

Healthy Practices with Parents—Results from Surveys of Teachers and Parents

Introduction

Parents sincerely want to provide their children with healthy lives, but lifestyle and social pattern habits are changing rapidly. What was once held as common wisdom about child-rearing has faded into the past. Families with many responsibilities and busy lives frequently do not know how to incorporate rhythm, routine, and reduced stimulus into their homes to support a healthy lifestyle for young children. Young parents are called out of the home to work. Stay-at-home parents can feel isolated and seek the company of others, filling their days with activities outside the home. Life is fast-paced, technology-filled, and instantaneous in many ways.

The teacher has the responsibility to talk with parents about these issues in ways that are respectful, honest, supportive, and compassionate regarding the complicated lives of our modern families. Parents are usually eager for suggestions from their child's teacher, yet teachers report that building relationship with parents is requiring increasing amounts of time and attention. The question of how we can meet this situation is a critical issue.

Based on these considerations, how do we open the door to building relationship with parents that will support the conversations to come? WECAN was awarded a grant to research this question and we surveyed teachers, asking them to share healthy practices with parents. The survey asked a series of questions to explore how individual teachers have found ways to build relationship and trust. The results summarized below give the general content and mood of the replies, along with specific examples of ideas that may inspire our own interactions.

Deep thanks are extended to each of the teachers who responded to the survey. The time and thoughtfulness evident in these replies is deeply appreciated.

- Nancy Blanning

Part One: Teacher Survey

What works in building parent collaboration?

Common practices include parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, individual appointments, phone conversations, home visits, and inviting parents to attend festivals and birthday celebrations. An additional question asked what helps to establish “trust and partnership” with parents.

Responses emphasized that no single approach is most effective. What is paramount, however, is that any interaction demonstrates true interest in the other, offers warmth, and includes a willingness to give generously of one's time at the beginning of the relationship. Rather than recommending particular formats—parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, work days, study groups, festivals, birthday celebrations or home visits—responses emphasized that the **quality of the encounter** rather than the specific form is what matters. Each and all of the well-known formats are helpful at different times and for different purposes. While group parent meetings can be effective in communicating information about Waldorf education and

community building, relationship with an individual family best develops through one-on-one interaction. Taking time to build relationship at the beginning is most helpful. Throughout the survey, teachers' responses reflected that it is the **teacher's inner mood, attitude, and intention in the encounter that is most important**. Following are some representative descriptions of these three qualities to expand this picture.

- Extending true engagement to the parent with active listening was described repeatedly as the most respectful and sincere approach.
- "Parents need to feel that you hear them and that you take what they say seriously. Face-to-face conversations outrank any other form of communication when possible." Parents wish to feel invited into the school community.
- Meeting the family with an accepting and non-judgmental attitude is always a best practice and is an essential gesture when welcoming new families into the school community. "If one can meet the parents in a non-adversarial manner, finding them where they are in their journey, any interaction may build trust. We must stand before parents as advocates for their children and as those who hold their child's well-being foremost. If a teacher emanates fearless inclusivity and warm objectivity, almost any challenge can be addressed."
- "I try to keep in mind that the parents are my peers and colleagues in this work with their child. I also remember that they were chosen for the sacred role of being that child's parents, not I. I am a facilitator."

Specific suggestions:

- Invite parents to visit the classroom for a morning at least once per year with conversation afterwards about what has happened during the morning. Teachers should not be anxious or too guarded about having parents visit.
- Use short check-ins with parents at drop-off or pick-up time for a brief, friendly encounter.
- Share positive, amusing anecdotes in informal moments. Write down details to share with the parents during conferences.
- Be available to listen to parent questions or concerns always. If the parent mentions something, it is important to him or her. Schedule private conversations for topics needing more time. Longer conversations need scheduled appointments for privacy and candor.
- Offer regular weekly 20-minute slots that parents can sign up for to just touch base or express a concern. Regular, easily arranged access builds trust.
- When meeting with parents, share personal examples of your own struggles or foibles as a parent. This builds camaraderie and trust too. When parents can see that the teacher is also human, a new door can be opened to share and work together.
- Practice salutogenesis by speaking positively. Use language that is supportive and clear. Make room for questions.
- Ask the parents to describe their experience of their own child. Hearing from their perspective is very helpful. Ask the parents for ten to twenty words to describe their child. We can refer back to these words to remind ourselves of how the parent sees

the child. Ask what the parent hopes for the child in the coming year and for his or her life.

- Have a selection of post or art cards available when speaking with parents (or during a parent group meeting.) Ask the parents to pick one card that makes them think of their child and talk about their choice.

How do you communicate your interest in a child on a general basis when nothing is ‘wrong’? Overall it is important to share interest in each child in a general way when things are going well. Sharing specific details and anecdotes is most appreciated by parents. Specific areas to comment upon include:

- Playmates of the day, new friends made, new children included in play
- Imaginations developed during play time
- Quote of something the child has said and perhaps unique individual “sayings”
- Developmental observations of how the child is maturing and growing, such as self-care in dressing, getting his or her own shoes on, tying shoes or apron strings for others
- Favorite toys or play activities
- The child’s helpfulness or comfort extended to a friend
- Special moment—“Tommy found a beautiful rock on our walk.” “Sally was excited by all the praying mantises we saw on the walk today.” “When Jack saw the tiny wildflower in the grass, he touched them with delicate fingers.”
- Special attention shown during an activity, such as circle, story, clean-up time
- New accomplishments with skipping, jumping, drawing, etc.

When and how can these special observations be shared?

- Most teachers find these encounters can be a short bit of friendly conversation at morning drop-off or at pick-up time directly with the parent.
- A common and effective goal is to share something with each parent once each week. One teacher reported that she tries to make direct contact with at least two parents a day.
- A few teachers send some anecdotal notes by email or write a note to the parents.
- Regardless of the content, one teacher remarked that she always tries to “celebrate the child’s disposition, sharing how he or she fills the room with joy and love.”
- Teachers who send home regular email newsletters may also share anecdotes from the class to give a flavor of the individuals and group interactions.
- Some teachers enjoy writing and like to send emails. One remarked that sending a personal email about a child is much more effective in building relationship than a general email about the whole class.
- A detailed letter once a month to capture the mood of the class and experience of and with the children also has important value in supporting the class community.

How do you get to know the parents as individuals?

- Be truly interested in wanting to know them. Ask non-intrusive but interested questions about their work, hobbies, and leisure activities. One teacher summed this up by advising to have “lots of conversation, ask questions, and actively listen.”
- Potluck meals, social time at the beginning of class meetings, and parent conferences offer some relaxed moments for these exchanges to happen, both between parent and teacher and among parents themselves.
- When a family encounters special stress or crisis—illness, death, marital difficulties—a “How are you doing?” can be a welcomed opener to conversation.
- Talk with the parents about their own family festival celebrations as they were growing up. What are their memories? How does their parenting style compare to how they were raised?
- Work alongside parents at work days, festivals, and fund-raising events. At a parent meeting have something for the parents to work on such as apron, napkin, and placemat for their child. Working alongside one another leads to friendly chatting.
- Schedule an extra 15 minutes at the first conference to chat with the parents about themselves—work, hobbies, and special interests. Focus on the parents as adult individuals with their own biographies and aspirations.
- Ask the parents to remember when they were children. What memory stands out from when they were their child’s age? What would they have chosen to play with in the room?
- One teacher hosts a “Parent Appreciation Night” with a fancy snack provided. Each family is given a photo of their child and a favorite quote relating to the child all mounted on one of the child’s watercolor paintings.
- Host a Mothers’ Day tea and Dads’ End-of-Year picnic. These are big favorites.

If you had one bit of advice to offer to an early childhood educator just beginning this journey with parents, what would it be? Responses to this question reflect upon the experience of many years with children and parents. A simple summary does not do justice to the thoughtful and wise articulations that were shared in this survey, but there are common themes that the following responses represent for the whole:

- Keep your heart open to the parents as you do to the children. Respect their lives and their struggles without judgment. Show your openness to help in any way. Communicate and have a sense of humor.
- Build a relationship first by being authentic and non-judgmental. Be a good listener. Seek to *propose* rather than *impose* our understanding of the developing child. Let go of fear of failure and simply strive to meet and love the children and their families each day.
- Have a kind, open, and loving heart for each parent, especially the ones that shake our foundations, make us question our path, and doubt our work. Remember that the parents themselves are drawn to Waldorf education, too, for reasons of their own biographies.

- Extend warmth to the parents as well as the children. Everyone is doing the best we can with the time, information, and resources we have. We can share information from Waldorf education that may offer a new picture of family life that the parents may wish to move toward.
- While extending warmth and compassion, be clear about appropriate professional boundaries. Caution yourself against taking on a role other than that of being the child's teacher.
- Practice the 8-fold path. Pause before speaking, then pause again. When being asked critical questions, work to turn defensiveness into gratitude. Promise less than you think you can actually deliver.
- It is hard to be a parent in our times. Be open to what you hear and see. Be clear about your priorities and keep it simple.
- Try to be authentic and be who you are. Do not be afraid to say that you do not know all the answers but are willing to think, research, and help to solve any problem collaboratively. Our sincere goal is to earn trust and not over-step boundaries.
- Be open to ideas. Parents know their children. Their insights can be very helpful. Do not feel that you always need to be right. We are all on a path of learning.
- The first years of a child's life usually mean that the parents, too, are passing through a threshold. They are confronted with the opportunity to deepen their overall understanding of life and growth for themselves as well as their children. This can throw people off from who they had set themselves up to be.
- Listen. Even if one knows a great deal, it will not be effective if the teacher comes off as the "authority." Listen to what the parents are saying behind the words and offer a reflection of what you are hearing rather than a solution. Our work is to collaborate and to engage with the parents in this work.
- "Be authentic and present. Do not try to dazzle parents with information that you just learned in the last 6 months about the child's developing will, birth of the etheric, etc. What you learned needs to settle and take root. Also, don't dress too 'weird.' Enough already with the flowing skirts, layers of wool-on-wool. Keep it real."
- Meet the parents with compassion, non-judgment and gentleness. Realize that each one will take something from Waldorf education, but only what each can digest. Convey what a gift we parents and teachers have been given in being chosen by these particular children. We most importantly must surround them with warmth and love. If we accomplish this, then we have surely done our most important work.

What is the best advice you have received or lesson learned from your interactions with parents? The points of advice in the previous section were reiterated here with "lessons learned." The wisdom gleaned from making mistakes or incorrect assumptions is summarized again. Teachers emphasized that parents have shown them how important these next points are:

- Listen actively without judgment.
- Do not discount the parents' insightful view of their child.
- Do not speak to parents about another child who is not their own.

- Be warm and friendly but always professional and hold clear boundaries—even if a parent in the class is someone you would be close friends with in a different circumstance.
- We cannot please everyone. Make accommodations as you can that are objective and fair but do not compromise what we know to be true to our understanding.
- We cannot do this work alone. Colleagues can help us see a situation from many different angles to solve and work through parental problems.
- Do not try to move too quickly. Get to know your families respectfully so we can understand their circumstances as best we can.
- Be clear with parents when having difficult conversations. Document the conversations for parents to review so there is no misunderstanding. Speak only out of your observation; never speak with judgment.
- Lecture less, listen more. Each of us really wants to be heard.

The following direct statements from a few teachers capture the essence of thoughts shared by many:

- My comfort with parents changed when I began to listen for what was really behind the question, the angry comment, or what felt like a judgment; and I began to look for what I call the archetype of what is living. Then I was able to understand and find ways to reconnect if something had been damaged in the relationship.
- In general terms, the most important lesson is to not be defensive or to hold judgments. I have at times discounted what a parent said about her child, as though I knew better. As teachers we know what we see in school. But what the parents experience is critically important to the whole picture of the child. Learn to listen and not interrupt or contradict and thank the parent for offering an expanded picture of the child.
- Every parent loves her child. Early on I carefully described a child about whom I was really worried. At the end of the description, I was concerned the mother would say, “How can you say that about my child?” Instead she beamed at me and said, “I know! Isn’t he wonderful? You have described him perfectly!”
- Remember that the child and parents are on a karmic journey together. We are only there to help them along. Hopefully they will receive something from us “to put in their suitcase.”

Another part of the survey asked about parent meetings. These gatherings are commonly held several times a year and are a good way to build the social fabric of the parent community and share more information about Waldorf education. Questions were asked about how often the meetings were held and what formats were well received by parents.

How often are Parent Meetings held? How successful do these seem as a healthy practice with parents?

- Common practice is to hold three parent meetings per year, though the range was from two to four.
- One school holds monthly meetings for parent enrichment—festival preparations, toy making, etc.—yet has a pedagogical presentation only two of these times.
- Many reported that parent attendance is low with busy lifestyles. Evening meetings are difficult because parents are tired. Saturday meetings conflict with precious family time. It is challenging and frustrating to find a time when enough parents can attend.
- Where attendance has fallen off, the number of meetings has been reduced—2 per year—and four check-ins via telephone with each family during the year.
- Some schools are experimenting with early evening meetings—5:30 with childcare. A simple supper—soup or pasta—is served to the children with a simple activity to follow. Adults have a snack and socialize a bit. The event ends promptly by 7:00 so children can be taken home and put right to bed. This has had encouraging success. Some schools offer the childcare and supper *gratis*. Others charge a modest amount that goes to pay the care providers.

Format for the meetings?

- Parent meetings should not only be informative about the curriculum but also have a flavor of joy. Beginning the evening by sharing anecdotes about the children can create this mood.
- Speaking about how “we are all on a journey together in deepening our understanding of the children” has been very helpful.
- Healthy practice seems to include some social time for parents to interact, a brief presentation (“If you speak longer than 20 minutes, you have lost the parents”) about the classroom or pedagogy, and an activity—craft project, preparing something for the class, etc.
- Begin with an opportunity for parents to share a memory of themselves at the age of their children. This helps us find connections and also remember what it was like at that time in our own lives.
- Have something active for the parents to do. Doing a craft or preparing some festival materials for the classroom gives practical help to the class and also offers the parents a chance to chat with one another. Working with our hands helps relax for conversation.
- A separate book study or studying a short selection from a book at the parent meeting helps to build relationship between parents and teacher.

Note: An additional resource on this subject, offering many practical suggestions, can be found in the WECAN publication, *You're Not the Boss of Me!* See “Working with Parents: Ideas for Parent Meetings,” p. 247-256.

Part Two: Parent Survey

Parallel to this survey with teachers, Waldorf kindergarten teachers Stephanie Skinner and Helene S. Brodsky Blake distributed a questionnaire to Waldorf parents. This survey asked how different kinds of parent activities had contributed to their understanding of and relationship to Waldorf education for their children. A summary of their findings is included below. A complete report of their investigations and discussion with other teachers about cultivating positive relationships with parents is in the article, "Creating Culture and Community," in the Fall 2015 *Gateways*.

The survey was sent to parents across the country from a wide variety of schools and programs which include independent Waldorf schools as well as public schools and home programs inspired by Waldorf education. It is the hope of this project that these responses will help teachers to create meaningful opportunities for parents to learn about Waldorf education and feel welcomed into the Waldorf community.

Which of the following community events have you found most meaningful and effective for building community at your school or program? Choose all that apply:

Work Parties	32%
Parent or Class Meetings	69%
Guest Lectures or Speakers	31%
Festivals	76%
Community Picnics	32%
Volunteering in Classroom	36%
Crafting Groups / Making Little Ones	38%

Which of the following areas of your parenting approach or home life have been influenced by Waldorf Education?

Media use; media mindfulness	90%
Routine/rhythm in the home	83%
Children's health	47%
Overall understanding of child development	82%
Nutrition	42%
Understanding of First Grade Readiness	41%
Spirituality or religion	20%
Festivals, celebrations	61%
Activities outside of school	27%

To which of the following experiences do you attribute these changes?

Parent nights, parent meetings	66%
Articles, links, and other resources	82%
Parent-teacher conferences	65%

Work parties	10%
Festivals	43%
Birthday Celebrations	27%
Time spent volunteering in the classroom	37%
Learning from other parents	50%
Class picnics	11%