

# Parents and Teachers Working Together

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## **There is No Such Thing as a Student**

Donald W. Winnicott, the British pediatrician and child psychoanalyst, once said, "There is no such thing as a baby." With this evocative comment he helped us to realize that there is no such thing as a baby separate from its mother. Similarly we could say, 'there is no such thing as a student' - separate from his/her teacher. While it is usually not practical, or even advisable, for a parent to have daily contact with his/her child's teacher, there are some strategic times and ways for parents to work with teachers that can greatly facilitate the learning process for the student.

Parents and teachers know that they have the most important and most unappreciated jobs in the world – to raise and educate the next generation. Nonetheless, sometimes parents and teachers find themselves in conflict with one another. When this happens it is usually to the detriment of the child.

## **The Relativity of Experience**

It is often useful for parents and teachers to try to understand the position of the other. One of the most important components of psychological sophistication is the recognition of "the relativity of human experience." This means being aware that each person experiences the world in a different way based upon social position, gender, race, family background, social context, etc. When we speak of empathy or walking a mile in someone else's shoes, we are talking about trying to see the world from someone else's perspective. When working with children it is important to try to see the world from their perspective and when parents and teachers are working together, it is important for each to try to see the world from the perspective of the other.

## **The Difference between "My Teacher and My Child's Teacher"**

Parents have many ideas about what goes on in a school. Those ideas often have to do with their own experiences of school when they were children. Maybe they were good students or mediocre students or even poor students. Maybe they got into trouble in school. Maybe they never got into trouble because they were so frightened about doing the wrong thing. In any case, when a parent has a child of his/her own, there is a tendency for that parent to navigate between the memories of his/her own childhood and the perceptions of his/her child today. They will say, "If it was good enough for me, it will be good enough for my child." Or "I want to give her everything I never had." "I want to raise my children the way my parents raised me." Or "I'll never treat my child the way my parents treated me." Parents often have similar ideas (or rather confusions) about their education and the education of their children.

When a Mother goes to talk to the teacher of her child, is she talking to that teacher or, in a sense, continuing to talk to, or perhaps argue with, her own teacher from long ago? When a father goes to talk with the principal about his son, does the father feel he is talking with another concerned adult about his son's problem or does he feel that he himself is in trouble and 'has to go see the principal?' Does the parent appreciate the teacher's efforts or in some way feel competitive with the teacher for the love of the child? Does the parent look to the teacher for helpful suggestions or does the parent defend him/herself from some imagined criticism that is expected to come from the teacher? With these few examples, we can see how important it is to recognize the difference between 'the memory of my teacher' and 'the reality of my child's teacher.'

### **Working with Teachers**

One way to overcome an antagonistic relationship with a teacher is to state and restate the obvious - that is, that you are both working together toward a common goal and that you need to find a way to work together. By appreciating the difficulty of the teacher's job and expressing openly your need for his/her input, you draw that teacher into a useful and productive parent-teacher alliance. Teachers are routinely blamed, for just about everything, by students and parents alike. Consequently most teachers are likely to feel more co-operative if you can remind them that you value their work and that you need their input, their observations, and their co-operation in resolving whatever problem your child may be encountering.

### **School Related Problems**

School related problems include *behavior problems* that disrupt the learning process for the student or other students and *academic problems* in which the student's performance is below his/her ability. These problems may be due to a learning disability, an ineffective seating arrangement in the classroom, poor nutrition, not enough sleep, family discord, culture shock (following enrollment in a new school), poor study habits, short attention span, an authority problem, difficult peer relations, etc.

### **What To Do**

In parent-teacher meetings, demonstrate your respect for the teacher by being on time and prepared for the meeting. Ask for observations and assistance. Be sure to acknowledge their work and explicitly voice your appreciation of the teacher's efforts. Make your own assessment of the situation but be open to changing it after getting more information. Acknowledge that any plan you formulate may or may not be successful at first and that you may need to be in regular contact for a time to fine-tune whatever plan you may establish. Give supportive feedback along with your suggestions. Many students have difficulties in school because they have poor study habits. Talk with the teacher about how and where your child does his/her homework and ask for suggestions on how to improve study habits. If you had poor study habits yourself, it may be difficult to help your child in this area. Ask the teacher for suggestions and try to follow through. In this way you will be able to give something to your child that you didn't have for yourself. Finally, ask for any appropriate referrals that you may need such as: pediatricians, judo classes, dieticians, learning skill evaluators, clinical psychologists, tutors, activity programs, art classes, summer camps, baby sitters, etc.

In many circumstances it is easy and often tempting to blame teachers for the problems you may encounter with your children. But blaming is actually not very useful at all. In fact, blaming tends to be a counterproductive attitude that polarizes and then immobilizes everybody. Rather than blaming teachers (or anyone else) for what they did or did not do in the past, it is always better to recognize how they can be helpful in creating a productive change in the future and how you can continue to work together. If you have a particularly difficult problem working with a teacher, it is often valuable to call in a third person, like the principal or a school counselor, to help facilitate the conversation.

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