

Ongoing Communication: Responding to Reactive Communications

Context

While educators work hard to build positive relationships with families, there are times when families may send negative emails about events or topics involving school. It is important to address a family's concern in a way that continues to build trust between school and home.

What do these negative communications look like? A family may:

- Express anger towards the teacher, other families, or other students;
- Question teacher choices; and/or
- Blame teachers for perceived problems.

Primary Goals for Teacher/School Leader Response

- Make family feel heard;
- De-escalate any strong negative emotions;
- Inform family of any additional information; and
- Move toward solution and understanding.

If a family sends a negative communication, you must decide how best to respond.

Here are some options, one of which should be used within 24 hours of the initial email from the family:



Email Reply: Email for scenarios that are brief, timely, and are feasible to clarify and discuss electronically with no more than 4 emails back and forth.

- *Pro:* Can easily be done from anywhere.
- *Con:* Tone can be misread by either the family or teacher.



Phone Call: Call for scenarios that require further clarifying than what is possible to do in a timely manner via email. Call families who have shared in the past that they prefer non-electronic communication.

- *Pro:* You can get a better understanding of the concern and gauge tone/emotions.
- *Con:* Not all families are easily reached by telephone in a timely manner.



In-Person Meeting: Suggest a parent-teacher conference to review the parent concern, to hold conversations that involve more than one staff member or administrator, or conversations regarding student services.

- *Pro:* Allows you to read family body language and show a personal level of care.
- *Con:* Not always possible to meet in-person.



Involve Administration: Administration should be involved if communication is hostile, the administrator has been involved in this particular topic of conversation in the past, or the communication involves a school or district policy.

General Guidelines for Positive Responses

- Set a positive tone while addressing concerns. Some good sentence starters:
 - *Thank you for sharing your concern about ...*
 - *I appreciate your insights about ...*
- Assume the best intent.
- Start from a place of understanding and problem solving.
- Be open and honest. If you don't know about something, share with the family your plan to find out more information and when you'll follow up.

Things to Consider:

- What issue is the family specifically reacting to?
- What assumptions might you be making about the family or the situation?
- What do you **know** about the family that might guide the manner in which you respond?
- What are the non-negotiable aspects related to the family's concerns (example: school or district policy)? What are the negotiable aspects related to the family's concerns (example: the day the student is assigned to share with the class)?
- Who else was included on the email? Does the communication involve any other school staff members, and if so, what role should they play in responding?

School Leaders: how can you help?

- Support teachers by giving them dedicated time during the school day to follow-up with families.
- Set your expectations for non-negotiable and negotiable topics/policies and shares those with the staff.
- Set your expectations for when you feel administration or other staff should be involved in communications as well as when communication should be in-person versus electronic.
- Provide your support to school staff as they build and manage relationships and communications with families.

Examples:



Parent Email About Recess Concern:

Hi [teacher],

Last night [child] told us that [assistant teacher] has prohibited him from playing during recess on three occasions. He says she requires him to stand or sit by her while the other kids are playing. He also said this was because he was on bad behavior – the example he said he could recall was him waving his sleeves around.

We didn't think [school] withholds recess as punishment, and, if [child] were behaving in a way that required his recess to be withheld three times, we feel like you would have raised it with us. We would be particularly upset if [student]'s account is true as, I thought you share this value too, his outdoor and play time are crucial to his overall health and development. We would really appreciate you helping us figure this out.

Thank you very much,
[father]

Teacher Response:

Hi [father],

Thanks for your email. I appreciate you sharing [student]'s comments, as well as your concerns.

I will touch base with [assistant teacher] tomorrow to get more information. I can tell you that sometimes when on the playground we do ask students to "take a break", similar to what we do in the classroom. The message is: you're having a tough time following the rules and accepting reminders, get yourself together, and then you can return to the fun. This usually lasts 1-4 minutes and gives the child a chance to reflect on the issue.

I'll touch base tomorrow after I speak with [assistant teacher].

Take care,
[teacher]

Parent Text About Allergy Concern:

[Student] told me he ate watermelon out on the field the today but he was happy his cheeks didn't puff up this time. He is on record as having a watermelon allergy, correct?
Can you ask the parents not to bring watermelon for the shared snack?

Teacher Response:

Thanks for your message. We did have watermelon as part of our snack last today. He ate the watermelon without issue, and I honestly didn't think twice about it. Looking back at my notes from our conference I see that you shared he is allergic to watermelon. I'm so terribly sorry that this happened and so grateful that he did not have any negative health effects. I will be much more sensitive to this and carry better documentation of his (and other students') allergies.
