

How One Teacher Communicates with Parents and Stepparents: Tips for Successful Communication

*by John Ford
5th Grade Teacher, Forest Park School, Fremont, California*

I am beginning to see more and more stepchildren in my class. For these children to succeed in school and thrive it is becoming increasingly critical that I have good communications with both sets of parents and they with me. It is important that the parents and stepparents be involved in the child's education and welfare. The cornerstone to achieving this goal is that constant and equal communication take place between all parties and their child's teacher. Here's how I manage this goal and hopefully you might gain some ideas to help in your various situations.

At the beginning of the school year I sit down with the parents and set up the yearly calendar of where the child will be throughout the school year. Depending upon the situation between the households you may or may not want to meet with both sets of parents at the same time! Ask before you schedule an appointment. When I know where the child will be on any given day I can better understand the special needs of that child.

I take the initial meeting time to communicate with the parents my expectations and the format of progress reports, newsletters, grade reports, etc. I also solicit from parents their honest feedback about what they expect from me. Sometimes one set of parents may want information from me via fax, others prefer e-mail, or they just want me to call them if there are any problems. What's key here is that this two way communication allows me to assess what my students have to deal with in each home. It affords me the ability to slip seamlessly into the unique structures of each household. Most importantly, the more I can do to smooth the waters on my end helps my step-students focus on learning and away from any miscommunication between the two households.

Here's how a typical arrangement works in a situation where custody is shared by two households. At the beginning of the year I marked my personal calendar each Friday to indicate what parent doesn't have the child on a particular weekend along with their fax number. Every Friday I do an end of week progress report for each of my students. In the morning I fax the progress report and newsletter to whichever parent doesn't have the child that weekend. The child carries home the original to the parent they're with. This way both sets of parents are informed at nearly the same time. They also feel that I consider them important and special.

Getting other school informational flyers home is a little more difficult and time consuming. However, I have found that by mentioning any such items in my newsletter such as picture day, the annual jog-a-thon, etc. I generally can keep both parents informed in case I've missed faxing something home. If one set of parents doesn't have a fax my solution is to have a second set of material available for the child to take to their other home when it's time.

I send home a mid-trimester grade report in the same way I do the newsletter and progress report. Actual time spent in implementing such a program is really minimal. The only item that is not a part of my regular routine with all children is the fax which only takes the time it takes to dial a phone number. By taking the extra effort to keep all parents informed there are no surprises as well as a more combined effort on the part of both parents to insure that all is being done for their child. Long term projects don't get fragmented and the child reaps the benefits of having two households that are on the same wavelength.

When it comes to parent-teacher conferences, I am also prepared to meet with each set of parents separately. By meeting one on one they don't feel like they need to compete for my attention. This helps my students. For example I had one situation where the mother was very concerned about math skills and the father was more interested in social science. What I did was try to balance the concerns of each when making my report cards for their child.

Ultimately what's important is to make a win-win situation. For parents and stepparents to be involved with their kids, everybody needs to be informed and considered. As a teacher I think it's important not to contribute to communication problems between households. The results help the child be successful based on the fact that there is no missed communication as to assignments or expectations.

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