“When Calling Parents Isn’t Your Calling; A Teacher’s Guide to Communicating With Parents” (Guest Blogger Crystal Frommert)

I have had the opportunity to record a couple of podcasts with Crystal Frommert and to read an early copy of her book on communicating with parents. Crystal writes from her experiences as a teacher, administrator, instructional coach, and parent. I invited her to share an excerpt.

Why do we need to value parent interactions?

I worked with a young, no-nonsense principal early in my career who was wise well beyond his years. As the school leader of a public junior high with 1900 students in a building that only comfortably held 1500, he had to work some sort of magic to keep the school running smoothly. He once said to the faculty, *"These parents are sending you the best they have. They're not hiding their good kids at home."* I'll admit it was a bizarre thing to say, but his point was that parents were sending their absolute pride and joy to school. He expected his faculty and staff to remember this in every interaction with a parent, even the tough interactions. When talking with parents about their children, it is far more emotional than talking about any other topic. Sayde Campoamor noted in an NPR CodeSwitch interview, consider the brain science behind conversations about people's children, *"…when you talk to people in general about their kids, you're talking to their amygdalas. And an amygdala is a part of your brain that's the lizard brain that's like 'threat, threat, threat'."* (https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1096469394 NPR CodeSwitch Podcast hosted by Max Freedman and Mark Winston Grittith May 4, 2022)

A few times, I had to tell parents that their pride and joy was struggling in my math class or that they had misbehaved in class. No matter how they responded to this news, I had to always remember that if we did not work as partners, I could not do my job effectively. I needed that parent to support their child at home, support the work I sent home, and work toward the same goals for their child's success. I needed that parent to trust me as a professional educator and also trust that I made decisions with their child's best interest in mind.

Working with parents within healthy boundaries

Partnering with parents doesn’t mean catering to their demands. Like a good doctor would work with a patient toward a healthy solution, a teacher works with the parent toward a solution that is best for the student. If an overbearing parent wants to walk their middle schooler to the classroom door every day, we have to take a firm stance that this behavior is not best for their child. If a parent expects you to spend a disproportionate amount of your resources on their child, you can set boundaries around what is reasonable. The hard part is convincing the parent to partner with us on this decision. Try these sentence stems to get the conversation started:

- The last time we spoke regarding Joey’s behavior in class, I appreciated your support in helping him move forward and correct his behavior. I am hoping that we can work together again to resolve this issue.
- I absolutely see your point of view here that _____. Additionally, Samantha needs to develop skills that will help her _____.
- Did Joanna tell you about what happened at lunch yesterday? I am curious about what you heard at home.

Happy notes

Whether you teach little kids or big kids, many parents want to hear happy things from their child’s teacher. Early in my career, I was given fantastic advice to make sure your first interaction with a parent is a positive one. If you suspect

that you will need to contact the parents of a particular child with a negative message, then reach out very early to get the positive message out when you can. As a math teacher, I took the time to write a personalized email to each family during the first week of school. To save time writing dozens of similar messages, the bulk of the body of the email was copied and pasted. I was sure to add something personal to the email.

Writing an email for each family takes a while, but the investment of time that you put in during the early weeks will pay off for the rest of the year. The parents get a good impression of you as the teacher, and they know that you know their child.

Sending happy notes to parents throughout the year is one of the most rewarding ways to spend a few minutes of your day. A happy note is a short message telling a parent that their child has done something remarkable. The meaning of remarkable has a broad range here. The best time to send a happy note is when a child, who typically only receives negative notes or calls, has shown improvement or has completed a positive task.

Without sounding too transactional, sending messages like this are like deposits into the parent partnership bank. Like a bank account, the balance is maintained through deposits and withdrawals. You want to keep a positive balance.

Partnering with parents can also head off potential academic and discipline issues. In the book, *“No More Taking Away Recess and Other Problematic Discipline Practices,”* the authors include a section titled *“Talk With and About Families.”* This section advises educators to “talk to families early on about your students.” The story told in this section involves a sixth grade girl whose mother was getting remarried to a man the child didn’t like. This life event was causing a lot of stress for the student. The teacher was in contact with the child’s mother frequently, therefore, was able to frame

the child’s display of being distant and critical in a way that allowed the teacher to support her because he knew the cause of her behavior. The teacher and the parent partnered to support the student to use writing as a way to express her anger in a healthy way. By staying in close communication with the child’s family, the teacher was able to redirect the negative behavior which benefited both the home and the classroom environment.

Find Crystal’s book here and read more of Crystal’s articles here.