

Communication Plans and First Impressions

Communicating with parents requires a variety of approaches. Just as the children in your classroom are individuals with their own unique learning needs and interests, so, too, are your students' parents. You will find that some parents will be avid readers of your newsletters or notes. Some are hands-on and will attend workshops and meetings. Others will be most attentive when communication is in the form of e-mails or Tweets. This doesn't mean you have to do all of these things. However, it does mean that one size does not fit all, so you will need to consider what you can do and how you might go about it.

Some forms of communication will be easily folded into what you already do; others will require a bit more effort and planning. However, just as with all subjects in the curriculum, if you want to make certain something will happen, you have to plan for it. So, too, with communicating with parents. It is helpful to map out a year of communicating, indicating what tools you plan to use, how often and for what purpose, along with what parent-focused events you plan to have.

The tools might include newsletters (paper or electronic), a website, pamphlets, etc. Events can include meet-and-greets, special class events, work parties, etc. Some tools, like newsletters, will happen more regularly (e.g., a monthly newsletter) than others (e.g., a meet-and-greet that might happen only once in September).

Laying it all out in advance, in an orderly fashion, allows you to stay organized and be prepared. You will be able to see at a glance if you are going for long periods of time with little or no communication or if you are relying solely on one communication tool. You will also notice if a month is getting too crowded or if your overall plan is unbalanced. In addition, having a plan alleviates some of the stress you might feel around communicating with parents and gives you confidence in your ability to do a good job. The good thing about using a planning template is that it can be a work in progress, growing and changing in response to the needs of both you and your parents.

The planning template on page 14 will get you started. Begin by filling in what you already do or what you think you want to do. Perhaps you know you want to have an event in December but don't know what that will look like. That's okay. Just record "event — *tba*" and come back to it once you have decided. You can add ideas from this book or ones that colleagues share.

Continue to map out your plan for the year. As you work on your curriculum planning, look for ways to link your parent communication to your students'

See page 14 for a template for the Communication Planner.

SAMPLE COMMUNICATION PLANNER

| Month | Tool (e.g., newsletter, Facebook, e-mail, etc.) | Purpose | Event (e.g., Literacy Night, Math Take-home, etc.) | Purpose |
|-----------|--|---|---|--|
| August | <i>Letter</i> | <i>Intro me and my classroom</i> | | |
| September | <i>Survey Newsletter</i> | <i>Get contact info</i> | <i>Meet-the-Teacher</i> | <i>Curriculum night — school-wide</i> |
| October | <i>Dialogue Journals</i> | <i>Start with parents who missed Meet-the-Teacher</i> | <i>Spooky Family Literacy Night</i> | <i>Literacy stations — questioning and comprehension</i> |

learning. School-to-home connections are ways to enlist parents' support for literacy learning in purposeful, curriculum-related ways. They are opportunities to engage parents' help to reinforce a strategy or concept you have taught.

Try to link home connections to your mini-lessons:

1. When using a touchstone/mentor text as a model in your writing lessons, demonstrate the concept with the students and provide an opportunity for them to practice individually or in small groups: for example, using a nonfiction/information book, teach students the use of a KWHL chart to activate prior knowledge, set the purpose for reading, and stimulate further interest in a topic.

2. Then send home an activity that mirrors or extends students' learning using the same concept or strategy: a letter that informs parents what a KWHL chart is, explains why you are teaching its use, and describes how they can use the chart or the questions the chart poses when reading a nonfiction book with their children at home.

See *Books as Bridges* (Baskwill, 2010: 71–101) for a more detailed look at home connection activities and sample letters to parents.

Some teachers will feel comfortable jumping right in and scheduling a number of new ideas along with what they already do. Others will want to tread a little more slowly and put their toes in the water before they actually wade in. Do what's right for you. Chances are, once parents start to respond favorably to your efforts, this response will provide you with all the encouragement you need to keep going and to seek even more ways to effectively communicate with parents.

It is also helpful to set up a Communication Binder in which to put a page of description, notes, reminders, or things to remember to do or not do for each communication tool or event; see the Individual Event Planner on page 15. If you keep the Communication Binder up to date, you can make use of it year after year and save yourself a lot of work in the long run. It is a convenient spot to keep reminders and feedback about how your efforts have been received and to remind yourself of the *dos* and *don'ts* for next time. Gathering this data in one location helps you to make an informed decision regarding any changes you may want to make to your communication planning along the way.

See page 15 for the Individual Event Planner.

SAMPLE INDIVIDUAL EVENT PLANNER

| | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Event: <i>Family Science Night</i> | |
| Date: <i>October 18</i> | Time: <i>6:00–7:00</i> |
| In Advance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Prepare and send invitation</i> • <i>Collect materials for science stations</i> • <i>Prepare direction cards for science activities</i> • <i>Create Pinterest board for families with science activities</i> | |
| On the Day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Set up stations</i> • <i>Send home reminders via Facebook and bookbag notices</i> • <i>Have feedback forms available</i> | |
| Feedback Comments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mostly positive</i> • <i>Several families requested additional activities they could do at home on the same topics</i> | |
| Next Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More links to science info for each station</i> | |

Communication Planner

| Month | Tool (e.g., newsletter, Facebook, e-mail, etc.) | Purpose | Event (e.g., Literacy Night, Math Take-home, etc.) | Purpose |
|--------------|---|----------------|--|----------------|
| August | | | | |
| September | | | | |
| October | | | | |
| November | | | | |
| December | | | | |
| January | | | | |
| February | | | | |
| March | | | | |
| April | | | | |
| May | | | | |
| June | | | | |



Individual Event Planner

Event:

Date:

Time:

In Advance

On the Day

Feedback Comments

Next Time

