

Got a Few Minutes?

How to talk with teachers

By John Storm

Listening. Talking. Listening. Sounds simple, right? As easy as conceiving children? We can do a lot, but we fool ourselves if we think we are born with wisdom. Today, we learn talking and listening skills from the electronic mother or father in the dean, but the reality is that we should pay more attention to human interaction, including with our teachers.

There are several elements to a successful conversation with your child's teacher, and perhaps one of the best is to appeal to the teacher as a teacher. The educator has been trained to instruct, to think of how to respond, to help. So your opening comment could be: "Could you please help me understand this?"

This approach, if said without a raised voice, rapidly assures the teacher that you're not about to attack. Too often today, teachers feel threatened, although usually not physically, by aggressive and hostile conversations with parents. In keeping with our popular culture, some parents want immediate results. "Give me my reward even though I didn't have to work for it."

Think about the message we give to our children for the need to probe, to work through problems. We expect our children to become successful (whatever that means) in society, but at times we parents behave like brats when we talk with their teachers.

That's not to suggest that parents should be bland about education. They should show great interest, and often there are plenty of reasons to feel disappointed, even angry. But that energy should be focused to deliver a reasonable, calm message. Without that, our passion is seen as blame, an attack. How do you feel when someone blames you? Beyond that, acting like an immature person frankly blows your credibility.

What about communication differences between males and females? Sociolinguists have shown that often males engage in conversation as if there is a contest. The "my-dad's-faster-than-your-dad" competitive conversation remains with many men today, even if they're only talking about the weather. Women, on the other hand, tend to be better at conversation.

We don't know if those trends continue over into education, but it's reasonable to suggest that many teachers, while saying they welcome parental comments, are inwardly on guard. They've been taught by parents and the community at large to defend their work and reputation.

And the more knowledgeable the parent is, the more unsettling it can be for the teacher.

In my own case, it took a long time to assure teachers that I didn't want to have them fired, nor was I on a mission to destroy programs. I'm happy to report that many educators have been wonderful to me, but only because I worked hard to build those relationships. Schools of education continue to avoid teaching teachers how to talk to parents and others; so you're often left talking with someone who has learned to talk with young students – but not adults.

An additional skill for a parent is to stop a teacher from going on at great length in his or her response to your question. For most of the day, teachers are in positions of authority and, as a result, they talk a great deal. Parents are often stuck when they ask one question and get 15 minutes of response.. The trick is to help the teacher feel good about stopping. One way to achieve this is to say that you have four or five separate areas you'd like to explore and it would be good if the talk around each issue took only a minute or two. Remind them of their skill at timing. Better still, send in your general question themes in advance of your conversation.

Finally, try to leave the conversation with both of you feeling satisfied that your views have been heard and respected.

(Mr. Storm was appointed to the first round of the Ontario Parent Council. The St. Catharines father has been and continues to be heavily involved in education from a parent's perspective.)