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The Dicey Parent-Teacher Duet

By [SARA MOSLE](#)

The teacher-parent relationship is a lot like an arranged marriage. Neither side gets a lot of say in the match. Both parties, however, share great responsibility for a child, which can lead to a deeply rewarding partnership or the kind of conflict found in some joint-custody arrangements.

As a teacher and parent, I see the relationship from a dual perspective. Educators almost universally regard parent involvement within economically disadvantaged student communities as a vital way to boost student achievement.

Yet in more affluent neighborhoods, active parent engagement, as the clinical psychologist [Wendy Mogel](#) has argued in her latest book, "The Blessing of a B Minus," can interfere with children's necessary maturation and strides toward independence.

Parents of all classes may be forgiven if they can't clearly identify the point at which a parent goes from providing valued hands-on support to becoming an obstacle to children's growth.

"No one wants to be a helicopter parent," says Liza Lee, head of the Columbus School for Girls in Ohio and a former head of the middle school at Brearley, the elite private school in Manhattan. "Parents just don't always know how to work with schools." Ms. Lee points out that few parents know anything about other families' private parent-teacher conferences and, as a result, have few models for guidance.

So parents have no idea whether it's better to be a squeaky wheel, or avoid rocking the boat lest they irritate a teacher who will subsequently take his or her annoyance out on the child, a common parental fear, according to Ms. Lee, and one that's almost always unwarranted.

For teachers, the terrain can feel equally treacherous. "Today, teachers are being bashed everywhere they turn," Ms. Lee says. "They're scared. They feel parents put their jobs in jeopardy. The parent is in the position of power."

A few simple guidelines emerge in conversations with educators and parents on the subject of how best to reduce the mutual anxieties and establish and maintain the kind of trust that is essential to respectful and productive parent-teacher communications:

First, encourage children to take the lead. Many parents can't resist the urge to fix even older students' problems for them instead of giving the child a chance to sort out difficulties

on his own, says Kevin Skelly, a father of four and the superintendent of the Palo Alto Unified School District, which serves the offspring of Silicon Valley executives and a small percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. "We all need to learn how to work with diverse people," he says. "Imagine how confident a student will feel if he or she works with the teacher and resolves the issue on his or her own?" College admissions officers tell Mr. Skelly they're looking for students "with a voice," he says. "When parents intervene on their children's behalf, it's robbing them of their own voice."

Second, know the power - and limitations - of electronic communications. Many parents and teachers communicate almost exclusively by e-mail or text messages. The appeal is obvious: communications can be asynchronous and delivered with the tap of a thumb. Jasper Steenhuis, who teaches at a KIPP original charter school in the South Bronx, tries to accommodate families' needs. "It can be disruptive for a parent to receive a phone call on the job," he says, and those without a strong command of English may feel more comfortable composing messages in writing.

But there are drawbacks. It's easier to fire off a text in anger or annoyance; so, as Ms. Lee points out, conflicts often escalate in e-mail in ways they never would face to face. Educators caution against using e-mail or texts except to convey simple information like appointments or scheduled absences. Whenever a subject is delicate or a matter can't be resolved by a quick exchange, Mr. Steenhuis advises picking up the phone or meeting in person.

Third, if you use e-mail for minor matters with a teacher, don't copy the head of school or another administrator. "It's disrespectful to teachers and parents alike, as it sends the message you don't think there's even a chance you can work this out on your own," Mr. Skelly says. "If you have issues, take them up directly, as you would want."

Fourth, teachers, please respond to communications within a reasonable time period. Nothing drives parents battier, they say, than initiating communication and never receiving a reply. Teachers can't always resolve an issue immediately, especially when they need to consult colleagues in order to do so. But teachers can and should acknowledge messages promptly and let parents know they will respond.

It helps if parents have some idea of what teachers' days are like. If a parent sends an e-mail at 8 a.m., a teacher may not see it until after her classes are over for the day. My students know I'm unlikely to respond to an e-mail between the hours of 6 p.m. and 9 p.m., as that's when I'm focusing on being a parent to my own child.

Fifth, if you do drop the ball, say "I'm sorry," as you would to a friend. It's gracious and builds trust. "Nothing is more disarming," Mr. Skelly says, "and it's so simple to do."

Sixth, identify and build on strengths. I don't do this enough as a teacher, and most parents, according to educators I've spoken to, don't do it at all, but if you have something positive to say, say it early and often. Parents are better prepared to hear about a child's challenges,

if a teacher knows their child, understands his or her strengths and is prepared to build on them. The same is true for teachers. Let them know what they're doing right, not just what they're doing wrong. Seventh, look for concrete solutions. When parents and teachers have chronic conflicts, Ms. Lee assumes that, as in a bad marriage, both sides are telling "the truth," at least from their perspective. But that doesn't relieve either party of coming up with a solution for the child's sake. Whatever the trouble, identify the concrete outcomes desired.

And finally, proceed with humility. Mr. Skelly counsels parents to take occasional bellyaching about his teachers by a child - especially a teenager - with a grain of salt. Most teenagers are in some kind of opposition to authority as they struggle to grow up.

"The teenager, being a teenager," Mr. Skelly says, "may not rank your parenting skills very high, either."