

Talking about Students with Parents or Guardians

What is the pedagogical practice of talking about students with their parents or guardians?

Promoting the participation of parents and guardians in the education of their sons and daughters is one of the tasks of educators today. As a problem, it has inspired the compilation of evidence about the benefits of building an alliance between the family and the educational institution (Treviño, Valdés, Castro, Costilla, Pardo & Donoso Rivas, 2010; Weiss, 2014, Romagnoli & Cortese, 2015). This evidence confirms that when a nurturing alliance is built between parents and guardians and educators, the benefit is directly visualized in the quality of children's learning and, therefore, in the quality of the educational institutions that receive them.

Despite the certainty of the positive aspects associated with a nurturing relationship between parents, guardians and educators, there are still great challenges. This is mainly due to the fact that it is a topic strongly influenced by the context in which it is developed (in a specific and unique time and space) and sustained by the complex relationships that are built among the actors involved. This complexity is also evident in the different perspectives of analysis of the authors who have investigated the subject (economic, educational, psychological, sociocultural and anthropological perspectives), and the tensions that arise between them.

One of the challenges of this problem is to select the communication channels of the educator with parents and/or guardians (interviews, guardian meetings, reports, newsletters, etc.), the content to be worked on (developmental or learning characteristics, values, strategies, event management, among others) and the way in which it is carried out (language, physical space, organization of time, among others).

If the educator and the educational institution declare among their principles or options, the importance of recognizing families as the first educators, under the conviction that building a relationship with them will allow them to have "an ally", both to contribute to the deep knowledge of each child or young adult, and with a coherent and consistent support in two different spaces: the home and the educational institution, this positive impact of cooperation and alliance between families and the educational institution will result in greater and better learning for all.

This has been evidenced in different investigations. For example, Sánchez, Reyes and Villarroel (2016) expose the positive effect of this alliance regarding the increase in the feeling of self-confidence in the family, the development of a better vision of the school and teachers, the decrease in the effect of contextual factors such as low socioeconomic level or low schooling of the parents, the increase

of interest in the children to participate in school activities and the improvement in infrastructure conditions.

In this way, the aim of parents/guardians and educators to meet to talk about the students is the joint search for the success of each one of them, which will give confidence and continuity to the educational trajectory. These meetings and exchanges, which seek a better reciprocal understanding, must be based on respect and trust. Hence, it is a matter of building a relationship that requires work, time and planning.

What it is not Talking about students with their parents or guardians

- Delivering information in a unidirectional manner from the educator to the parents or guardians. An example of this is "the delivery of grades", a traditional instance in which families receive the written report on the learning and development of students, without a conversation (prior to or at the end of the period) about the content of the report that is delivered. This instance of conversation implies an exchange of information, in which those who meet alternate moments of expression and listening that allow the generation of spaces for discussion and agreement on future actions.
- Informal and spontaneous conversation. Informal and spontaneous meetings between educators and parents/guardians (for example, when children arrive and leave the school day) do not have the conditions that favor a pedagogical intentionality in the meeting (adequate spaces and environments that favor a planned, respectful and confidential communication). However, they are instances that can nurture the planning and follow-up of a formal conversation in which the goal of the meeting is made explicit, an intentional or specific topic to be addressed for each child is discussed, and agreements are formalized.
- Conversation between educators and parents/guardians focused on demands and complaints. The look from "the deficit" is a characteristic unveiled in research about communication from educators to parents/guardians (Gubbins, 2016; Alarcón, 2015). This evidence speaks of meetings in which the educator invites only to request support (in materials, money, time or other) to report the student's failures (performance, responsibility or behavior). Parents and guardians who go through these experiences stigmatize the possibility of other calls, often closing the doors of the relationship. To build a relationship from a perspective of recognition of the other, it is essential to always start by valuing and making strengths visible, in a positive and safe environment.

Teaching Strategies for Talking about Students with Parents or Guardians

Three categories can be distinguished when breaking down HLP 11: the choice of content associated with the aim of the meeting (what do we talk about?), communication management (how do we talk about it?) and communication channels (where and when do we talk?). We distinguish in each of them, some strategies.

a) Content to work on

Regarding the topics to be worked on, there is a diversity of content at different levels of the curriculum. For example: school programs, focused objectives, learning modalities used, types and rhythms of evaluation, agreements and class norms, among others. When dealing with specific aspects of child or youth development and learning, it is important to distinguish between what is observed (behaviors and performances) and what the child or youth "is", avoiding making judgments about the person.

Based on the above, some strategies to be considered are:

- Explain the objective: clearly state what is to be achieved from the meeting. For example: a diagnostic meeting (to get to know each other), a closing meeting (informative/evaluation), a meeting to deal with conflicts (specific situations) or a follow-up meeting (of the educational process).
- Let them speak: from an open question, give space for parents and/or guardians to express themselves about a topic (Santelices and Scagliotti, 2013). In the case of an interview, you can seek to collect the parents' or guardians' perception of their child (How would you characterize/describe...?), or of the relationship they have with him/her (What do you like to do together, or how would you describe your weekend?). In the case of a parent-teacher meeting, the first open question can be worked on in a small group, for example: "My child is... and what I admire most about him/her is..." to then draw up a joint profile of the group's strengths based on the perceptions of the parents and guardians. This space within the meeting allows, on one hand, for the educator to reorient his/her proposal by adjusting or enriching it with the ideas expressed by the parents; and on the other hand, for parents and guardians to feel that they are considered and validated, that they have a space where they can express themselves and communicate their ideas.
- To nurture the topic based on precise and pertinent evidence: to have evidence (observation records, children's work, video of experiences, images...) that allow the educator to account for and support the ideas he/she wants to put forward, always bearing in mind the achievement of the objective proposed for the meeting.
- Record agreements: follow up on the conversation and build on this in the next instance of dialogue.

b) Communication management

- Invite rather than quote. Based on the proposed objective for the conversation, the educator can create a favorable climate from the moment of the invitation. In this communication, the objective of the meeting can be made explicit, giving different alternatives to schedules and the time it can last.
- Dialogue must be based on active listening and mutual respect. On the one hand, families are sensitive to everything that has to do with the child or young person, his/her well-being and future development. Educators must be attentive to avoid those questions, impressions, questions or any idea they raise being perceived as an attack (aggressiveness). For example, experts Meghan McCormick and Natalie Schwartz share for Education World some recommendations when it comes to communicating with parents or guardians of students who

have behavioral problems: (<https://eligeeducar.cl/ideas-para-el-aula/10-formas-de-mejorar-lacomunicacion-con-padres-y-apoderados/>). For this, communication skills and the use of evidence will be a fundamental input.

- From andragogy (adult education), we know the importance of creating a safe climate when it comes to communication between adults, a fundamental condition to motivate any action or change that arises from the agreements of this exchange. Avoiding discrimination of any kind is a prerequisite for creating this safe environment. In this sense, welcoming different points of view, not perceiving periods of silence as a threat, or verifying with clauses such as "I understand that what you mean is..." the correct understanding of the message, can be a contribution to set up this "safe climate".
- Avoid judgment and prejudice. Some parents or guardians avoid talking with educators for fear of being judged, especially when there are problems. Adequate preparation of the interview, the work of the pedagogical team in the search for evidence, the development of personal communication and empathy skills, and focusing on the topic that summons the meeting, can be variables that contribute to these cases.
- The use of evidence. As already mentioned, the use of evidence is a fundamental aspect to consider when planning the meeting with parents and guardians. These evidences (photographic images, observation records, children's or students' work, audios, among others) show those aspects that are to be focused on in the exchange of ideas; they are an input that provides objectivity and opens the exchange of the perception of the actors involved, thus avoiding the interpretation of dealing with a topic that arises from personal perception or from a subjective impression.
- Organization of the space. Preparing the space, as in the pedagogical experiences, also delivers a message to parents or guardians. The objective preparing the meeting's space is that it delivers a message of welcome and well-being for the meeting. For example, check the location of those who are going to talk, intend the messages on the walls, avoid environmental noises, perhaps provide some beverage or snack, order and cleanliness of the place, brightness, among others.
- Time organization. Respect the agreed time for the conversation and be able to cover the proposed objective. Normally, having 30 minutes would be enough to: welcome, take up the proposed objective, let the parents speak, raise the educator's perspective, dialogue and exchange to reach a project, record agreements and say goodbye.
- Confidentiality. The educator must safeguard the confidentiality of the information of the conversation, both at the time it is carried out and in the record that remains of what was worked on. This must be communicated to parents and guardians, from the moment the meeting is called, avoiding that it remains as implicit information of the meeting.

c) Communication channels

- Combine different communication channels to speak with parents and guardians. What characterizes each of these communication channels is the pedagogical potential they have as they are instances that must be previously planned and subsequently evaluated, responding to the different objectives of the institutional annual plan (Keyser, 2006). These can be:
 - In group or individual: In group (e.g., parent-teacher meeting, understood as a group/course of parents and guardians who meet with the educator or a representative of the educational institution to get to know each other, learn about the IEP, discuss a specific topic or follow up on the group's learning and development) or individual (e.g., interviews, understood as

an instance in which the parents of a child or young person meet with the educator in charge, with the main focus on discussing or following up on the learning and development of the child or young person);

- Oral or written: oral (instances in which orality prevails as a communication exchange channel, for example, pedagogical outings or celebrations), or written (instances in which written communication predominates, for example: bulletins, communication notebook, entry panel);
- Virtual or face-to-face: virtual through a technological medium (e.g., whatsapp or video conference) (Mitchell, Foulger, and Wetzel, 2009) or face-to-face (e.g., an interview or the participation of a parent or guardian in some pedagogical experience in the classroom).

An interesting way of verifying whether the educational institution opens various channels of communication with parents and guardians is to identify the characteristics of the instances already implemented and what innovative instances could be proposed. For example: The parents' meeting is a formal, in group, generally oral and face-to-face instance. What formal, oral and virtual group instances could be created? Perhaps, promote the instance of an online reading club, on topics that nurture the questions asked by families.

- Group meetings: in these meetings the educator should promote spaces for dialogue between parents and guardians. Spaces in which parents can learn from their own experiences by sharing different points of view. These can arise from a literature discussion, a workshop on case analysis or a workshop on questions, among others.
- Individual meetings: in these meetings, both the educator and the parents or guardians will have the opportunity to deepen their mutual understanding of the particular case. As already mentioned, dialogue based on evidence and communication skills will be fundamental aspects that the educator can try and thus develop joint proposals that favor the learning and development of the child or adolescent.

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