

# Improving home-school communication

## Introduction

Think of the last time one of the parents of the children in your class came to talk to you. Was it because there was a problem?

We may assume communication between the home and school happens only when there is a problem that needs fixing. Indeed this is a crucial factor in the home-school communication process. However, we hope that in the following few pages we can encourage you to try different ways of building a positive dialogue between parents and the school. This dialogue can be used not only to resolve problems but also as a way of building trust between school and home and, most importantly, as a way of exploring new ways of optimising children's learning.

There is sometimes an expectation that because we are teachers we know everything about the children in our class. The reality is that only by working together with our pupils' parents or guardians are we able to gain a more holistic view of what and how each child learns and what their needs are.

This article seeks to outline how home-school communication (HSC) can help build a support network around each child's learning. It will also offer some practical advice on starting an HSC programme as well as offering some general tips and advice on avoiding common pitfalls. It will also show how **Home-School Connect** (developed for *English World*) can support you throughout and help build a simple routine for HSC.



# Improving home-school communication

## What is home-school communication (HSC)?

HSC, as described by Epstein and Dauber (1991), is based on two-way communication, respect and a positive relationship between the parent and teacher with the focus being on the welfare and development of the child. Good HSC is key to enabling teachers and parents to work together to support the child's learning and ensure the child feels secure in their learning environment. It is not only about preventing and fixing problems but also about creating an invigorating learning environment for teachers and children and, most importantly, it is a way of enriching and extending the curriculum. Lavoie (2008), Grant (2010) and others have shown that functional HSC can help in the following ways.

### *Preventing problems*

HSC can help:

- reduce the number of Special Education referrals
- reduce dropout rates
- reduce the incidence of high risk behaviour
- target 'hard to reach' parents which in turn can result in better attendance and achievement.

### *Creating a positive learning environment*

HSC can:

- result in improved test scores/grades
- nurture a more positive student attitude
- help improve staff morale
- strengthen relationships between a school and community
- increase parental support for a school's initiatives
- improve parental opinion of and regard for the school
- have a positive impact on a child's achievement
- positively influence a child's attitude towards school.

Parental involvement in a child's learning has been shown to be a better predictor of achievement than social class or school factors (Grant, 2010 p.14). This is a significant finding and suggests that as educators we need to be maximising every opportunity to improve a child's learning experience by working with the child's parent or guardian.

It is very important to emphasise that none of these benefits happen automatically; they are a result of commitment, sustained focus and encouragement on the part of both the school and parents.

# Improving home-school communication

## How to develop effective, two-way HSC

As mentioned earlier, starting an HSC programme is not a decision to be taken lightly. It will take effort and commitment. For this reason try to involve the school administration and as many colleagues as possible. Here are some practical suggestions on how to increase communication with parents.

- Make yourself available to parents. For example, let them know that they can come and talk to you at a set time every week. Ideally, this would be face to face but make sure they can contact you via text message or email if necessary (but avoid using your personal email address or mobile, if at all possible).
- Try to have regular communication with each home, once a month ideally.
- Make sure you make it clear to parents from the outset why you are contacting them, explaining clearly the benefits of HSC.
- Try to give parents specific information about their children. Avoid generic praise, such as "Peter is doing very well." Instead try to think of specific examples where the child has shown progress. For example: "Peter used to find it difficult to use the past tense in English, but he's worked really hard recently and has made good progress. The other day he told the class about his trip to the beach and used the past simple perfectly."
- Whilst not avoiding negative feedback, try to ensure the communication is as positive as possible. If there is a real problem, start a separate dialogue with the home.
- Encourage parents to let their children know that they are talking to the teacher. This shows the child that both parent and teacher are taking an interest in their study.

Perhaps most importantly, provide opportunities for two-way communication. It is to be expected that a school should want to communicate with parents to pass on messages and to show how the child is progressing. However, it is easy to forget that parents should be a part of the dialogue. If you, as a teacher, send a message home, what reassurance do you have that it has been received? For this reason, encourage parents to reply to every communication that you send. This could be as simple as asking them to sign a note to show it has been received, or writing a short comment. From this simple foundation it should be possible to show parents that you want them to be a part of the conversation.

# Improving home-school communication

## What should you do if parents never reply to your communication?

### Recommendations:

There is no simple answer to this – it will depend on the situation. However, we would recommend some of the following:

- Review your communications: are you asking too much of the parents? (Are your messages too long? Do they require parents to spend a long time doing an activity? If your messages are in English, consider sending a translation.)
- Talk to the child and explain how important it is that you are able to talk to their parents.
- Contact the parents directly, explain what you are trying to achieve and ask them if they have any concerns. If they do, you may need to moderate your expectations.
- Persevere. Show that you are committed and ensure that each message is different and not simply part of a routine.
- Did you make it clear to parents from the outset why you've been contacting them? If not, make sure you explain the benefits of HSC to them.

### Things to be aware of:

- Parents' school experience may not have been positive so they may be reluctant to get involved. It may be these 'hard to reach' parents that you most want to talk to.
- Communication needs to be regular and frequent (though needn't be extensive). That way parents and teachers can develop a relationship and learn to trust the mechanism. This will take time and commitment.
- Bear in mind that the message you send out may not be the one that is received, especially if the child is the messenger.
- Some parents may be reluctant to take part as they may feel they are doing the teacher's job.
- Parents may feel a loss of authority if, for example, they are asked to help with homework they do not understand.
- Communication needs to be two-way: home to school/school to home.



# Improving home-school communication

## Practical advice on how to start an HSC programme

- Make a plan. What are your realistic objectives and how do you plan to meet them?
- Start small: HSC will take up some valuable preparation time for teachers, and it will involve a time commitment from parents too. Therefore, it is important that the communication is succinct, on message and doesn't become a chore.
- Be realistic: you won't reach all parents all of the time.
- Consider the messenger: what is the most reliable way of ensuring the communication gets through? (Remember all those forgotten notes in the bottom of the school bag? What about the confused messages where the pupil has not understood the teacher?)
- Talk to other teachers/departments. How do they communicate with the home? Can you work together so that the parents are getting a consistent message? Does your school have a way of sending text messages or emails to all parents?

To help you get started you could consider a short introductory questionnaire, such as the one below (translated into the parents' language) as a way of gathering attitudes to English.




**Please tell us a little about your child and their attitude to English.**

- 1) Does your child enjoy their English class?
- 2) Do you feel they are making progress?
- 3) What could be done to make his or her experience better?
- 4) Does your child show you their homework?
- 5) Is there anything you'd like to tell us about your child? (For example: What do they enjoy doing? What are their strengths?)

# Improving home-school communication


## How does *Home-School Connect* support HSC?

*Home-School Connect* is an HSC system designed specifically for users of *English World*. It aims to take the hard work out of setting up an HSC system. At its base is a series of merit cards designed to celebrate success and show progress both to the parents and to the children themselves. Each card features some core language, a simple but engaging task and an encouraging phrase in English. The children review the language, carry out the task and show their parents who in turn are asked to sign the card. The cards can then be collected in a folder or ideally displayed around the classroom, thereby acting as a reference point for key language and to demonstrate how much each child has learnt during the school year.

Language practice		How many people like these sports? Tick (✓) the boxes.				
Do you like swimming? Yes, I love it. We went to the gymnastics competition.		1	2	3	4	5
<b>Word bank</b>  cycling judo show jumping swimming gymnastics sailing skiing  exciting amazing brilliant interesting favourite						
						
						

**Merit card**

**Great work!**



**English World**

**Level 3 Unit 6**

**Home-School Connect**

Parent's signature

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*Home-School Connect* is an excellent way of gently increasing the two-way dialogue between the home and the school for the following reasons:

- *Home-School Connect* provides a reason for making contact with families and, more importantly, by asking the parents to sign the card we can see how receptive they are to increasing the amount of communication.
- *Home-School Connect* is an easy way to share children's progress with families. The merit cards are sent home regularly and help to keep the parent informed about what the child is learning at school through the topic-based activities.
- *Home-School Connect* strongly supports parents in helping their child to learn at home. This support comes in the shape of extra tasks and games that are available in the local language, so even if the parent does not speak English they can be involved in the child's learning.

# Improving home-school communication

## Action points

Before starting your own HSC programme we recommend you follow these steps to help you set realistic expectations for both you and key stakeholders.

### Investigate

- 1) **Investigate:** Do any of your colleagues already have a functional communication system in place? How does the school administration communicate with parents? Can you use the same system?

**Objective:** establish a baseline.

### Prepare

- 2) **Prepare:** How do you think you can make the current communication process better? How much time can you set aside to prepare and implement an HSC programme? How will you measure success? Over the course of a month send out a few communication pieces, preferably using different formats (notes, email, text messages). Ask your parents to acknowledge receipt and measure which format had the best response.

**Objective:** establish realistic expectations given time available and what you hope to achieve.

### Implement

- 3) **Implement:** You now understand how the school currently communicates with parents and how you plan to make it better, so it's time to start your programme. Remember, don't be overly ambitious, and be careful not to overload parents with messages.

**Objective:** establish how realistic you have been and the likely sustainability of the programme.

### Review

- 4) **Review:** This is a key stage. Look back over steps 1–3 and evaluate what went well and where you think the programme can be improved.

**Objective:** amend and adapt your plans to ensure maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

Once you have completed this cycle you will have discovered the best possible HSC system for you, your pupils and their parents. You will see for yourself the benefits of HSC as it revolutionises your relationship with parents and improves the standard of your pupils' English.

# Improving home-school communication

## References and further reading

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