Parent-School Communication

Children benefit when their parents and school personnel communicate openly, positively and frequently with each other (Epstein, 1996).

Research indicates that effective communication can help:

- Build strong, collaborative relationships between families and schools, and set the stage for positive partnerships throughout elementary school.
- Encourage parents to be involved in their child's learning at home.
- Provide teachers with information that enable sensitive and supportive teaching.
- Promote children's adjustment in the academic, social and behavioural domains (Powell, Son, File, & Juan, 2010).
- Serve as a key protective factor for children at-risk for school difficulties (Webster-Stratton & Reed, 2010).

Communication between parents and school personnel may include discussions of children's educational progress, including accomplishments and difficulties in the home and school contexts.

Types of Communication:

- **Formal**: Report cards; parent-teacher interviews.
- **Informal**: Discussions at the start or end of the school day; agenda or communication books.
- **Direct**: In person; via phone or email.
- **Indirect**: Newsletters; class websites.

All of these forms of communication are valuable and aim to ensure that parents are involved so that children's needs are best met in the classroom.

"Parents can be an invaluable resource to teachers, providing them with information about their child and what works best in terms of learning and positive behavioural support."

(Alberta Education, 2011)

In Early Elementary School:

As children progress through the early elementary grades, parent-school contact tends to become more school-initiated, formal, infrequent, and focused on concerns such as child difficulties in the classroom (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999).

It is important to note that effective communication involves a two-way exchange of information, trust, and cooperation where both parents and the school work together toward common goals for children's learning and development.
Barriers to Parent-School Communication:

Many parents and teachers face barriers that decrease their ability to effectively communicate with each other (Alberta Education, 2011; Kohl et al., 2006; Rogers et al., 2009):

- **Time constraints** due to parents’ employment and teachers’ busy schedules are often the biggest obstacle for frequent home-school communication.

- **Parents may feel intimidated or uncomfortable** communicating with school personnel due to their own negative educational experiences or previous interactions with their child’s school.

- **Teachers may feel unprepared** to develop collaborative relationships with parents due to minimal training in how to help parents be involved with their child’s learning and how to work with reluctant or challenging parents.

- **Parents and teachers may hold different perceptions** of children’s problems or needs that can impede their collaborative relationship.

Strategies to Better Communicate with Parents:

There several ways that schools can promote frequent, two-way communication with parents to support the development of positive, collaborative relationships between parents and schools.

- **Inform parents at the start** of the school year that their knowledge and views of their child are important, welcomed and encouraged.

- **Contact parents early** to discuss expectations, goals, their child’s strengths and any concerns parents may have.

- **Use multiple modes of communication** (e.g., newsletters, notes, phone calls, agendas) to share information with parents.

- **Give parents specific information** about how to help with their child’s learning at home and be clear on what their child is expected to learn.

- **Notify parents regarding good news** about their child as well as concerns.

- **Support parents in communicating their concerns** about their child. Be sensitive and aware of the challenges that some families face.

- **Recognize parents’ strengths** and commend their attempts to support their child’s learning and to reach out to the school for guidance.

- **Be reliable, honest and open with parents**. Explain jargon or concepts that may be unfamiliar to parents. Accept feelings that parents’ express, follow through on commitments, and ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the child.

- **Be patient and maintain your attempts to communicate** with “hard-to-reach” parents. Remember that these parents are often the ones that would benefit most from resources and support and that building trust takes time and effort.

- **Have an involved parent serve as a classroom liaison** who can provide school information and resources to parents who may feel uncomfortable communicating with the school directly.

- **Communicate in-person** when discussing child difficulties and when possible. Use statements that express concern for the child (“I’m concerned about how Jessie is getting along with the other students”). Use specific examples of behaviour (e.g., “this morning, Jesse hit another student in class”) rather than general labels (e.g., “Jessie is defiant and aggressive”).

- **Use active listening skills** to encourage communication with parents (e.g., maintaining eye contact, leaning forward, nodding to express understanding, summarizing parents’ concern in your own words, write down a list of their concerns).

- **Use a solution-focused approach** by collaboratively problem solving and brainstorming solutions together (e.g., invite parents to think about the strengths and preferences of their child prior to meetings).

Resources:

