

# Teachers and families working together

## Frequently Asked Questions

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### 1. How can I develop a positive teacher-parent partnership?

The best outcomes are possible when teachers and parents work together to combine their respective expertise and knowledge.

Respecting a family's privacy and being aware of a family's unique circumstances will also assist in developing a trusting and supportive relationship.

Other things that teachers can do include:

- Spending time getting to know the student, parents and family.
- Listening to, and valuing, parent knowledge.
- Answering questions from parents clearly and honestly.
- Providing information in a format and at a level that parents can understand.
- Trying to understand the situation from the family's perspective.
- Considering the individual circumstances of each family and their method of coping without making comparisons with other families.
- Being mindful of times throughout a child's life when parents may feel more vulnerable, for example when a child is in hospital and during times of transition.

- Not dismissing a parent's genuine anger or frustration as grief. A parent's anger or frustration can be a legitimate response to an imperfect service system.
- Adopting a flexible and creative approach and being open to the ideas and priorities of the family.
- Being aware of the pressures that families face, including those that do not relate to having a child with a disability.

Developing a positive partnership with parents is the same as for any other relationship. It requires mutual respect, listening skills, empathy and communication. It takes time to develop trust and confidence.

Effective partnerships are characterised by recognition of each person's contribution, equality and working towards a common goal. Acknowledge what is working well and what could be improved. Be prepared to consider alternative solutions and to compromise. And remember to celebrate achievements, both big and small.

### **3. What is the best way to communicate with parents?**

Good formal and informal communication between school and home is essential for developing and maintaining a positive partnership with parents.

Formal communication occurs through school newsletters, notices, assemblies and in Student Support Group meetings.

Informal communication can include face-to-face conversations, phone calls, email, communication book or a combination of these. It is helpful to establish early in the year how, when, where and how often communication will occur.

A communication book that travels between home and school in the child's bag can work well as long as both you and the parent check it regularly.

Schools can use the communication book to tell parents about events such as sports days or excursions, learning themes for the term or a positive note about something the child has achieved.

Parents can use the communication book to tell schools about things that are happening at home that may affect the child's day at school, for example, a late night family celebration, change in medication or house renovations.

Remember to keep education support staff in the communication loop, as they may be able to facilitate communication between you and the parent.

Strive to establish and maintain a mode of informal communication that suits both you and the parent and be mindful of confidentiality in all communication.

#### **4. What is the best approach when teacher and parent expectations don't match?**

It is helpful for teachers to give parents clear and honest information about what can and can't be achieved at school with available resources.

It is equally important for teachers to demonstrate to parents that they have a good understanding of the child's strengths and needs, and that they are able to work effectively to support them to achieve goals in the Individual Learning Plan.

Parents need to know that, despite their child's disability, teachers really believe there are genuine opportunities for development and achievement.

Occasionally, mutual understanding and shared expectations may not always be possible. But it's important to strive for agreement on major issues such as long term goals and priority of needs.

Goals need to be challenging but achievable for the student, and realistic for the teacher to achieve within the context of the whole class.

It is up to the Student Support Group to work together to develop an Individual Learning Plan with agreed goals. All members of the Student Support Group should approach this task with an open mind.

#### **5. How do I work with parents who seem anxious?**

Parents can become anxious when they don't know what is going on for their child at school. Most children with a disability cannot effectively communicate what they did at school or how they felt. Parent anxiety can often be reduced through regular communication and reassurance from the teacher.

Changes at school can also cause anxiety. This can be reduced by allowing extra time for communication whenever there is major change, for example at the beginning of the school year or when there are staff changes.

It's important to inform parents of any incidents that occur at school, such as bullying and issues with personal care or safety, and how these incidents were managed. It's better to inform parents of relatively minor issues straightaway rather waiting to see if they escalate. Parents also like to hear about their child's progress and achievements.

Developing a positive partnership means that both teachers and parents can feel comfortable approaching each other if issues arise. Proactive education planning and communication with the family can reassure parents that their child is safe and well cared for, and that their child is learning. This will help to develop mutual trust and confidence.

## 6. How can I address issues or problems?

If an issue arises don't feel that you have to come up with the answers on your own. If you have a concern about the student, discuss it with the parents. Find out how they address this issue at home and consult any other relevant people such as a Student Support Services Officer, therapist or previous teachers.

Concerns about the student's program are best addressed by the Student Support Group. Concerns about other staff should be directed to the principal.

The Student Support Group should be informed of all serious or ongoing issues and adopt a problem solving approach together. If necessary, the Student Support Group can also consult with other specialists, or get advice and support from the [DEECD Regional Office](#).

Refer back to the Individual Learning Plan, and any other relevant plans, to review what has been done previously. Make sure that these plans are revised to include any new decisions.

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