

Home-school partnerships: 9 tips for teachers

The research demonstrates that teachers play a significant role in influencing the types and level of family involvement in students' education. Strong home-school partnerships improve parent-teacher relationships and teacher morale, and provide teachers with the information they need to support students. However, teachers and principals do not always feel well prepared for involving families in education, and find this one of the top three challenges for their profession.

There are many things that teachers can do to initiate strong, constructive partnerships as part of their own practice. Here are some ideas and strategies to consider.

1. **Reflect on your beliefs** about home-school partnerships. If you see partnership as beneficial to your own teaching and to student learning, you are more likely to reach out to families with information and invitations to participate. Parents report that it is teachers' and principals' positive attitudes that encourage them to get involved in their child's education. Consider whether or not you:
 - Hold positive attitudes towards parents.
 - See all families as a resource for their children's learning. Trust develops when parents and teachers respect and have high personal regard for one another, believe in each other's ability, and desire to fulfil their responsibilities and put children's interests first.
 - Are aware that it can be more difficult to get to know families whose cultural background differs from your own, which may lead you to believe these families are not interested in involvement, and to provide these families fewer opportunities for engagement.
2. Focus on **developing relationships** as an essential first step for successful partnerships. Families from diverse cultural backgrounds in NZ report their relationship with their child's teacher to be the key factor enabling them to feel confident participating in school, particularly where the teacher shows a desire to learn about the child's background, needs and interests (both academic and personal) and has a caring attitude. To build relationships with families, you can:
 - Make a sincere effort to make parents feel welcome and valued.
 - Be visible and available.
 - Respect parents' choices, and give their opinions, ideas and requests real consideration.
 - Develop empathy by trying to see the child's situation from the parents' perspective.
 - Trust families, and encourage them to trust you through open and honest communication.
 - Demonstrate reliability, confidentiality, sound judgement, openness and honesty.
 - Ask about children's likes and dislikes, and their strengths and weaknesses.
3. Be aware of everyday **formal and informal interactions** with parents to provide the foundation for mutual support and understanding and keep them informed about classroom and school practices, their child's development, achievement and learning goals, and how they can support their child's development. You can:
 - Take the initiative in opening the channels of communication.
 - Use informal contact such as face-to-face conversation, and make your email address available so parents can contact you with questions and concerns.
 - Make communication two-way. For example, invite parents to share information on their child's needs while you share information on their progress at school.

- Focus on the content and quality of your interactions with parents, which is more strongly related to increased family engagement than the amount of contact.
 - Don't perceive a lack of communication from parents as disinterest, but seek to understand and minimise the barriers to communication. Avoid deficit theorising and consider phone calls or home visits to liaise with these parents.
4. Develop **shared agendas with parents** and **establish clear roles** for supporting learning. Shared objectives and expectations help promote positive student development. To achieve this you can:
- Find out about parents' aspirations and priorities rather than just gaining support for your teaching agenda and decisions.
 - Negotiate a shared need or a problem that both you and the family jointly agree is worth working on.
 - Develop a shared language and understanding of achievement and progress.
 - Be optimistic but objective about students' development, and open and honest about students' strengths and weaknesses.
 - Make the most of parent-teacher conferences as oral reporting is often easier for parents to understand than a written report and offers opportunities for clarification.
 - Join with parents as a problem-solving team where there are issues or concerns for students. Empathise with parents and deal with conflicts openly and respectfully. Show respect for families' concerns and suggestions.
5. **Support students to communicate with their families** about their learning. Students play a significant mediating role in shaping and influencing teacher-parent interactions, and students' involvement can be highly motivating for parents' involvement. Students are often the main source of information about school for families and are usually willing to take an active role in helping keep their families informed. You might:
- Have students participate in or lead parent-teacher conferences, take a lead in parent evenings, and find a role for family members in projects or homework.
 - Have students write in a 'family message journal' about different aspects of their school day, such as something they learned, or an upcoming event, and take it home each day for the family to read.
 - Have students take photographs or make videos to share with their families.
6. **Support families' understanding of schoolwork** and share information that helps families understand school activities. You can:
- Offer demonstrations of teaching and opportunities for questions and discussions, perhaps by making videos of literacy or mathematics with explanations and a commentary on the video.
 - Help families navigate school activities and student assignments.
 - Use class websites or blogs to inform parents about what students are currently working on in school.
 - Clarify expectations regarding the amount of time spent on homework, how much help to give, and how to deal with challenging questions. Offer parents a range of strategies for helping their child.
7. Find out about, **respect and appreciate families' expertise** and their contribution to their child's learning, and **empower parents to support learning in the home environment**. Everyday routines, experiences, interactions, lifestyle habits and values can contribute to students' learning and development. The most important family roles include providing support and structure, having high expectations, and offering an enriching environment, but parents can also encourage children to set goals, and plan and manage their time. It is important to:
- Ensure that your models and ideas of parental involvement are broad enough to account for diverse cultural beliefs and practices.
 - Make it clear that you think of parents as genuine partners and that you value what they do already, and let them know when the help they have provided to their child has had a positive influence on their achievement.

- Link the learning that children begin at home to the learning of the classroom. Basing classroom practices and content on children's home experiences can capitalise on cultural diversity and give all children a similar advantage in mastering the curriculum.
 - Support parents to engage in the most useful kinds of parental involvement.
 - Help parents develop high expectations for their child's achievement and performance.
8. **Plan activities for shared engagement, and invite families to participate** rather than just informing them that something is happening. To do this you can:
- Tailor practices to the families – there are no 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. Try to tap into family interests.
 - Start with reading involvement as this is often perceived to be a shared responsibility between teachers and families.
 - Draw parents into school with invitations to see their child's performances, or use students as ambassadors for new initiatives.
 - Emphasise the direct relevance of an activity to students' learning, which may make parents more inclined to participate.
 - Make activities consistent, easy, and enjoyable.
 - Build on success by developing it to achieve greater momentum for involvement.
 - Be sensitive to barriers that prevent parents from participating as much as they would like.
9. **Plan homework** carefully so that it can enable greater parental involvement. In New Zealand, parents confirm that they appreciate homework as a way of supporting the child to develop a work ethic, but many have concerns that they do not know how to help. Interactive homework that requires student-parent interactions is consistently correlated with improvements in student achievement outcomes and parental involvement at home. To ensure that homework is effective you can:
- Include specific guidelines for parents alongside those for the student.
 - Help parents to understand their role in the homework activity and what to do if their child gets stuck, and offer prompts that encourage parents to support their child's initiations and problem-solving attempts.
 - Set interactive homework tasks of hands-on and relevant activities.
 - Support parents of older children to encourage good homework habits and create a regular routine, space and materials for homework completion, but discourage direct assistance with homework.

Further Reading

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