



Tips for Talking with Your Child's School

Do meetings at your child's school run smoothly? Do you become concerned when the school doesn't seem to hear what you are saying? Do you know the best way to ask questions? Are you asking the right person your questions? Are they able to provide clarification and answers?

Asking questions, bringing up issues to discuss, gathering information, and clarifying points are all a part of your role as a parent. Talking with school professionals is a good way to monitor your child's educational progress and identify problems early on.

Here are some tips:

- Make a list of your concerns or questions to ask at meetings. Check them off as you address them.
- Gather data or material that supports your concerns and bring it with you to meetings
- Use a notebook or log to keep track of who you spoke with, the date and time, and their response. (A contact log can be found in PACER's book *PHP-a19, "Working Together."* Visit PACER's website to order this and other publications at: [PACER.org/publications/spcedrights.asp](https://www.pacer.org/publications/spcedrights.asp))
- Ask that you receive any decisions in writing
- Ask for clarification. Make sure you and the speaker are in agreement on what is being said. Statements such as, "I think I understand you to be saying... Is that correct?" or "Tell me more about what that might look like so I understand it clearly." It is okay to say, "I'm sorry, I just don't understand that."

How we ask questions can sometimes determine the response we get. Do you know your communication style?

- **Are you a passive communicator?** "I guess since he is failing he isn't trying hard enough." "If you think that will help, okay, I guess." These are examples of passive communication.
- **Are you an aggressive communicator?** "It's your fault my child can't read!" "You created the problem... now fix it!" These are aggressive comments.
- **Are you an assertive communicator?** Assertive communicators are able to share their thoughts, feelings and opinions openly and honestly. They are clear and direct with their statements. "That sounds like an option. Let's try it for four weeks and see if it makes a difference."

Assertive communicators are the most likely to be successful in expressing their ideas and feelings to others while maintaining a level of respect. It's not always easy to be assertive, especially if you feel nervous or guilty about asking for something. The trick is getting past those feelings, and recognizing that your child's needs are important. Once you begin using assertive communication, you may find that school staff members include you in problem-solving and ask your opinions about ways to improve your child's education.

Here are some tips that you might try:

- Use "I" statements to say how you feel, what you think, or what you would like to see happen. "I feel my child needs extra help in reading. I see her struggle at home and become frustrated." Avoid comments like, "You are a poor teacher and that's why my son can't read." "You're the teacher, not me."

- Ask direct questions to receive information and to help clarify. “*What programs can you provide at school?*” “*What teaching techniques have you seen work with other children with this problem?*” “*Tell me more about what that might look like.*” Avoid saying, “*You created the problem now fix it!*” “*Don’t you know how to teach kids like this?*”
- Be aware of your body language and tone of voice. Do you sit with your arms crossed and stare across the table at others? Do you interrupt others when they are speaking? Do you sound hostile and angry, or confident and open to discussion? If these are areas that you as a parent need to improve on, PACER’s publication *PHP-a19, Working Together* is a great resource.

A good rule of thumb is to make sure everything is put in writing, whether it is coming from you the parent or from the school. Here are some sample letters to let the school know about your concerns.

SAMPLE LETTER

Date _____
 Mrs. Smith
 Flying Elementary School
 1138 S. 14 St.
 Windy City, MN 55555

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I am increasingly concerned with Johnny’s progress in math. He is bringing home work that he appears not to understand, and cannot explain it to me. He is spending 3 hours a night doing homework and we are all getting more and more frustrated. I do not feel we should have a problem like this every night. I am requesting a meeting to address this concern. Please contact me as soon as possible to schedule this meeting. I can be reached any time at (555)-555-5555.

Sincerely,
 (Your name)

FOLLOW-UP LETTER

Date _____
 Mrs. Smith
 Flying Elementary School
 1138 S. 14 St.
 Windy City, MN 55555

Dear Mrs. Smith,

Thank you for meeting with me yesterday to address my concerns with Johnny’s math abilities. My understanding following the meeting is that Johnny’s homework will be modified to only six problems per night, and that you will send a written note in his communication book so I know what he is supposed to be doing.

Also, in addition, if there are other things we can be doing at home to help Johnny with his math, please let us know. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,
 (Your name)