing. Another event that will bring parents (and other relatives) to school is the opportunity to read their favorite story aloud in your classroom.

## **31. Ask a witness to come to any meetings you have scheduled with an angry or potentially explosive parent.**

Ask your principal, counselor, SPED teacher, or any other person with a positive connection to the child to join you at your meeting. This is good idea for multiple reasons:

1. You will have a witness in the event the parent makes a wrongful accusation about something you say or neglect to say.
2. You have support to back you up and affirm to the parent why your decision or action plan was a good choice.
3. The presence of another person in the meeting might give parents reason to pause and collect their thoughts. They will be less likely to unload their pent-up emotions on you, if they realize there will be another person to listen to them.

4. Any individuals you have invited to the meeting can likely be more objective and help you to de-escalate the situation while not being emotionally involved. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Joelle Wright)

### **32. Refer to parents as partners and experts.**

Consistently refer to parents as “partners” and “experts” when it comes to helping their child. Don’t do this to stroke their egos; do it because it’s the truth. Parents know their child better than anyone else, and using this language sends a message that they have every right to engage in the educational process of their child. Some parents find the current educational system foreign and intimidating, so they lash out. Reaching out to them with an offering of partnership can often bring them around to your team. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Andrew Lucas)

## **SUMMING UP AND LOOKING AHEAD**

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Hopefully, you have come upon a few proactive strategies you can incorporate into the routines, procedures, and daily life of your classroom and interactions with parents. Be forewarned that there will always be parents that need more specific help than that afforded by this chapter. Chapter 3 expands the universe of ways you can respond to angry and dysfunctional parents.