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Reflecting on Childhood: A Link Between Parents and Teachers

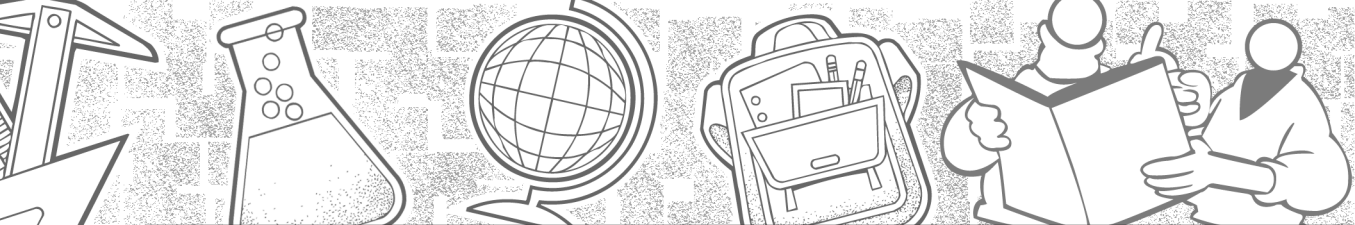
Ms Fenwick breathed a sigh of relief. Her students were gone for the day and she could take a moment to relax. She smiled as she thought about the exuberance of the six- and seven-year-olds she taught every day. She tried to remember her own childhood and thought back to her Year 1 classroom. 'The thing I remember most,' she decided, 'was trying to write the letters of the alphabet so that each one looked perfect on my page. I would get so frustrated when my attempts didn't look as good as the teacher's examples! I don't know if any of my students even care about things like that.'

Growing up in the early years of the 21st century isn't the same as growing up in the, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s or even the 1990s. Close your eyes and take a few moments to reflect on some memories from your own childhood. Then, in the left-hand column below, make a list of the various things, events, places and activities you can remember. Next, in the right-hand column, make a list of typical events, places and activities an average child in your class might experience today.

Memories from my Childhood

Typical Activities of Children Today

As you look at the two lists, what conclusions can you make? What things have changed? Write your observations and conclusions below or on a separate sheet of paper.



Families in a Time of Change

Families in Australia and New Zealand, like those in other parts of the post-industrial world, have gone through profound changes in the past thirty years. Family structures have changed, many more women are in the work force, families move from place to place with greater frequency and corporate restructuring and mergers make continual employment less certain. Divorce and remarriage are commonplace. Some kids live with grandparents while others see a series of live-in boyfriends or girlfriends come in and out of their home. Still others move and change schools several times in just one school year!

Because of this state of constant flux in their lives, some children receive no messages about expectations from their parents and seem to have no guidelines for behaviour, rules or boundaries. These children may be called on to assume adult responsibilities without the maturity to know how to do it. When there is little or no parental supervision, children often assume they can do whatever they want. This independence and freedom without commensurate skills in responsible behaviour is usually a recipe for underachievement in school, and an indicator that parent–teacher communication would probably be helpful. These parents need guidance themselves in order to learn how to guide their kids.

Another sign of change is that in many cases, life is full of too many activities and time to simply be together as a family is at a premium. With both parents working, children are often left to wake up and get to school on their own. Many children rarely eat a meal with their parents or have time in the evening for a conversation or a story. This results in little or no communication. One study showed that the average parent talks to their child only twelve minutes per day! Is it any wonder children turn to the TV for conversation and entertainment?

Teachers and parents both feel the effects of the tremendous changes inherent in this new century. Parents look at everything going on in the world, in their community and even within the school, and may see vast differences from their childhood experiences. Often this is a good way to begin a conversation establishing a collaborative relationship with parents, for parents and teachers often look at the world through similar generational eyes.

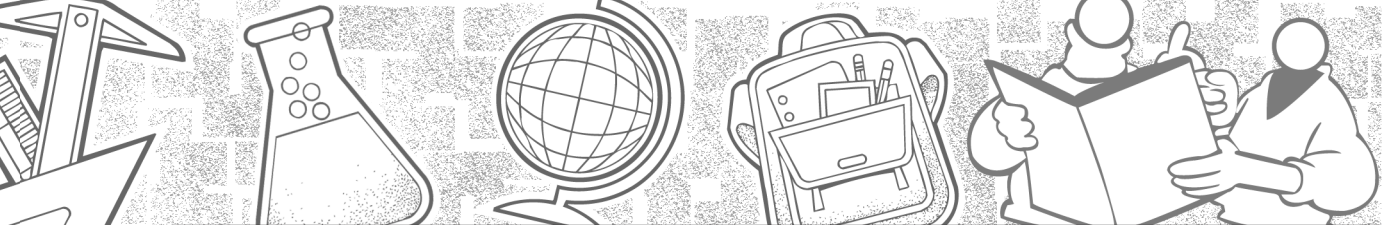


As I have mentioned, family structures have changed during the past several decades. Because of this, the skills needed to meet the challenges of family life have grown more and more complex. Parents must fill numerous roles with their children, and must do this while they are balancing a multitude of other demands. Many parents are simply overwhelmed at the task that confronts them. Some have all but given up.

Parents legitimately want to have a voice in the education of their children. When teachers and parents view the educational process as a collaborative effort, everyone benefits. You might be wondering what this actually means.

‘Collaboration’ is one of the buzz words in education at the present time, but we must go further than merely repeating the appropriate words and sincerely want parent participation and input into their child’s education. Parents need to be involved in the day-in and day-out activities of the school. The more they are involved, the more they will understand about the world their child lives in for a good portion of each day. The more parents are involved, the more they will appreciate, understand and support the schools.

Parents can provide valuable information about their child’s behaviour, educational concerns, strengths, weaknesses and how to manage their son or daughter. Additionally, recent research has shown that parental attitude and encouragement can affect school success at least as much as a child’s innate abilities. Many times the difference between children who do well at school and those who do not relates to their parents’ attitudes about school. In other words, parental involvement enables children to achieve better and learn more.



Productive Communication between Parents and Teachers

Most parents welcome suggestions from teachers and other adults who are interested in their children. Usually the most difficult thing is finding time to communicate with one another. Make communication with parents one of your top professional goals. In an age of sometimes difficult and complex children, parents and teachers need to work together and communicate regularly with one another in a productive manner.

Good communication involves skills in both *talking* and *listening*.

As good talkers, teachers must be sure that their ideas and concerns are expressed clearly and can be understood by the parents. Problems should be stated as simply as possible but they should not be ignored or avoided. It is very important for parents to know when there are problems and understand why the problems are occurring. Therefore, it is essential to state a child's behaviour in real terms that parents can understand and identify with. Be specific. Don't use educational jargon and say, 'We're seeing some signs of aggression in Jeremy.' Instead, spell out the problem: 'Jeremy has been in three fights at school this week.'

As good listeners, teachers must be sure they listen in such a way that they will really understand the parents' point of view. Concentrate on what the other person is saying. Don't spend the time thinking about the next statement you will make and miss what the parent is saying. Too often what passes for listening is actually arguing mentally as the other person makes their points!

Use the form on the next two pages as you reflect on your own ideas about good communication. Jot down your own ideas; then discuss the topic with other teachers. Share your ideas at a staff meeting.