

Parent and Teacher Communication: Fostering a Team Approach

By Beth Ustanko

A commonly held belief in education is that parents and teachers should work together as a team. Many will agree that successfully raising gifted children is vitally important, and in keeping with all important work it cannot be done alone. However, the word team is defined in many ways. For example, when used as a noun, Webster's dictionary defines a team as: "*a number of persons associated together in work or activity*". Merely being associated together though does not encompass the positive relationship that is required between teachers and parents which allows gifted learners to thrive. Consider instead Webster's definition of a team as a verb: "*to form a team or association: join forces or efforts*". This type of team, a team in action, is what is necessary for gifted learners to succeed to their fullest potential. Consequently there is a compelling need for parents and teachers to join forces to create a proactive working partnership.

The question which looms large for both parties in pursuit of this goal is how to create an active and dynamic team. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) asserts that the three key components to creating a collaborative team are "trust, respect, and a commitment to teamwork..."(2019). The challenge, thus, is to foster an environment where both parties work together, rather than against each other. To facilitate productive communication, elements of mutual respect and trust need to exist. It is ideal for this relationship to be reciprocal; meaning it is developed on both sides. Hallmarks are parents placing their trust in the professional expertise of the educators who work with their child, and educators who recognize the key role that parents can play in understanding and advocating for their child's unique needs.

Educators

Educators who show a commitment to honoring the perspective and feedback from families can demonstrate their willingness to establish trust and respect. One way teachers can strive to do this is through establishing two-way communication. "Two-way communication...is correspondence that goes back and forth between the sender and receiver. In this situation, the sender and receiver are equals. Both listen to each other and share their thoughts or questions" (Waterford.org). Ways teachers can facilitate two-way communication include:

- Discuss contact methods with each parent at the beginning of the school year. Use their preferences to create personal and classroom parent communication plans.
- Share positive comments you have about your students with their parents. When they have questions later in the school year, they'll feel more comfortable coming to you.
- Make parent-teacher conferences a goal-making discussion rather than an assessment or lecture.
- Be proactive with letting parents know about any concerns you have about their child. That way, you can all work together to find a solution

- Document your communication efforts to keep track of what works best for each family (Waterford.org).

Parents

At the same time, parents can establish positive relationships with teachers through constructive communication. J.F. Smutny's article "Communicating Effectively with Your Gifted Child's School," originally published in 2002 with an update in 2015, has stood the test of time due to its valuable advice. The full article is a worthwhile read, however her criteria for a successful conference (and one could argue all family and teacher communications) is worth noting for families:

- Your child [is] the main focus, not the opinions or agenda of you or the teacher.
- Both you and the teacher [listen] to each other and [consider] each other's point of view.
- You [negotiate] for solutions that will meet your child's needs without disregarding the teacher's responsibilities or your knowledge of your child.
- You [come] to an understanding even if you had different opinions.
- You both [agree] to work on a solution that will help your child and to continue working together.
- You both [make] commitments and scheduled actions. (Smutny)

The charge to both teachers and parents for this upcoming school year is to develop an active team which joins efforts and forces to provide the best possible education for the gifted child(ren) in their sphere of influence. The responsibility is on both parties to bring forth their best efforts to nurture a relationship which is both positive and productive. These endeavors will take diligence and time. However, they will be rewarded with all stakeholders (including students, parents, and teachers) believing they are effectively achieving their full potential.

References

"How Two-Way Communication Can Boost Parent Engagement." Waterford.org. 8 November 2018, <https://www.waterford.org/education/two-way-communication-parent-engagement/> Accessed 23 June 2022.

National Association for Gifted Children. "Position Statement: The Importance of Parent, Family, and Community Engagement." *National Association for Gifted Children*, 2019, <http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Governance/Parent%20Family%20%20Community%20Position%20Statement-Revised%208-11-19.pdf>. Accessed 23 June 2022.

Smutny, J.F. "Communicating Effectively with Your Gifted Child's School." *Davidson Institute*, 9 March 2020,

<https://www.davidsongifted.org/gifted-blog/communicating-effectively-with-your-gifted-childs-school/>. Accessed 23 June 2022.

Beth Ustanko has been an elementary educator for 22 years, and is currently a Gifted Services teacher with Fargo Public Schools. Her prior experience includes teaching both as a classroom and GATE teacher with West Fargo Public Schools. Beth earned her BA from Concordia College, her Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from St. Catherine University, and completed her coursework for her Gifted and Talented Endorsement from the University of North Dakota. Beth has served as Secretary for NDAGC since 2018. She credits her daughter's GT teacher for encouraging her to consider the field of Gifted Education. She has both found a true passion for working with gifted students, and a better understanding of the needs of her own child.