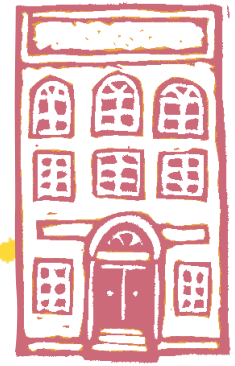




home & school

R E P O R T



Home and School Report brings you articles, advice, and resources for working with your child's teacher and school, as well as information on exemplary programs around the country. If you would like to submit a brief article or program description for consideration for H&S Report, send it to: H&S Report, Parenting for High Potential, 3452 Windspun Dr., Huntington Beach, CA 92649.

ANOTHER SCHOOL YEAR: OFF TO THE RIGHT START! *by Arlene R. DeVries*

Another school year! What will it be like for my child? Will she find academic success? Will she remember the year fondly, or frequently come home in tears? Will it be a battle every morning to get her out the door, or will she go willingly with enthusiasm for learning? What is my role as a parent to ensure her social, emotional and academic growth? Should I sit back and wait? Or if I approach the school, will I be labeled as "another pushy parent"? Another year! Another quandary!

This all too familiar scenario occurs each fall in the minds of caring parents. And, yes, there are things you can do as a parent to guarantee your child has a "banner" year. Your child's education is a partnership from the first day of school to the last graduation ceremony. Trying to educate children without the involvement of their family has been likened to playing a basketball game without all the players on the court.

Get to Know the Teacher

Get to know your child's teacher early in the year. One parent sends a letter of introduction to the teacher which includes a photocopied picture of the family. The parent lists some of the special strengths and interests of the child along with some areas of concern or family information that might affect the child's school performance. This kind of letter might include a request for a conference with the teacher to discuss in more detail how you and the teacher can work together throughout the year.

The overall tone of the letter or conference should be one of positive cooperation. "Catch the teacher doing something right" pays off later. If you have heard from other students or parents about a special activity or interest of that teacher, you can comment in an honest, positive way: "We're looking forward to Mary being in your room this year. I understand you have a wide selection of paperback books available for the students. Since Mary is an avid reader, this will be a wonderful year for her." Or, "Tina loves animals and learning about science. She can't wait to help care for the salamanders and turtles you have in your room." Or, "John is quite fascinated by the Internet access on our home computer. He is really looking forward to learning more from you about acquiring information for his school reports."

To ensure your child's interests, personality type, and learning styles are a compatible match with that of the teacher, you might contact the school principal in May when class assignments are being made for the fall. If your child has a special interest or learning "need," such as reading books several grade levels beyond the classroom placement or grasping material with little or no repetition, you might suggest to the administrator that your child be placed with a teacher who understands and addresses the needs of children who require less time to master the material. If your child is a computer whiz, you might request that he be placed with a teacher whose room is equipped with a computer network that enables him to use the latest technology to complete his assignments. Remember these suggestions are made in the spirit of an advocate, not an adversary!

The trip to school to advocate for your child should not be the first time the school has seen you. A friendly face gets a more positive reception when you have a concern. Do you regularly attend the parent-teacher organization, the open house, and parent-teacher conferences? Have you written a complimentary letter to the teacher, with a copy to the principal, when your child had a particularly positive learning experience at school, or when the teacher went out of the way to make things work for your child? Maybe you sent a letter to the editor of the local paper commending the school for its efforts?

Become a Volunteer

Be known as a friend of education. Volunteer in your school system in ways that will help all children, not just your own. Perhaps it's riding the bus for the field trip to the zoo; sewing costumes for the play; selling popcorn at the concession stand; helping construct new playground equipment. Some parents enjoy working directly with students. Others prefer to support school programs indirectly using their organizational skills to arrange special events or to serve as resource persons. Work schedules are often flexible enough to allow parents to meet with students over the lunch hour or at other times throughout the day.

If a problem arises at school, how do you know when to talk to the teacher? Choose your battles! Not every circumstance warrants a phone call or visit to the teacher. The first step is to discuss the situation with your child and brainstorm some

(continued on page 30)

home & school REPORT

(continued from page 7)

creative solutions. For example, help your child decide what would be an appropriate activity, one acceptable to the teacher, when she has completed the classroom assignment. Next empower your child to resolve the situation on her own. Help her decide when would be an appropriate time to discuss this with the teacher, as well as what she should say and what she might do if the suggestion is not acceptable to the teacher. Prepare her for various outcomes of the conversation.

When should you, the parent, contact the teacher? A general guideline is this: if something is harmful in some way to the child's self-esteem or his general attitude about school, call the teacher. Listen to what your child says about the situation and the emotions conveyed. Keep in mind that you are hearing about the situation from the child's point of view, which may or may not be the same perspective as that of the teacher. Ask the child what he would like you to share with the teacher, how he thinks the teacher will respond, and any creative solutions he might have.

It's important that your first communication be with the child's teacher. Schools respect parents who honor the chain of command: the person closest to the child first, then a building administrator, a teacher or coordinator of gifted programs, and finally district administrators or the board of directors. Persons who threaten to take matters to the superintendent or the school board have seriously jeopardized their chances of affecting positive changes.

Prepare for the Conference

Make an appointment to meet with the teacher, indicating the reason for the conference, then arrive promptly. Go when you are calm! When possible, take someone with you. It could be any person who also has responsibility for the welfare of the child. Be aware of your own personality traits and how you can make them work for you. If you tend to be intense and become emotionally involved, visualize yourself in a more measured, low-key manner. If you are highly verbal but tend to ramble and have difficulty expressing your concern clearly and concisely, practice what you will say or let the other person state your concerns.

Enter the conference situation confidently and positively. Even though school personnel have been trained in educational techniques, you are the expert regarding your children. You have watched them develop over the years. You know their special interests and abilities and have insights regarding their likes and dislikes, emotional highs and vulnerabilities. Be specific about your concerns. You might take samples of the student's writing, art work, projects, or books she has read. Avoid speaking in generalities using words such as "always," "never," "continually;" or words that might negatively affect the teacher, such as

"bored," "brilliant," or "uninteresting." Give specific examples of the child's behavior or concerns. State what you have tried at home and ask for suggested ways "we" (you and the teacher) can work together to improve the situation.

Listen intently and indicate with your body language and your comments that you are interested in the teacher's information. Try to reach consensus on a plan of action. If you sincerely question the wisdom or effectiveness of a suggestion for your child, offer that you'd like time to reflect and think about the implications. Arrange for a follow-up letter, phone conversation, or conference. Thank the teacher in person or in writing for caring enough about your child to take time to meet with you. Do try some active problem solving with your child and communicate again with the teacher as agreed.

Your attitude of supporting the teacher and the school policy gives the child a feeling of security. Those most important to him are united in helping him achieve school success.

With a positive partnership between home and school, chances increase for your child to have a fulfilling, rewarding educational experience. Get to know your child's teacher early, express a desire to work cooperatively with that teacher, be visible at your school, and provide a supportive, nurturing environment at home. Enjoy your son or daughter and the myriad of school activities. Commencement will be here all too soon!

Arlene DeVries is currently chair of the Parent/Community Division of NAGC, co-chair of its Parent Institute Task Force, and a member of the NAGC's Advocacy and Parent Magazine task forces. She is vice president and local parent chapter liaison for the Iowa Talented and Gifted Association, and has been the Community Resource Consultant for the Des Moines Schools gifted/talented program for the past 15 years.

"Your attitude of supporting the teacher and the school policy gives the child a feeling of security."

WHAT DOES "GIFTED" MEAN?

There are many definitions of "gifted and talented." According to *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (1993), "Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared to others of their age, experience or environment. These children or youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require activities not ordinarily provided in the school.

"Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor."