

## Real Talk: Talking to Parents

How many teachers regularly communicate with parents? According to [Matthew Kraft](#), not enough. In a [guest blog](#) for Edweek, Kraft, an education professor at Brown University, pulled data from the *Parent and Family Involvement in Education* survey and reported striking results. Kraft found that, despite the increase in *email communications* from schools to parents from 2002 to 2012, the number of **parents receiving a school initiated phone call decreased from 2002 to 2012, as did parent satisfaction with parent-school staff interactions**. Yet, even more startling, he found that in 2012, **59% of parent respondents reported NEVER having received a phone call home from the school**.

While these numbers are shocking in isolation, they become even moreso when one considers the benefits of consistent parent-communication. [In a separate study](#), Kraft and fellow educational scholar Shaun Dougherty found that frequent teacher-family communication immediately increased student engagement and success:

- Student homework completion increased by 40%
- Instances of teacher redirection of students to the task at hand decreased by 25%
- And class participation rates increased by 15%

To put these numbers in perspective, if you have a class of 30 students that means 12 more students complete their homework regularly. If you averaged sixty student behavior corrections per class, you would have 15 fewer corrections per class. And, you would have 5 more students participating per class discussion. You probably knew regular communication was important, but didn't realize it could have that kind of impact!

### Real Talk

But, let's talk about the real reason you aren't talking with parents as much as you should. You're an early career teacher, you don't have the time, you're questioning your credibility, and you're worried parents won't take your side. Most likely, your administration has told you control in your classroom is your responsibility, and you have internalized that mantra to not think about outside help. That's ok. I get it.

When I was first teaching in Detroit, it was incredibly difficult to call parents. In part, this was because phone numbers changed constantly, and it was hard to have current contact information. But, for the most part, I was scared how parents might react. When I did get up the nerve to call home, I often hoped to only have to leave a voicemail, so I could say what I needed to, but not have to confront my students' parents.

My avoidance behavior lasted one month to two months until I spoke with a [veteran teacher](#) who had the best parent-teacher relationships in the school. She set me straight.



She said, first, **I had to get over my fear and realize that I was educating someone's child, and that person wants to know how his or her child is doing**, and, more times than not, they want to know if that child is acting up. As a teacher, I have an obligation to the parent, not just the student. She said parents want to be in contact with the school and the teachers, but they don't want to advocate for themselves because parents often have negative relationships with schools. In our case at Cody, most of the parents had not graduated from high school, so many of them had adversarial relationships with school, which was only further compounded by schools now rebuffing their involvement as parents. She promised that if I made the first step, I could break down these barriers, and my students' parents would be the greatest assets in effectively educating kids.

Second, **all call homes don't have to be negative**. She told me teachers don't think to call home when things are going well, but parents love those calls. Plus, it helps to build relationships with parents and students: parents develop greater trust in you as a teacher and students appreciate you recognizing what they do well. She taught me the most powerful parent communication came in pairs. Sometimes a student's behavior was unacceptable, so I would have to call home or meet with a parent during which the parent and I would set new expectations for the student. Once, the student met or exceeded those expectations, I would call home and let the parents know their student was beginning to excel! These calls had an immense impact on the culture of my classroom and my ability to connect with parents and the larger community.

Before long, I had more parents showing up for parent-teacher conferences, fewer behavioral problems, and kids who wanted me to call home to tell their parents how they were doing. **Maybe even more important, I had parents that communicated with me on a regular basis because of the trust that had been built**. If students wanted to stay for an after school program, parents would ask to speak to me to make sure their student was telling the truth and get all the details necessary. When parents were unable to pay their electricity bill or had their hot water turned off, they would come talk to me. Similarly, parents would let me know if there had been a death in the family or other tragic event that affected the student's well-being. Although I could not always help with these problems, I could direct them to the social services outlets in our school that could. But, once again, if it had not been for the relationship developed through constant communication those parents may not have felt comfortable enough to come talk to me, and their families would be less able to take advantage of these key services that could provide the necessary support for their children inside and outside of school.

### Making Time

One common misconception about this work is that it takes an inordinate amount of time. That can be true, but the more organized you are, the more efficient you will be.

**First thing, make sure you have an easily accessible database for phone numbers**. Whether it's a personal notebook, an excel spreadsheet, or the school's catalog. If you can look up and get the numbers quickly, it will take less time. To streamline



this process and make it most effective, I often called students up every couple of weeks during independent work to get updated phone numbers and the names of who I was contacting (mother, father, aunt, grandparent, etc.)

**Second, know your parents' schedules.** It's unreasonable to expect that you will know when to call parents when you first begin, but when you talk to parents ask them when it is best to call and put that in your database. If you can be efficient in your calls and not play phone tag, the calls will take less of your time, be less burdensome to parents, and you will spend less time thinking about how to get a hold of parents.

**Third, plan to make one or two predetermined phone calls a day.** Make it part of your daily routine to call parents. Each call should take anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes. Depending on your parents' schedule, you may be able to do this during your prep, in the evening before dinner, or first thing in the morning.

**Also, you should have a script or organization to the phone calls to make sure you are communicating the most important information and presenting yourself in the best way possible.** Some scripts might look like the following:

<b>Call Home for Student Misbehavior or Struggles Academically</b>	
<b>Introducing self and asking about parents</b>	<i>"Hi, my name is Mr. Kautz. I'm Jasmine's English teacher. How are you doing?"</i>
<b>Small report on the student's performance overall, question for parents about what may be going on</b>	<i>"I just wanted to speak with you because, while Jasmine has developed strong peer relationships, she has struggled to stay focus during our independent reading time. Is there anything going at home that would be affecting her concentration?"</i>
<b>Respond to problem at home/ offer your interpretation</b>	<i>"I didn't realize that was going on, what can I do to help?"  "I see, so you say there's nothing that should be affecting her performance? You can ask Jasmine, but I think she has been distracted and unwilling to focus because she finds the work hard, but she is unwilling to ask for help."</i>
<b>Develop a joint solution, establish the next time you will communicate</b>	<i>"Given everything going on at home, I will be more gentle in her redirections in class, and maybe you can let her know if it's hard to focus in class, she can let me know, and we'll figure it out, but also encourage her try and do her best to focus? Would it be alright if I called you in a few days and updated you?"  "Thank you again for time. So please let Jasmine know that she needs to be more proactive raising her hand and asking for help, and I will communicate the same to her. Also, we'll find who she is most comfortable working with in class, and I will sit her next to that student, so she can also ask her peer's for help. Is it ok if I call you in a week and update on her progress?"</i>
<b>Final Questions</b>	<i>"Thank you so much for time, is there anything else I should know, or you would like me to do in the meantime?"</i>



<b>Call Home for Student Success, Academically or Behaviorally</b>	
<b>Introducing self and asking about parents</b>	<i>"Hi, my name is Mr. Kautz. I'm Jasmine's English teacher. How are you doing?"</i>
<b>Small report on the student's performance overall,</b>	<i>"I just wanted to speak with you because, while Jasmine has developed strong peer relationships and she is always willing to participate</i>
<b>Focus on specific improvement</b>	<i>"However, I really wanted to call today to speak to you about her behavior in class. Previously, Jasmine has struggled to stay on task and not talk to her friends. But, she and I had a conversation a week ago about this, and, since then, she has been a model student. She is even working to help her friends remain on task! I just wanted you to know because I'm really proud of how she is maturing."</i>
<b>Listen to parent's response/ follow up questions, ask her to relay the message to the student</b>	<i>"I really appreciate your involvement in Jasmine's schooling, and I just want you know you are raising a fine, young woman. Please feel free to let Jasmine know I called and encourage her to keep up the good work!"</i>
<b>Final Questions</b>	<i>"Thank you so much for time, is there anything else I should know, or you would like me to do in the meantime?"</i>

### Maximizing Parent Communication

**Another important thing to remember is always communicate to students what you are telling their parents.** You can do this before or after calling home. Personally, I always found it helpful to let students know beforehand, so the student did not feel blindsided when he or she went home. These communications with students also helped develop our relationship because all communication was transparent; students knew if I was calling home what I was going to say and didn't feel like I was personally attacking them, even if the call home was for misbehavior or unsatisfactory academic work. Eventually, the management of my classroom and relationships developed with students enough that I could tell them what I was going to say, and students would either affirm what I said, or correct a minute detail I had missed. The involvement of the student created greater accountability, empowered the student (rather than marginalizing him or her), and gave the student an opportunity to speak with the parent first, knowing what I would say.

**Finally, consider inviting parents to visit in person.** As I said before, parents may be less enthusiastic about communicating with schools based on their previous experiences. If a student is struggling in your class, and you're only communication about their child is negative, they may be less inclined to listen to you over the phone because you are just a voice. In this way, it is



helpful to have these conversations in person and let the parents experience the warmth of your classroom. Alternatively, you can invite parents to sit in on a class. Although this is sometimes difficult for students (especially older ones), it really helps parents feel involved and for students to connect their family life to school. The difficulty this imposes on students subsides the more often this happens – if it’s not just one student’s parent coming in the room, but multiple, students see parent’s presence differently. One of my former students, who was a respectful student, but sometimes got carried away in freshman antics, started to develop a negative relationship with school. As a result, he started doing less of his work and talking back to his teachers more. When I told his mom, she was shocked! Our plan? She would come and spend the day in school with him. Every couple of weeks, she would take a day off of work and spend the first three periods with her son. Not only did her son’s behavior and academic performance improve, but also it let her be connected to the school in powerful ways. Remember, parents love their kids, and, if they can tell you are trying to do right by their child(ren), they will always be helpful.

All things considered, you still may be incredibly nervous, and that’s ok! Reach out to [us](#) ([facebook](#) & [twitter](#)), and we’ll help guide you through this process in person or over the phone!

