

Be a Parent Teachers Like to See

By Joe Neff

When I saw Mrs. Jenkins at the end of the hall, I hesitated to walk that way. As school principal, I believe in being visible and available to parents. But right then, I didn't have time for Mrs. Jenkins.

Other staff sometimes felt the same way. They avoided her. She had a reputation for being critical and hard to work with.

Working together

Our teachers wanted a working relationship with Mrs. Jenkins, but they had tried and failed. A short appointment after school to hear about her daughter's needs turned into an hour complaint about last year's teaching methods. When Mrs. Jenkins volunteered to help with music, she made sure to mention that the chalkboards were too high. A teacher's friendly hello brought a string of comments on the traffic pattern in the parking lot.

Of course, you may have difficulty with a teacher who battles problems of her own. Or you may have had difficulties because a teacher's beliefs conflict with yours. Then it is even more important to be a parent who works well with teachers.

What a Parent Can Do

If you want to be a parent teachers seek and not a Mrs. Jenkins, here are seven suggestions that will help:

1. Avoid agendas. Establish a positive relationship. Try to work together. If you become acquainted with your child's teacher before



problems occur, you will have a greater impact when a need arises. A parent known for her walk with God and for caring is more likely to make a change than a parent known for pushing her ideas.

Sally, one of the humblest servants and encouragers among our school parents, always said something positive or asked how she might help. When she expressed an occasional concern or a need, everyone was ready to listen because of her kind spirit.

2. Give help, not advice. Most teachers need help, not more information. When helping, try to do what the teacher wants, not necessarily what you want. And be careful not to pass on information about children's behavior that you see in the classroom. A neighbor shouldn't hear from a classroom volunteer about her sister's son's problem with thumb-sucking.

3. Show appreciation. Even in the most positive schools, an amazingly small number of parents (and students!) ever show appreciation. We all work harder for those who say thanks. After receiving a note of praise from a teacher, my son would do practically anything for him. Teachers are no different.

4. Be positive. If your child struggles, make the teacher aware of the problem and ask for suggestions. Don't be afraid to tell the teacher your plans and how she can help. Focus on

changing your child, not the teacher, the school, or the child in the next seat.

5. Pick your battles. Don't overlook important issues, but choose your battles carefully. Realize that if you fight, people get hurt. Is it worth it? Many battles aren't.

I have seen a parent argue over having skim or 1 percent milk in the school. While an important issue to her, I doubt that the damage to relationships was worth it. On the other hand, I have seen a parent fight for help for her learning disabled child—a worthy cause.

If you have a concern, start with the teacher privately. This gives her a chance to explain what happened, which takes care of most problems. This has happened to me many times, such as the time a parent thought I favored abortion because I challenged her child to show me in Scripture why it was wrong. A simple discussion solved the misunderstanding.

If you can't resolve the problem with the teacher, ask about the proper steps to follow. Most schools have a formal procedure to handle disagreements. Your interest in following their plan protects your reputation as a parent.

6. Respect the teacher. For a good idea of how you might be perceived by the teacher, ask yourself this question: What would the teacher's life be like if every parent did what I do? To show respect, set up appointments to talk and call the teacher after school only with her permission (unless it is an emergency). Be careful not to go around, behind or over the teacher.

7. Pray for the teacher. If you multiply your needs as a parent times the teacher's 25 students, you will feel the need to pray for her. This is something I as a parent have often forgotten to do. When I have prayed with my children for their teachers, the children go to school wanting to help their teachers. And God answers their prayers.

Special Needs

If you have a special-needs child, it is easy to feel like you are a Mrs. Jenkins. But, your child needs someone to speak up for her, and no one can do that better than you—if you handle it right.

Talk with the teacher before the school year begins. Get to know each other and let the teacher know about your child's needs. Offer your

support. And let the teacher know how much you appreciate her help.

Find out how the teacher likes to get and give information, especially if you need frequent reports. Send thank-yous. Show a desire to work the teacher's way, if possible. Let the teacher know your needs as a parent.

Don't be afraid to send information from your doctor or from articles about your child's special needs. But add a note that says, "You probably already know this, but I just found it" (or something like that). Little notes show respect that encourages me to read and use the information.

Reminders are important. During crowded days, teachers can forget little things that make a big difference for some children. Gentle reminders of your child's needs can be phrased as questions ("Have you noticed Jenny paying less attention in the morning?"). Teachers want to help, but it is hard to remember at times.

Looking Forward to Seeing You

Even though we all knew that Mrs. Jenkins tried to make things better for our school and her family, her approach failed. Her constant advice drove staff away. Unrealistic expectations and lack of trust made her hard to work with and made us find something to do when she came around.

As you work on the parent-teacher relationship, you will be blessed with a partnership that too few parents enjoy. While teachers care for Mrs. Jenkins and her children, they can work best with parents they enjoy seeing. You can be one of those parents.

This article first appeared in Focus on the Family magazine, September, 1998. Reprint the article freely. Joe served in school leadership for 32 years at Cedar Valley Christian School, Wheaton Academy, and Little Rock Christian Academy. For a PDF of this article or information on the Rooted Schools ministry, contact Joe@RootedSchools.org. Joe can also be reached on LinkedIn, Twitter @ljoeneff, or Facebook. ©2015 Joe Neff