



# Talking with your child's teacher:

## A guide for families

# Introduction

**Talking with teachers can be difficult sometimes.**

We've created this guide to make conversations with teachers easier and more productive. It contains tips, insights, and information that can help you work with teachers to get the best support for your child.

## What's inside

- » Why connecting is important
- » How to know it's time to talk
- » Knowing what to say
- » When English isn't your first language
- » Understanding barriers for families of color
- » Making the most of parent-teacher conferences
- » Free resources to make communication easier

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## About Understood

Understood is the only lifelong guide for those who learn and think differently. Each year, we reach more than 20 million people, 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.

# Why connecting is important



You and your child's teacher share a common goal: providing the best learning experience for your child. Being able to share information and ideas is key to making that happen.

Having good communication with the teacher can give you a fuller understanding of your child. It also gives you the chance to share concerns about what's happening at home that the teacher may or may not be seeing in school.

Engaging your child's teacher lets you find strategies to use in class and at home, and other ways to support your child at school.

When you and the teacher try the same strategies and use the same language, your child sees that everyone's on the same page. It can help kids feel confident when they know what to expect and what's expected of them.

**Tip:** Reach out from the start. Don't wait for parent-teacher conferences to begin building a relationship.

## How to know it's time to talk

Teachers can be great sources of information and advice. They can shed light on what's happening in the classroom and give you a sense of your child's strengths and weaknesses.

**If you have any questions or concerns about your child, you can ask to meet or talk at any time. But it's time to reach out when you see your child:**

- Struggling with reading, math, writing, or other areas of learning
- Having trouble with focus or self-control
- Having a hard time doing things other kids seem to do easily
- Suddenly behaving differently
- Lacking motivation or confidence
- Struggling to finish homework
- Getting lower grades and test scores

**You should also tell the teacher if your child:**

- Doesn't want to go to school (in person or virtually)
- Often gets angry or frustrated
- Often feels sick before school or complains of stomach aches and headaches
- Isn't catching up, even with extra support at school
- Talks about or shows signs of being bullied or of bullying others



You may worry that you're bothering the teacher or that your concerns aren't serious enough to bring up. But teachers want to know what you're seeing at home and what might be going on that could affect your child at school.

Every teacher is different. For an idea of what teachers want to know, Understood editor Kim Greene shares when and how she liked to connect with families when she was a grade school teacher:

### **When a child was on track: Once a marking period**

I connected with parents at parent-teacher conferences or through report card comments. I also welcomed an informal phone call, email exchange, or chat at dismissal time.

Usually, families wanted to know what their child was learning and how they could build on that learning at home. I would ask if they had heard anything from their child that they wanted me to know.

### **When a child wasn't on track: Once or twice a month**

This way, we could decide if the difficulty was just a rough spot. Or we could track if it was something more we should look into.

It helped if parents took notes on what they were seeing and shared them with me. It was also good if they made a list of their exact concerns to go over in one meeting or call (instead of separate ones). And I always wanted to know if they had noticed any changes in their child.

### **When a child was struggling: Once a week**

This could be an email or phone call on a Friday afternoon in which I would update parents about how the week had gone. I liked having a response in my inbox by Monday morning so I could plan for the week.

I specifically wanted to hear about behaviors and struggles at home. That included how often they happened and what triggered them. And I wanted information on how the child was handling homework, like how long it took and how much help the child needed.

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## When kids were “in crisis”: Once a day

During times when a child was having serious behavior problems, I touched base with families at the end of each school day. I shared what had happened in school. I also asked for an update about what was happening at home.

I wanted to know about anything that happened overnight or in the morning on the way to school that I should be aware of. I also wanted to know about any changes at home, and any good news or “wins” I could reinforce at school.

Most teachers try to be available to answer questions or talk about concerns. But they vary in how they communicate and in how much they want to hear from families. Ask your child’s teachers directly how much contact they’re comfortable with.

## Knowing what to say

It can sometimes be hard to have conversations with teachers. That’s especially true if your child is struggling or if you have concerns about behavior you’ve seen at home. Having the right words to say can help.

Depending on what you (or the teacher) want to talk about, there are specific things you can say to get the conversation going. But in general, here are some guidelines to keep in mind whenever you talk to teachers:

- Be clear.
- Be specific.
- Ask questions.
- Ask follow-up questions.

If you want more information or need clearer explanations, don’t be afraid to keep asking. The whole point is to understand what’s happening at school and find out what can help.

Starting the conversation is often the hardest part of talking with teachers. It can be difficult to find the right words or to know exactly what to say. Here are some examples of things you might say:

- “I’m worried about my child’s (area of concern), and I’d like to talk with you about it.”
- “I’ve noticed that my child does (specific behavior). Does this mean there’s a problem?”
- “I’ve never heard that term before. Can you explain what it means?”
- “Are there things you can do in class that might help? What can we do at home?”

**Tip:** **Write it down.** Having the words to say can make the conversation easier. Before you talk with the teacher, make a list of what you want to talk about.



Here are some respectful sample conversations for specific concerns.

**Trouble with focus:** <https://u.org/3zK8uAl>

**Trouble with reading:** <https://u.org/2Y70e0o>

**Trouble with writing:** <https://u.org/3ATLqk2>

**Trouble with math:** <https://u.org/3CXAwKn>

**Trouble with self-control:** <https://u.org/3zMVPwf>

**Behavior challenges:** <https://u.org/2XV1G5I>

## When English isn't your first language

Language barriers can make it difficult to communicate with teachers. That's especially true if the school doesn't provide the right language support.

**Use these three tips to make it easier to connect:**

### 1. Write an email.

Find the teacher's email address on the school website. Once you finish writing the email in your own language, you can translate it into English using a translation program like Google Translate. You could also write an email to the parent coordinator, if your school has one. In many schools, the person in this role speaks more than one language and can act as an interpreter for you and your child.

Parent coordinators ask questions on your behalf or tell you the best way to solve a problem in the school. The parent coordinator can answer questions about school letters, meetings, trips, activities, or anything going on in the school.

### 2. Send a text or voice message.

Some schools use apps that translate messages back and forth between the teacher and the parent. There are other free messaging apps that translate into many different languages. Find out which app is being used at your child's school.





### 3. Request a free interpreter.

By law, schools have to respond when parents ask for language assistance. (That includes help with parent-teacher conferences.) For example, schools must offer translated materials or a language interpreter. Also, language help must be free. And it must be provided by staff that is appropriate and competent.

The interpretation services are done in person or over the phone with several people calling in at the same time. If the school sets up a videoconference, an interpreter has to be there, too. If you prefer, you have the right to bring a person you trust to interpret for you.

## Understanding barriers for families of color

For some families of color, past experiences of bias and judgment can be a barrier to good parent-teacher communication. Educator Afrika Afeni Mills, MEd, explains why:

Before kids ever set foot in a school, they have learned so much from their parents and families as their first teachers. My parents were actively involved in my education. They always commented on my report cards and participated in parent-teacher conferences.

I'm sure you already have and will continue to do the same for your children, though I know it's not always easy. I want to highlight why some families of color (perhaps including yours) may feel uncomfortable when communicating with schools and teachers — and I want to encourage you as your child's first teacher.

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### Negative personal K-12 experiences

If you had bad experiences yourself as a K-12 student, it might be triggering to connect with your child's teacher. If you or your family were judged, brushed off, or not taken seriously when you were a student, it's understandable that you might be concerned about having the same experience as a parent.

However, it's important to know that there are educators who are aware of this history for some families. They are ready to support you as you work through the emotions that come with navigating your own school-related trauma, as well as the impact of institutional racism in schools and society.



## Negative messages about families

When I became a new teacher, and later when I worked on teacher development, I unfortunately became aware of negative attitudes that some educators have about students' families. I often heard comments like:

**“Parents are not educated enough to help their children with homework.”**

**“Parents are too busy to help their children with homework.”**

**“Parents don't come to open houses and conferences, so they don't care about their child's education.”**

Some teachers certainly hold these beliefs. But there are many educators who fight against these negative messages, and who are excited to partner with you on your child's learning journey.

## Concern about how teachers perceive families

If you're at the beginning of your journey as an advocate for your child and their learning differences, it can feel intimidating to talk with your child's teacher.

There's a lot of terminology to learn. There's a lot to be aware of when it comes to ensuring that your child is benefiting from all of the learning opportunities they're entitled to. It can be hard to avoid worrying that teachers may judge you for what you may not yet know about how to best advocate for your child.

Yet I want you to know I have worked with many educators who are prepared to meet you where you are in your advocacy journey. They are here to support you as you build your awareness about your child's learning needs, and bridge that knowledge with who you know your child to be.

Like my parents, you have so much to offer as your child's first teacher. Your voice is needed in the school, in the classroom, and as part of your school's Parent Teacher Association and site council.

No matter where you are on your journey, always remember that you are a vital partner in your child's experience as a student. Your voice is powerful, and your experiences and perspectives matter.

## Making the most of parent-teacher conferences

Parent-teacher conferences usually only last 10 or 15 minutes. That's not a lot of time to connect with your child's teacher. But with a little preparation and planning, you can make the most of this time.





## Here are five tips that can help.

- 1. Gather information ahead of time.**  
Look over your child's homework, essays, reading logs, and other schoolwork. Review report cards. And talk with your child about how things are going in school.
- 2. Start with your biggest concerns.**  
Time is limited, so bring up topics that matter most to you. It helps to make a list of questions and concerns ahead of time. Put them in order of importance.
- 3. Stay calm and respectful.**  
It's important to keep your emotions in check during the conference, even if your child is struggling with something.
- 4. Figure out next steps.**  
Save a few minutes at the end of the conference for next steps. For instance, the teacher might agree to try some informal supports in the classroom while you try some strategies at home.
- 5. Follow up.**  
If you and the teacher agreed on next steps, follow up in the next week or so to see how things are working out. It's useful to have check-ins before the next conference. At each check-in, ask for an update. Also be ready to share what you've been doing on any action steps.

**Tip:** **Give specific examples.** Details about what you're seeing will give teachers a much clearer picture of what's going on.

## Free resources to make communication easier

Here are some downloadable tools you can use to make conversations with teachers easier and more productive. They can also help teachers understand your child better.

**Make a 3×3 card about your child to share with teachers**

<https://u.org/3kQsL32>

**Learn what to put in emails to teachers**

<https://u.org/3ohcA00>

**Fill out a parent-teacher conference worksheet**

<https://u.org/3zS7dHn>

**Download self-awareness worksheets for kids**

<https://u.org/3kP5xtP>



## More ideas and strategies for communicating with teachers

**5 topics to go over with teachers early in the school year**

<https://u.org/3Anzyq1>

**Questions to ask at your parent-teacher conference**

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

**Perspectives: How to make sure Black and brown students are heard by the school**

<https://u.org/2WkfdmK>

**How to decode what teachers say about your child**

<https://u.org/2Y0DDCP>

**7 tips for improving your relationship with your child's teacher**

<https://u.org/3kPZNA6>

**How to talk to your child's teacher about too much homework**

<https://u.org/3EV19BC>