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Conversation, Not Confrontation: One Mom's Advice on Parent-Teacher Talks

There's a lot at stake when you and the teacher get together to talk about your child's learning problems. When communication breaks down, it's often your child's learning that suffers most. On the other hand, clear, respectful parent-teacher communication can make a school year better than you'd ever hoped.

Mary Beth Castell knows this better than most people because she's been on both sides of the conversation. A former elementary school teacher, she is also the parent of an 11-year-old daughter, Jennifer, who has severe dyslexia. Although she had taught for six years, Mary Beth says she'd never heard the term "dyslexia" until her daughter was evaluated. These days, her advocacy efforts extend beyond her own family; she's talked with hundreds of families through her work at The Learning Brook, a nonprofit resource center she founded for parents of kids with learning problems.

Jennifer began to struggle with reading more than five years ago, but Mary Beth says that only in the past two or three years has she finally mastered the self-awareness and skills needed to build a good working relationship with her daughter's teachers. SchwabLearning.org spoke with Mary Beth recently about parent-teacher communication, and the strategies she recommends to support the learning needs of a child who's struggling with school work.

Q: What are your recommendations for a parent whose child is having problems with school work, but who may not yet be identified as having a learning disability? How can the parent work with the teacher to figure out what's going on?

A: First of all, follow your "gut." If you have a feeling something's not right with your child, that means something's **not** right. I think there is this unwritten rule that you can't go in and express what you see to a teacher because you're not a teacher. But that's silly. As a parent, you know your child better than anyone, so give yourself credit. Go to the teacher and say, "This is what I've noticed." You don't have to say what the behavior means, because you may not know what it means. Observe your child and tell the teacher specifically what you see: "He moves his mouth a lot when he reads," or "He skips words when he reads." The more specific you are, the better.

Then, ask the teacher, what do you think? A good teacher is going to think about it. You might not get an answer right away. The teacher might say, "Gosh, I'm not sure." Teachers rarely say, I don't know. Many teachers are even told not to say they don't know because it opens them up to legal liabilities — it's sad to say, but we do live in 2004. If they don't know, a good teacher will offer to find out for you.

Q: Teachers — and parents — are busy people. What's a good way to keep the communication going once you've made that first contact?

A: When you have your first discussion with the teacher, whether it's a phone call or face-to-face, you want to document it in writing. It's easiest if you just keep a running log or journal. It doesn't have to be formal or fancy, but you need to note: What it is that you and the teacher are each going to do, and when? The sooner you figure out what the problem is, the better off your child is going to be. So, after your first contact, ask: Could we get together again in a week—or two weeks? Also, ask the teacher if she has any ideas of someone in the district who could be helpful; or just ask who she plans to consult with, and when that consultation will happen.

If your child had a physical ailment, you'd be making phone calls to figure out what it was and deal with it. The same process is appropriate with a learning problem. You need to take care of your child's needs. But the approach doesn't have to be negative or confrontational. It's just being assertive, pointing out what you would like, and when you would like it, to keep things moving along.

Q: Dealing with a child's learning problems can be very emotional for a parent. How can a parent acknowledge those feelings, without having them "take over" the home-school communication?

A: Strong emotions come with the identification of the learning difficulty. Your mind is going every which way, trying to learn all the new terms and information. And the clock seems to stand still

because you're thinking, "Oh, my gosh, my child needs help. She's going to fail if she doesn't get help. She's going to be labeled!" So there's this real sense of urgency, and I think the urgency puts parents in panic mode: "I've got to save my child!" From my own experience I've learned that you can go into this negative cycle where one concern feeds another, feeds another; and you want it all taken care of right away.

If you can back off and figure out, "Just what am I **really** asking for? What **specifically** do I want?" Your child doesn't need everything; she probably only really needs a couple of key things. For example, "I think what would help my child right now is extra time for assignments," or whatever the need might be. This approach reduces the stress; it can help get rid of all the tensions that have built up between you and the school. It's so easy when you're panicked to allow the problem to snowball into something much worse than it is.

Q: So, if you feel that you've already started out on the wrong foot with a teacher, for whatever reason, what do you recommend for repairing the relationship?

A: I think the best advice is to start communicating honestly with the teacher. If you suddenly realize that for the last four months everything anyone did for your child was wrong, you need to step back and say, maybe I've been the one with the issues. You may want to say to the teacher: "I feel like we got off to a bad start, and that I've made things worse. I want you to know that I still want some changes for my daughter, but I realize I've kind of lost sight of the long-term process here."

I know that, when I was teaching, I got defensive with parents who acted the way I acted toward my child's teacher at one time. I forgot that the teacher had 25 report cards to complete; and I forgot to give her credit for all the things she did do. I was so focused on problems, I also forgot to tell the teacher about my daughter's strengths, and that I believed those strengths would help her succeed.

We sometimes let communication become simply exchanges of negativity. In my case, the communication with Jennifer's teacher got lost in a few months of negative exchanges because neither one of us was listening to the other. There were apologies, but that was a year that never really got better, and that's a shame.

Q: Based on your experience, what do you think teachers need most from parents to set communication off on a good footing?

A: Most teachers are good, compassionate people. They want to know that a parent is going to be approachable, is going to listen, and is going to be fair. They want to know that you're going to give them a fair shot; not make assumptions about them based on your earlier experiences. That's sometimes hard for parents because they **do** have past negative experiences with teachers.

In my own situation, we went from a very bad school year to a very good year the following year because I broke down and acknowledged that I hadn't taken the best approach to working with the teacher. Even when you still don't think the teacher is right, you may have to apologize for your own mistakes in order to keep the communication open.

The following year, Jennifer's new teacher caught up with me early in the year and asked, "What do you think will work for Jennifer? What would you suggest?" I told him that Jennifer would know best, and that, if he saw her "wheels spinning," to prompt her to talk about it, and go with her ideas. So she had an entire year of school assignments based on a tennis theme—she really loves tennis and follows the sport.

For example, her class read biographies and reported on them. She wanted to do the Williams sisters (tennis champions, Venus and Serena), and her teacher, knowing that she's really good at "reading" people, asked her to compare and contrast the two sisters—their strengths and weaknesses. So, rather than just having her do the basic assignment, he pushed her to a higher cognitive level. He sees her writing abilities more clearly than I do.

Q: Do you have any other general suggestions for establishing and maintaining good parent-teacher communication?

A: Let the teacher know that you want to take the time to communicate with them and that they matter. Treat them as a fellow human being. Find out something about them. Do they have children? Is this their first time teaching this grade? Do they have a child or family member or friend who struggles with learning? What are their hobbies? Are they on the planning committee in the school building? As with any communication between two people, the more you know about them, the more you can make connections.

Before you have a formal conference with the teacher, you want to find out if they have a background in learning disabilities. That will affect how you talk with them about your child. The last thing is, when a teacher is doing something you like, notice it and take the time to tell them. There are many fabulous teachers that go the whole year without one compliment from parents. I loved it as a teacher, and I do it as a parent.

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About the Contributors

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