



Building Empathetic Relationships with the Parents of Your Most Challenging Student

By Alex Shevrin , Teacher/leader & techie at independent, alternative, therapeutic high school
Posted 07/10/2016 6:00PM | Last Commented 10/07/2016 8:59AM

Teacher relationships with parents can be tense: we educate other people's children, and miscommunication, lack of understanding and empathy, and misaligned values can all contribute to relational challenges. However, it is one of our most important roles as educators to engage empathetically with even the most challenging family relationships. We do our best work for students when we educate the whole child, and the whole child includes that child's parents, family or caregivers. Just as with our students, authentic and caring relationships are the foundation to a safe and caring school environment.

All these this is especially true with the parents or caregivers of our most challenging students. Sometimes when we are frustrated with students' behavior, it can be easy to blame a student's home life, be exasperated that family expectations are different than those in school, or feel that parents "just don't care." It's a fact that challenges at home often translate into challenges at school, but that fact sets our work in motion rather than halting it. To make change, we must partner with families and caregivers. With the parents of the students who challenge us the most, we must in turn challenge ourselves to reach for empathy and curiosity instead of blame.

Here are a few ways to spark connection and empathy with the parents of your most challenging student.

"What is amazing about your child?"

This is especially important to ask if you are feeling frustrated or hopeless about a student's progress on a regular basis. Challenge yourself to really listen to families about the special and amazing things about their children, even (and especially!) the things that have nothing to do with academics. These interests, strengths and passions might be the key to your own development of positive relationship with that student.

What happens if a parent shrugs or sighs and says, "nothing, nothing is amazing about my child"? You'll find this to be a pretty rare response, and if you hear it, use it as a clue that the parent in question likely needs more support and may be feeling equally frustrated, burned out or overwhelmed. If you notice yourself feeling judgemental of a parent's commentary about their child, ask more questions: be curious and dig in about how the caregiver may be feeling and what context might surround this, rather than making assumptions.

"What has school been like for your child in the years before this? What was school like for you?"

When my student has a parent who seems disengaged, angry or fearful in our interactions, it's a clue to me that something feels not okay about our interactions. Sometimes this is about me - I may be communicating in a way that doesn't work for that family - but sometimes it can be about what "school" means for that person, family, or culture. Maybe my student's mom had a really negative experience with a teacher and doesn't trust me to do something different for her child. Maybe my student's sibling is struggling and the family isn't getting the support they need from the district. Or maybe my student's family doesn't trust institutions in general, and schools specifically.

I need to own not only my own actions but my role as a representative of the institution of school and find ways to build bridges and rewrite negative scripts. Hearing a history of my student's and their family's experience of school might shed some light on where we can start.

"How can I help?"

As a teacher, it isn't your role to solve all of your students' family's challenges, but as human beings, we can be in service to one another by offering caring outreach. If my student is struggling because she's hungry every morning, it may not be my role to solve her family's food insecurity, but it is absolutely my role to make a connection between that family and a local food shelf, social service agency, or the school counselor. An extra phone call or email may only take a few minutes out of my day, but may make a world of difference as a gesture of care.

Additionally, we must model vulnerability and be willing to really hear if what a parent needs is for us to change our classroom practice. When we communicate that it's okay to question our methods, collaborate on our practices, and problem-solve together, we invite further conversation. If we shut down suggestions by saying, "I'm the teacher and I know best" - either through our words or our actions - then we are very clearly communicating that we don't actually want parent involvement. Instead, we can at minimum test out strategies or approaches parents offer. Sometimes, these end up being some of the best classroom experiences!

"I care about your child and I care about you. I won't give up on you or your child."

Make sure students, families, and caregivers know without a doubt that you care and that you won't give up. Even when you don't have a solution to a challenge, say "I don't know, but I want to work together to figure it out." This is especially important in moments of conflict and tension.

During a tense phone call with a student's parent, I reminded myself to slow down, take a deep breath, and say out loud to her: "It might not feel like it while we're having this conversation, but I really care about your daughter and think she's funny, brilliant and so capable. I have hope that she will persevere, and that we can work on it together." That moment shifted the tone of our conversation and our relationship. We reminded one another why we were there, and in service of the student as a whole child, we moved forward together.

The Big Picture

Relationships with our students' parents, families and caregivers aren't easy because human relationships aren't easy. If you read these questions and immediately think, "those parents can't..." or "those parents won't..." challenge yourself to increase your compassion and remind yourself that building trust takes time. When we approach with an empathetic stance, we can move more effectively toward caring and reciprocal relationships that benefit the students we teach.

This post was created by a member of Edutopia's community. If you have your own #eduawesome tips, strategies, and ideas for improving education, share them with us (<http://www.edutopia.org/node/add/discussion>).

Sign in to vote! (<http://www.edutopia.org/user/login?destination=node/478581>)

Sign in to Flag as Spam (<http://www.edutopia.org/user/login?destination=node/478581>)

Source: www.edutopia.org/discussion/building-empathetic-relationships-parents-your-most-challenging-student

Reprint Policy: www.edutopia.org/terms-of-use

Privacy Policy: www.edutopia.org/privacy-policy