

The Dos and Don'ts of Emailing Your Kid's Teacher

Sarah Brown Wessling, a National Teacher of the Year, shares her tips on how to talk to teachers about grades and behavior.

What teachers want parents to know about these tough situations

1. **We don't blame you.** We know that you're sending the best child you can to school each day. We also know that your child is growing up and that doesn't happen without some frustrating experiences. Sometimes those moments are at home with you and sometimes they're at school with us. Either way, we're in this together.
2. **We're not perfect either.** In the same way that we parents are fully aware of our imperfections, teachers will make mistakes too. Approaching a teacher with curiosity or empathy can go a long way to create a strong partnership. This means that instead of leading with accusation, a start of **thanks** (*I've appreciated the newsletters you've been sending home*), **empathy** (*I know this is a busy time of year*) or **curiosity** (*The project my child has been working on is really interesting. Can I pick your brain about it?*) will open lines of communication.
3. **We all want the same outcome.** Regardless of who starts the communication, we all want the same outcome: to see our students and children love school and be prepared for the world. I often tell people that my job as a parent is to help my son Matt "become the very best Matt he can be." This sometimes means tough choices, but we're always thinking about what we want kids to learn from any situation and reacting with that end in mind.

Even when we know all of these traits of effective parent-teacher partnerships, it can only take the knee-jerk reaction of an email with an unintended tone to undermine a productive conversation. So, to help frame those moments when they arise, I offer three ways to start an email conversation when the topic may need to do more than scratch the surface.

The email about social or behavior concerns

In these cases, it's important to take great caution in naming other children. It's also important to give the teacher time to gather his/her own information about the situation before following up. Starting with an inquiry to the teacher instead of going directly to an administrator is helpful. The teacher will be the one to manage the day-to-day situations so making that the first contact is imperative. Here's an example:

Dear Teacher,

I just wanted to let you know that I appreciate the ways you've been working to make school a great place for Morgan to learn. She really enjoys the days she gets to have a "job" in the classroom and she loves the reading corner where she gets to choose her own books. Because I know you work so hard at this, I also thought you'd want to know that we've been hearing at home there is a lot of teasing going on at recess. Normally I would help Morgan find strategies to deal with this on her own, but this is starting to impact her sleep and her excitement about coming to school. Morgan doesn't know I'm sharing this with you. I would appreciate being able to follow-up with you on this after you've had a chance to survey the situation.

Thank you,

Parent

The question about grades

So much seems to ride on grades for students and parents; it's easy to see a startling report and want to know how the child can "get more points" or "make up those points." While this is part of the situation, the larger, more important questions rest on **what the child is learning**. You'll notice in this example that I'm referencing grades, but asking about Sasha's learning, not about extra credit.

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for updating (or sending home) Sasha's grades. I noticed that there are several missing assignments and that she scored very low on a recent exam. I'm concerned about her work habits and what she's learning. Could we please set up a time to talk about where the gap in his studying or "presence" in class might be?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Parent

The question about a classroom practice

Sometimes as parents we feel as though we don't fully understand the purpose or value of an assignment or classroom practice. It's important in these situations to be curious and again, to focus on the learning. Often times we get most frustrated at home when deadlines are fast approaching and that's when we're most likely to shoot off an inflammatory message. Opening the door to a proactive and forward-thinking conversation can pay big dividends.

Dear Teacher,

First, I wanted to let you know that I really appreciate all the ways you're challenging Jonas this year. He is working very hard at home and I hope you're seeing that at school too. He worked especially hard on the project he turned in last Friday, but at times, the learning purpose wasn't clear to us. I know that you are a thoughtful teacher, so I was hoping you'd be open to sharing your thinking with us. We can talk by telephone, email or I'm also available to stop by the school at your convenience.

Thank you,

Parent

The key is to never stop communicating with your child's teachers. The partnership between parents and teachers is the 'secret sauce' that makes for a great education.

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