



When students struggle:

A teacher's guide to communicating with families

Introduction

Talking with families about students' struggles can be difficult sometimes.

We've created this guide to make conversations with parents and caregivers easier and more productive. The guide contains tips, insights, and information that can help you partner with families to provide the best support for all students.

What's inside

- » **Building relationships from day one**
- » 5 reasons to partner with families
- » How to meet families where they are
- » How to connect with families of color and emergent bilinguals
- » **Communication tips**
- » 8 ways to foster open communication with families
- » Conversation starters to use with families
- » **Resources to make communication easier**
- » Printable resources in English and Spanish
- » More resources

Authors

Trynia Kaufman, MS Expert and Senior Manager of Editorial Research, Understood

Amanda Morin Director of Thought Leadership and Expertise, Understood

Tara Drinks Editor, Understood

Gretchen Vierstra, MA Senior Editor, Understood

Lydia Breiseth Director, Colorín Colorado

About Understood

Understood is the only lifelong guide for those who learn and think differently. Today, we reach more than 20 million people each year, helping them discover their potential, learn how to take control, find community, and stay on a positive path along each stage of life's journey. Once learning and thinking differences are embraced, confidence is built, community is created, jobs become careers, and life is more fulfilling.



Building relationships from day one

Of all the factors that determine student outcomes, family engagement is at the top of the list. Research shows that teachers can initiate and encourage engagement from all families – regardless of their culture, race, language, or income – with positive results.

In this section, you'll learn:

- **Why partnering with families is important**
- **How to help families navigate barriers to engagement**
- **Strategies for partnering with families of color and emergent bilinguals**

5 reasons to partner with families

Partnerships between schools and families can improve students' grades, attendance, persistence, and motivation. Involving families of students who learn and think differently is especially important.

Research and classroom experience support the five benefits below. By connecting with students' families, you can:

1 **Help students learn by connecting your lessons to their background knowledge, interests, and culture.**

Students connect more deeply with the material when lessons are tied to their experiences. There's a brain-based reason why: The neurons in students' brains become more active when they think about something they already know. These neurons make it easier for other neurons to fire and form new neural pathways. The pathways literally connect new information with old in the brain. And this connection makes it easier for students to learn and retain the new information.

Families can tell you about their strengths and interests – in other words, what makes those neurons fire. So be intentional about asking for that information, especially if a family's experiences are different from your own.

2 **Identify appropriate accommodations or supports.**

Students' families can help you identify the best ways to differentiate or personalize instruction for students who learn and think differently. Families can provide insight about strategies that have worked well at school and at home – and those that have not.



“

Meaningful interactions between teachers and families of students who learn and think differently can build trust, inform instruction, and improve student outcomes.

”

3 Empower families to support academic goals at home.

Most families believe that school is important and want their child to do well. But they might not know how to effectively support their child's education.

Give families tips for how to reinforce skills at home. For example, share a skill you taught this week – whether by email, phone call, newsletter, or the class website. Then provide just one or two ways they can practice that skill at home.

Students with IEPs have annual goals and may need to practice certain skills more than their peers do. Talk with those students' families about how they can reinforce IEP goals over time.

4 Develop effective and consistent methods for addressing behavior.

Open lines of communication help you know if something is happening at home that might affect a student's behavior in school. When you know the cause of a behavior, you're more likely to find the best way to help.

Families can also share behavior strategies that work at home for you to try at school. Consistency between home and school can help the student know what to expect and to practice more positive behaviors.

5 Have shared high expectations for the student.

Of all the ways families can be involved in their child's education, nothing matters more than how much they believe in their child's ability to succeed.

So thank families for believing in their children and having high expectations for their success. Make sure to share your own expectations for students, too.



How to meet families where they are

Families can support their children's education in many different ways. They may want to be more engaged with the school, but there may be barriers to being more involved.

Here are some common barriers and how you can help families navigate them.

Common barriers	Possible solutions
Unspoken expectations about engagement Families might not see it as their place to be involved in their child's education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Let families know that you welcome and encourage their involvement.• Ask what family engagement was like in their prior school.
Inflexible work schedules Families may have trouble taking time off from work or communicating with the school from their workplace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find out how and when they prefer to communicate: in person, emails, notes, phone calls, or videoconferences.• Record your back-to-school night presentation.
Shared or complex custodial situations Some students split their time between different homes or are part of the foster care system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with families and school administrators to better understand who to communicate with about what.• If you're unsure about the educational rights of a parent or foster parent, ask your school's social worker or counselor.
Prior negative school experiences Families of students who learn and think differently may have years of negative experiences with schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acknowledge past negative experiences if families bring them up.• Be concise, avoid using jargon, and offer information in multiple formats when possible.
Language/culture differences or immigration concerns Families of emergent bilinguals or immigrant students may find it challenging to interact with teachers and the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide documents in the family's home language – it's their legal right. Find out if your school has translated documents already and what service you can use for new documents.• Schools are legally required to provide interpreters. Never use students as interpreters.



How to connect with families of color and emergent bilinguals

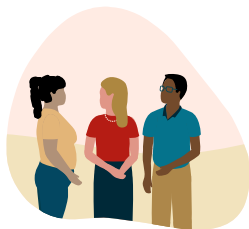


Emergent bilinguals are students who are continuing to develop their home language while also learning an additional language.

Students of color and emergent bilinguals are often underserved and underestimated as schools learn how to best meet their needs. And it's a common experience for families of Black and brown students to feel unwelcome and not heard at school.

Often, schools and teachers are not aware of biases that affect the way they interact with students and families. Below are some ideas and tips to help you connect with families and help them be heard.

Build trust with families by getting to know their students.



- Look for informal opportunities to spend time with students. Use that time to learn about students' strengths, talents, and interests.
- Talk with colleagues who have relationships with your students. Ask them what they know about students' cultures, languages, academics, and social-emotional learning.

Learn about and tap into families' skills, talents, and strengths.



- Communities of color often bring strengths that schools don't recognize. Make it a point to find out about families' skills, hobbies, and careers.
- Ask families open-ended questions. Avoid asking direct, personal questions, which may make families uncomfortable.



Get a better understanding of how families view school–family partnerships.



- Ask families to describe the role they've played in their child's schooling.
- Ask about their dreams for their child's future.

Think outside the box.



- Understand that some families may be anxious about entering the school building, providing identification and personal information, or signing documents.
- Ask families when and where they would like to meet or attend events. Consider options such as meeting at a family's home, at a house of worship, or in a public place.

Advice from the field: How to connect with families of color

Black and brown families often face biases when communicating with the school. While everyone's experience is different, there are ways to help make sure Black and brown families are heard.

Here's some general advice from the field:

“Get to know your Black and brown students on a real level. Don't make assumptions. Getting to know your students will help you feel more comfortable communicating with their families.”

– Kareem Neal, MA, special education teacher in Phoenix

“All parents, no matter what language is spoken, want to know that you understand their child. It's especially important when you don't speak the same language as them. Educators may want to focus on communication challenges right away. Instead, make the extra effort to keep the focus on what you have in common with families: the child. Share what you know about your student — the positive traits you see at school — before jumping into a conversation about a concern.”

– Shivohn García, PhD, executive director of impact at Understood

“Be prepared to listen. Often in education, we do a great job of talking but we struggle to really listen. Listening carefully to families of Black and brown students will help you better serve the diverse needs of those students..”

– Tim King, EdD, statewide program director for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in Florida



Communication tips

Communication is key to building a positive relationship with your students' families. But sometimes communication can be tricky, especially when you need to talk about a student's challenges.

In this section, you'll learn:

- **Ways to foster open communication with families**
- **How to have collaborative and productive conversations**

8 ways to foster open communication with families

When you establish open lines of communication with families, you can more easily address any concerns. Here are eight ways to foster open communication:

1 **Imagine yourself in their place.**

Building a relationship with families starts with empathy. Consider the perspective of a parent or caregiver whose child was recently identified with a learning disability or ADHD. The family might be uncertain about what this means for their child's future. Or they might still be processing the news – unsure of how they feel. No matter the family, know that parents and caregivers are on their own journey.

2 **Begin with a positive interaction – and then keep it up.**

When you first reach out to families, start with something good. Introduce yourself, share something you enjoy about their child, or simply let them know you're available to speak.



Aim to share a piece of good news at least twice a month.



3 **Find out how families prefer to be reached.**

Ask if families have a preferred way of communicating and at what time of day. Then honor that preference. In cases when email is appropriate, remember that your tone may be hard to interpret in an email.



4 Gather your thoughts in advance.

When you have to raise a concern, draft what you want to say before the meeting or phone call. A bulleted list of notes can help you prioritize and keep track of your thoughts. Consider sharing a high-level version of this list with families before the meeting so they can gather their own thoughts, too.

5 Use “I” statements.

Frame what you say from your perspective by using “I” statements like “I noticed,” “I am concerned,” or “I feel.” These statements are an empathetic way to share your thoughts. They may help family members not take the concerns personally.

6 Set boundaries together.

Let families know you’d like to establish a two-way relationship that honors the expertise on both sides. Share that you’d like both parties to be able to talk candidly and productively – all with the shared goal of ensuring their child’s success in school.

7 Communicate clearly and be solutions-oriented.

Be up-front about what you want to talk about and what your expectations of the family are. If you simply need to share information or voice your concerns, make sure that’s clear. Or if you’re looking for solutions to a concern, let the family know you’re asking for input to find the best solution together.

8 Send a follow-up email if needed.

A follow-up email gives you the chance to thank families for their time. It can also help both you and the family process your discussion and summarize any decisions and takeaways. And it gives families a chance to add any lingering thoughts or ask questions.



Conversation starters to use with families

When it comes time to talk about a concern you have about a student, it can be hard to know how to start. There is no one right way to engage with families. But there are some ways to make the conversation as collaborative and productive as possible.

Below is a guide for how to have these conversations with families.

What to do	What to say
Ask to meet or talk. Introduce yourself and ask if you're reaching out to the right person.	"Hi, this is [your name], [student]'s teacher. Are you [name]?" "[Student] is fine. I was hoping for a few minutes of your time." "I'd like to talk about some challenges I've observed lately."
Start the conversation. Begin in a calm, respectful, and reassuring way.	"I'd like to share something I observed during [subject/time period] to get your take on it." "I'm reaching out to ask for your help so I can better understand some challenges I've observed [student] having with...."
Share information. Give context, share examples, and explain how you've tried to address the concern.	"Today during [subject/time period], I noticed that [student] struggled with [behavior/skill]. We handled it by...." "I've been trying some strategies to provide extra support. They include [describe strategies you've used and the outcome]."
Get input. Ask the parent or caregiver what they've noticed.	"Is this something you've noticed at home, too?" "Has [student] had this challenge in the past? Can you share what has helped?"
Ask for help. Keep the focus on finding solutions together.	"What are your thoughts on the situation?" "Are there things you do at home that might work at school?" "Is there a teacher who knows your child well that you'd suggest I talk to?"
Finish the conversation. Be clear about the next steps.	"Thank you for talking with me. As we discussed, I'm going to [confirm next steps you agreed on]." "I feel like this was a good start. I'll speak with [any additional staff], and we'll set up a time to continue this conversation."



Resources to make communication easier

In this section, you'll find four printable resources, available in English and Spanish, that can help you build relationships and communicate with families. And below, more resources for building partnerships with families.

Printable resources in English and Spanish

Back-to-school update to learn from families

Share this form with students' families to learn more about your students and their learning experiences last year. <https://u.org/3kQdLLR>

Questionnaires for connecting with students and families

Invite students and families to write their responses. Or schedule a time to ask the questions in face-to-face conversations. <https://u.org/3AXEthJ>

Parent-teacher conference worksheet

Send this worksheet home to parents and caregivers prior to the conference dates. <https://u.org/3kTjnLQ>

School communication log

Give this to families to help them organize notes about phone calls, letters, in-person meetings, and emails to or from their child's teachers. **Bonus:** You can use this log for keeping track of your communication with families, too. <https://u.org/3F06XK9>

More resources

6 strategies for partnering with families of English language learners

<https://u.org/3F1Nx7M>

English language learners in special education: 4 things to know about partnering with families

<https://u.org/3mevjHH>

Why families of color may feel uncomfortable communicating with teachers

<https://u.org/3CRDJv4>

How to write an effective email to parents and caregivers

<https://u.org/3Dc9Q9d>

FAQs for multilingual families

<https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/special-education-and-your-child-faqs-multilingual-families>