

A Few Strategies which Promote Parent-Professional Partnerships

Setting and Maintaining a Positive and Hopeful Tone

Begin meetings and conversations with positives

Begin meetings or phone calls in a more casual, friendly manner. If you are planning to discuss a question, a concern, or a challenge about the child or classroom issues, it is helpful to begin the discussion in a conversational tone. Plan to begin with a brief, honest, positive statement about what is going well, what is working, what the child is doing that is positive, or what the team is doing that is effective. Be specific. *"I can see how Erin has been working hard to remember to raise her hand when she needs help in the classroom. I am glad we were able to talk about that at our last meeting. It seems to be working well."*

This type of opening comment or observation does not imply that there are no concerns or issues to be addressed. But it does say that you are observing the child from many perspectives, that you can see progress and you know the benefits of problem solving as a team. This positive approach encourages an exchange of ideas. Practice using language that builds rapport and trust as well as encourages discussion about the harder-to-discuss topics in a respectful manner. Give time for reflection and encourage questions. Use "rapport language" rather than "report language."

The use of opening all meetings with positives isn't as easy as it might appear. Here are a few suggestions to teams as they begin the use of opening positives:

- ▶ Remind team members that meetings will begin with positives. Help them know that these are NOT summary reports of the child's progress (that might come later in the meeting.) They are short, vignettes in the life of the child, a quick comment.
- ▶ Each member should be encouraged to share one comment. The comments can be made in a quick go around, usually taking a total of five minutes at the start of each meeting.
- ▶ Comments should be honest and genuine.
- ▶ Some examples of comments:
 - *"One of Kathy's classmates asked to sit next to her during reading time."*
 - *"Sam really likes his new backpack. He is so happy with it."*
 - *"Zack seems to be enjoying music class now that we are sending home the taped music. That was a great idea we came up with at our last meeting."*
 - *"Michelle worked hard on her math homework. She seems so proud."*



- ▶ Another idea is to bring in a photo of the child from home or in the classroom doing something that was fun, rewarding, or contributing to a sense of accomplishment. Any member of the team, parent or professional, can bring in the photo or a sample of the child's work.

Relax the labels of “the parent” and “the professional”

Remember that behind those labels and roles of both “parent” and “professional” are **real people** with interests, desires, passions, and dedication. Professionals may have to maintain some neutrality but boundaries do not have to interfere with setting a friendly, comfortable exchange. Take time to “chat” a bit about the weather, or a recent event at a school or in the community. Share a personal story. This can set the right tone for connecting as people. Sometime meeting in a new place, having a cup of coffee at a nearby restaurant, or just sharing an interest or a hobby will be a friendly reminder that we are all people who have lives beyond the workplace. (One author referred to this as “kitchen talk” – the informal, non-threatening exchanges that you might have in your kitchen as you are cleaning up.) This personal touch can help people feel more at ease.

Many professionals were trained to maintain a clear and distinct distance from their clients. They were often trained to “never take gifts from a family; never show your emotions in front of a client; or to never disclose anything about your personal life.” These “golden rules” are being re-evaluated in the human services field. Bringing some of who you are as a person, not just a role, can make significant contributions to building partnerships.

Express Appreciation – Celebrate Victories – Offer Feedback

Partnering is hard work in part because it is about forming relationships and finding ways to communicate effectively. When parents and professionals do something that worked, that was helpful, that gave hope, strengthened the sense of trust, or resulted in the child making progress, **Share** it with the team. Parents and professionals often feel uncertain about what they did that **was** helpful. Sharing “what worked,” can reinforce best practice. Often parents and professionals silently experience a “fear of failure,” a worry that we won't know what's best or do what's best. Feedback can provide important knowledge, reassurance or guidance.

It can be uplifting and supportive when parents and professionals recognize the efforts of each other and offer positive feedback to each other. This “partnership mail” can be in the form of a brief note, a card, an e-mail, a phone message, etc... It doesn't have to be fancy or long – just honest and specific. It is never too late to share gratitude, even ten years later. Never underestimate the power and long-term impact of saying thanks and applauding successes!



Share unusual circumstances when appropriate

Sometimes family or personal situations may impinge on our stress level or interfere with our full attention. It can be beneficial to acknowledge this, even in a general way so that other team members (parents and professionals) have a sense of what might be happening in our lives. For example, if a professional is experiencing an illness of a family member, it can be helpful to say something like, “My Mom is having emergency surgery so I am a bit distracted. I want to do the best I can, but I may not be quite up to par. I am sorry and want you to know that I will really try.” Most parents and professionals will appreciate this knowledge and are less likely to personalize any perceived changes in attitude or behavior. Acknowledgement of these important, unexpected realities takes the mystery out of changes in our moods, tones, or work.

Follow-Up Phone Calls

A lot happens in meetings. Not everything can be addressed. Sometimes it takes a few days to be clear about what happened and what else might need to be addressed. When professionals make a follow-up phone call to parents to ask about how they feel the meeting went, this helps to strengthen the working relationship. It can send the message that you care and want to hear their input. Meetings about the child can stir up a range of feelings ranging from hope to worry. The follow-up call invites the parent to share some of their thoughts and reminds them that they are part of the team.

Food, New Locations, and Meeting “Outside the Box”

Discuss what can be done differently to spice up the meetings. Bring in a small snack. Start off by reading a poem, telling a brief story of inspiration, or meet in a new location. Do something different. Sometimes this small gesture can help renew our spirit to work together or just bring a sense of kindness, humanity or compassion into the room.

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