

Parent-Teacher Partnerships



Teachers reveal six rules for parents to help their children get the most out of school.



Australian
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SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EDUCATION



Important messages for parents from teachers



Today's teachers have provided the parents of children attending preschool and school with some valuable insights into how they can contribute more effectively to their children's education.

Features surveyed:

In response to an opinion survey conducted by NEiTA (National Excellence in Teaching Awards) and the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG), award-winning teachers speak openly about learning, teaching, and parent involvement in their children's education.

Insights gained:

Teachers offer insights into the roles parents need to play to help their children make the best of their abilities. Most of all, teachers want parents to work in partnership with them.



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Rule 1. Prepare your child for school

When it comes to the things parents view as the teacher's responsibility, teachers have news that may come as a surprise to some parents.

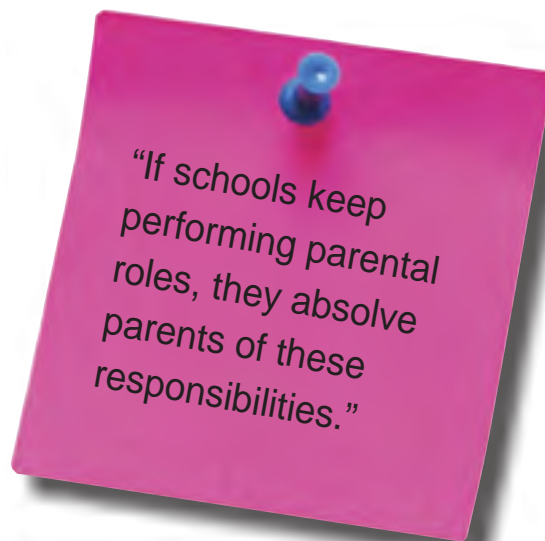
The majority of teachers surveyed felt that in a world where teachers are already overloaded with extra curriculum areas and duties, they are increasingly being expected to take responsibility for teaching the things parents are not. In the words of one teacher, "The family is primarily responsible for care and families can be very powerful resources".

When it comes to parental responsibility, teaching children respect was high on the list. And not just respect for teachers. Respect for the opinions of others and respect for personal property also rated a mention, as did empathy for, and treatment of, fellow students.

Teaching children acceptable behaviour and good manners ran a popular second, followed by personal hygiene, punctuality, acceptable mobile phone use, knowledge of healthy food choices, and the benefits of exercise.

Also ranking high on teachers' lists of parental responsibility was sexuality, drug education and personal safety issues, including water, road and energy safety.

Teachers also requested that parents educate their children about the importance of values and morals. Said Anna (a primary school teacher from Victoria), "I have found that it is very difficult to instill values that are not practised at home. Children are also learning



to 'talk the talk' and know what to say, but inherently don't take on these values unless parents reinforce them. I model and reinforce these values in daily discussions and practice but the lessons are clinical and time consuming, taking away from core curriculum."

For older students, teachers put emphasis on parents making the teacher's job that much easier by encouraging a positive attitude in their kids, a willingness to learn, persistence, confidence and organisational abilities – not to mention social, speech and listening skills.

Danny (a public school teacher from New South Wales) commented that, for younger children, there are "many basic things that we (teachers) take for granted". These basic things include telling the time, counting, colour and shape recognition, and tying shoelaces. In addition, Danny listed organisational skills, the ability to play and work (relatively) independently, manners and social graces, writing one's own name, pencil grip, colouring, cutting with scissors, and basic ball skills.

Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 1 continued

Veronica (a senior high school teacher from Western Australia) feels children also need to think for themselves. “Teach children to accept responsibility for their own actions”, she said, “as students need to be independent and yet cooperative”. A number of the teachers surveyed also believe children should be encouraged to take more responsibility. Parents are encouraged to give their kids more freedom to make mistakes and fight their own battles, as opposed to taking the blame for their children, which isn’t teaching them responsibility.

Helping a child to build their self-confidence was also seen as a parental responsibility. Parents can encourage the building of their child’s self confidence, say teachers, but this can mean a willingness to take risks and to fail sometimes. Even though many children are afraid to fail (and their parents are afraid of the failing as well), teachers assure parents that making mistakes helps children learn some of the most important lessons.

Teachers want parents to check homework. They want parents to teach younger children to wipe, flush and wash, and say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. Student advocacy aside, they also want parents to suspend their support of their children temporarily so they can understand the reasons teachers make certain decisions. “Don’t believe all that your child says”, request teachers, because it’s helpful for parents to hear both sides of the story before promoting a negative attitude towards teaching staff.

Teachers don’t want to hear from parents only when they have a grievance. Teachers are asking for respect, and for the parents who seem unwilling or unable to say ‘no’ to their children, the message is that increasingly, these kids are finding the discipline of school hard to take.



Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 1 continued

“Before children begin school they should be well versed in the 3Rs”, said Jean (a primary school teacher from South Australia). “Respect (self-respect and respecting other people and property); Responsibility (looking after their own possessions, completing tasks, being a contributing family member); and Relationships (forming positive relationships with family, peers and adults).”

A big picture scenario of encouragement came from Jenni (a state school from Queensland). “By working together on growing *capable, confident and caring* children”, said Jenni, “we will promote their ability to make *capable, confident and caring* decisions about their lives and the lives of others who they may manage, lead or work with in the future”.

Key points:

- Teach your child respect, acceptable behaviour, good manners, personal hygiene, punctuality, and healthy choices.
- Teach your child about the importance of values and morals.
- Teachers think the areas of sexuality, drug education and personal safety issues, including water, road and energy safety are parental responsibilities.
- Encourage positive attitudes, especially in older children.
- Teachers take for granted that you have taught your child basic skills.
- Please check your child’s homework.
- Allow your child to make mistakes and accept responsibility for their own actions.



Rule 2. Share the responsibility for your child's education

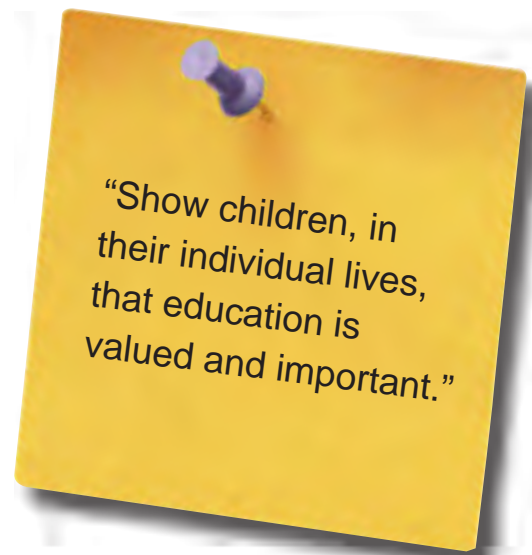
For some parents, education only happens in the classroom. Isn't it the teacher's job to encourage enthusiasm for learning?

Developing an enthusiasm for learning in children actually begins at home. Ensuring an adequate diet, enough sleep and appropriate television viewing habits, say teachers, are just some of the things that *can't* happen in the classroom. Any more than establishing family rules can, or completing homework or demonstrating that as a parent you value education.

Should schools today be expected to take sole responsibility for a child's education? Not so, say teachers, anxious to dispel the most commonly held misconception of all. Teachers believe education is a shared responsibility, and they are unanimous in their desire for parents to encourage learning on the home front in support of classroom learning.

But when it comes to encouraging your kids to learn, the good news, say teachers, is that you don't need to be an Einstein, nor do you need to put hours aside trying to come to terms with maths and science homework.

New South Wales public school teacher, Danny feels that helping kids to learn can be as simple as parents taking an interest. On the home front, suggests Danny, parents can be involved in their child's learning from an early age, simply by reading or listening to them read.



Danny also suggested that kids love having their parents watch them perform whether at school or in performances outside of school. "If parents display an interest in learning themselves, this is more likely to result in their children following their example", he said.

But teachers don't expect parents to encourage their child's learning without being encouraged themselves. Debb (a primary school teacher in Western Australia), says teachers want to engage parents as much as pupils. "Encouraging parents and relatives with special talents to do preparation work at home, gives out a positive message about learning."



Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 2 continued

And it doesn't have to be physical involvement that encourages learning. According to teachers, if physical support is not possible, then verbal or moral support will still be a form of encouragement. Five minutes in the classroom at drop off or pick up time, or checking your child has done their homework, can make a big difference in the encouragement stakes.

Encouraging learning, say teachers, is not complicated, nor does it have to take up huge slabs of parents' time. And for the 'time poor' parent who may be struggling to keep pace with their child's learning, an email or quick phone call can substitute.

Key points:

- Create a learning environment for your child.
- Share the responsibility for your child's education with the school.
- Show an interest in your child's learning.
- Become engaged with your child's teacher and the school.
- Encouragement can be simple and quick.



Rule 3. Partner with your child's teacher

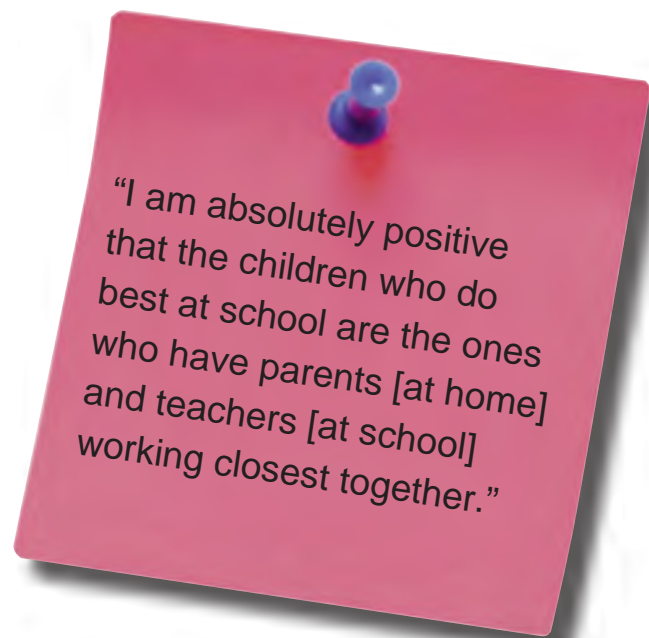
The parent–teacher partnership, say teachers, can be one of the most important factors in any child's education. In a positive partnership, teacher, parent, and child work as a team to get the job done.

When asked to describe the parent–teacher partnership, three words that teachers used most were *essential*, *vital* and *critical*. “Without the parent–teacher partnership”, said primary teacher Jenni (from Queensland), “the work is only half done”.

Many of the teachers surveyed felt that when children experience a positive link between parents and teachers, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards school themselves.

“In a positive partnership”, commented Kirralee (a high school teacher from South Australia), “parents and teachers mutually support each other as they both impart the best of themselves to the child”. When the parent–teacher partnership is missing, teachers agreed that children are more likely to feel unsupported and isolated in their learning.

From Victorian primary school teacher, Anna's perspective, there was also another important benefit. “When parents are involved, greater progress is achieved”, she said. Anna reflected on her own experience of finding it difficult at times to engage parents in their child's education, and admitted that on those occasions she is literally working on her own. “I find those times frustrating and difficult”, she reported.



A strong parent–teacher partnership, especially in the early years, teachers say, helps ensure young children get an effective start to school — socially as well as academically. For older children, academic achievement, friends and the power of peer pressure can be influences that parents don't see. Teachers reinforced that working alongside your child's teacher at this stage is just as important for you the parent, as it is for your child.

It was also strongly suggested that parents who are supportive of the teacher help their child to trust their teacher. Judith (a primary school teacher from Western Australia) said, “When I establish a personal relationship with each parent, a bond of trust is created. The parent then realises that I am approachable and they feel confident to speak to me regarding any concerns. Parents realise that my prime focus is their child.”

Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 3 continued

Children gain a great confidence boost knowing that their teacher understands their family dynamics and that home and school are working together. “The student needs to know you understand their family set-up and that you are really a part of their extended family”, emphasised Kaylene (a primary school teacher from South Australia).

However, parent–teacher partnerships don’t always run smoothly. Teachers agreed that both parties needed to be open and frank with each other. Teachers appreciate parents who speak their mind and feel free to address any concerns they may have openly and calmly. “Teachers need to be supported by parents in any decisions made and vice versa”, said Fiona (a primary school teacher from South Australia).

When it comes to the partnership issue, the message from teachers is clear. To ensure that your child has the opportunity to develop to their full potential, it is vital that home and school work together. Keeping the lines of communication open, the majority of teachers agree, goes a long way to creating mutual respect. Teamwork takes training, say teachers, and five minutes a week can keep the partnership alive.

Key points:

- Teachers describe parent–teacher partnerships as essential, vital and critical.
- Positive links between parents and teachers creates positive attitudes to school.
- Your involvement will help your child’s progress at school, build trust, and resolve differences.
- Parent–teacher partnerships, like any teamwork, benefit from training and communication.



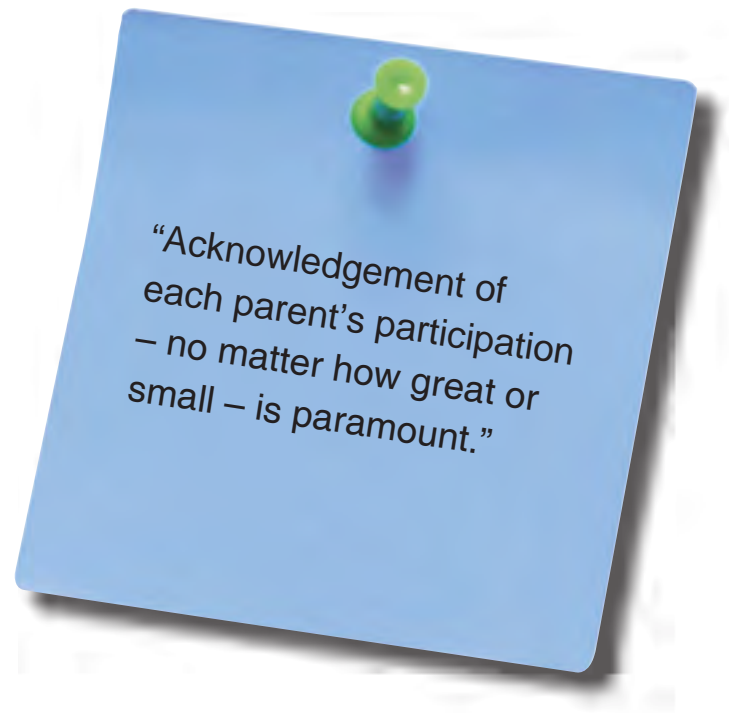
Rule 4. Participate in your child's school

Finding time to be part of a child's education isn't easy. One of the first questions many parents ask is, "How can I be involved with my child's school when I work full-time?" It's a fair question say teachers, but school involvement isn't necessarily restricted to the classroom or even to out-of-hours activities.

John (an intermediate teacher from New Zealand) suggests that parents can keep abreast of long term plans and important dates remotely through the school web site or simply by reading the school newsletter. And Robert (a Catholic teacher from Northern Territory) feels involvement could incorporate reading school policies, supporting the school's values in the home, and encouraging students to respect the policies even if they are not in full agreement with them.

Queenland state school teacher, Jenni also feels that sometimes its teachers who can take the lead in the involvement stakes by sending home newsletters explaining to parents what is happening in the classroom, or by having open nights. Teachers can also have an open door policy in the classroom where parents may come in at any time she said.

Most teachers agreed that parental involvement can include helping with sporting activities, parent committees, fundraising, classroom assistance, and working bees. They were quick to point out that no matter what support or assistance parents can offer, regardless of whether it's during school hours or out-of-hours, it's always appreciated.



But employment and time commitments aside, how do teachers feel when a parent chooses to be less involved than they would prefer? From the surveyed replies, some teachers feel disappointed when parents don't respect the work they are trying to do, while others regret that parents lose out on opportunities to share knowledge and education experiences.

One teacher commented that parents are consumers of education. This teacher expressed that parents are increasingly demanding of the work teachers do, without any real insight or understanding into teaching, or the considerable effort and dedication that teachers put in on a child's behalf. In support of this comment, another teacher felt it was time for teachers to reclaim respect.

Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 4 continued

On the flip side, teachers today invite parents to reap the benefits of being involved. Teachers want parents to experience feeling supported through mutual respect and by sharing a wealth of knowledge about their children. This, said teachers, makes their jobs that much easier. And in the long run, it's the child who benefits.

Key points:

- Read school communications regularly.
- Support the school's values in your home and encourage respect.
- Involve yourself in the school community through a diverse range of activities.
- Look for opportunities to share knowledge and experience.
- Respect the teacher's professionalism.
- Ultimately, your child will reap the benefits of your involvement.



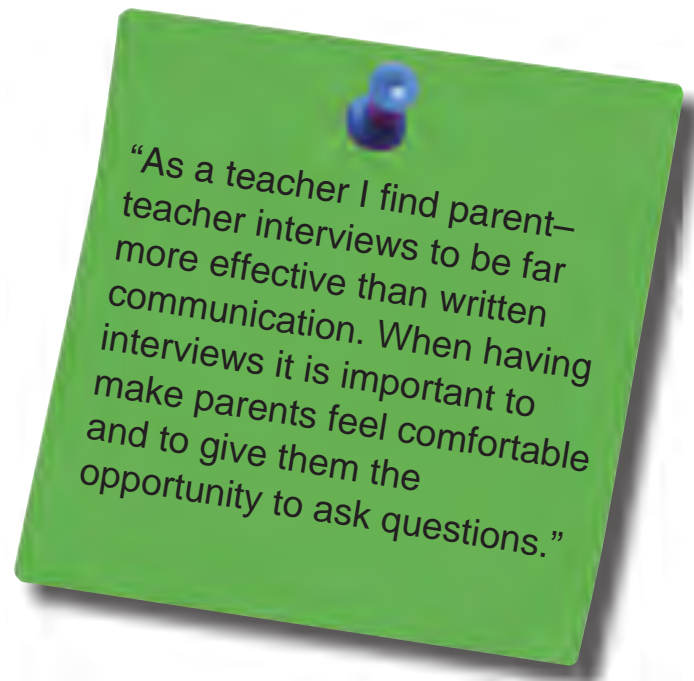
Rule 5. Communication goes two ways

It's a fact of life, say teachers that the parents you need to talk to most, don't front up for the parent-teacher interview. This, despite the fact that teachers agree that parent-teacher interviews are the best means of communication, they should happen more often, and parents should be able to take special leave to attend them.

While teachers acknowledge the benefits of keeping parents up to speed with their child's academic progress, many parents are yet to be convinced. According to Carl, a secondary teacher from Victoria, the interviews are important, but not enough people come. To counteract the problem, Carl admitted he has started to send interim reports home every five weeks to keep parents informed.

"More parents need to be involved – especially those of students at risk", says Greg (a secondary arts teacher from New South Wales). Ian (a secondary teacher from New Zealand) couldn't agree more and says teachers struggle to encourage parents in disadvantaged areas to attend parent-teacher interviews.

So what is it about parent-teacher interviews that keeps parents away? Northern Territory teacher, Robert believes that although the interviews are invaluable as they are one of the few times teachers can discuss progress face-to-face with parents, "most parents and students view meetings with suspicion, expecting criticism or complaints". He emphasised that from his point of view, most times he wants to discuss his students' positive achievements and ways to improve.



Ways to improve were uppermost in the minds of teachers who suggested ideas for making the interview experience more comfortable for parents, and therefore more enjoyable.

Some teachers feel the interview should allow time for discussion, and suggested there be shorter and more frequent opportunities for parents and teachers to communicate.

"Often informal talks during sports events or other school activities are very valuable", says John (an intermediate teacher from New Zealand), and Kaylene (a primary school teacher in South Australia) feels that three-way meetings or student-led conferences, involving teacher, parent and child, always work very well. In these instances, she often trains the student to run the meeting and go through an agenda.

Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 5 continued

Many teachers agree that the interview process should include the child, if only for part of the time. This way, everyone concerned has the opportunity to comment on the setting of goals and responsibilities for learning. Some teachers favoured the more formal academic review, while others felt shorter, more frequent meetings, informal chats, phone calls or emails worked just as well.

Regardless of the way it's done, teachers are united in their desire to keep parents informed, even when that desire is frustrated by disinterested parents or a politically correct reporting system that can in effect, disguise a child's real performance. Teachers agree that interviews can be the only time they see some parents, and the only occasion to give them the 'bigger picture' about their children in the school setting.

So the message to parents is, please participate. Don't fear the face-to-face interview – it's a positive time for sharing, reinforcement, support, and advice. It's also, according to today's teachers, a time to talk about the most important person in your life – your child.

Key points:

- Teachers want personal communication with parents because of its effectiveness.
- Teachers encourage parents to attend parent-teacher interviews wherever possible.
- Don't fear parent-teacher interviews – they aren't necessarily about criticism and complaints.
- Grab every opportunity to communicate with teachers – formal and informal.
- Teachers want to ensure parents are informed – please be sure you participate.



Rule 6. Support your child's teacher and school

For many parents, it seems that finding ways to show support for a school ranks alongside finding time to be involved. But teachers suggest that before parents can support the policies and values of their child's school, their first step is to find out what these are. The next step is to decide how best to offer support.

Being up to speed with the school's policies doesn't have to be complicated or time consuming, say teachers. Join the School Council, attend school transition functions, read school newsletters and correspondence or simply communicate with your child's teacher on a regular basis.

Once parents have a handle on policies and values, teachers suggest these become topics for family discussions. "Talk with children about the *what*, *why* and *who* of the values and policies", recommends Queensland teacher, Jenni. What are the values of the school? Are these the same as your family values? Why is it important to have values? What if someone did something to compromise your values, what would you do? To whom do these values apply?

As a family, discussing what school values look like, sound like and feel like, can lead to a deeper understanding of their importance, and as one teacher commented, "family discussions may also raise questions for some great classroom discussion and debate around the established values and policies".



Support for a school can be just as effective outside the school. Danny (a public school teacher from New South Wales) recommends promoting the school at every opportunity. "This can be done at the basic level", suggests Danny, "by parents encouraging healthy attitudes towards school in their own children, as well as to friends, community members and letters to the editor in local papers".

Home reinforcement of behaviours set at school also gives us more credibility, say teachers. "Construct similar values and rules at home with similar consequences", suggests South Australia primary school teacher, Kaylene. "Don't say anything derogatory about the school or teachers in front of the child. If there's a problem, come in and arrange a meeting with the teacher concerned."

Parent - Teacher Partnerships — Rule 6 continued

Be aware of the mission statement, the code of ethics, policies and the 'climate' of the school, suggest teachers, and try to maintain similar values and standards of conduct at home.

Even if you're not in total agreement with the school's policies, the message from teachers is to respect them. As South Australian high school teacher, Kirralee, points out, "As a teacher it is very difficult to reason with a student who says, "My Mum says I don't have to do that".

Key points:

- Know the policies and values of your child's school.
- Talk about the importance of policies and values in the home with your child.
- Mirror the rules and consequences of the school in the home.
- Promote the school to your child to encourage a healthy attitude.



Final Words



Many elements combine to enable children to gain a quality education that provides them with a platform for their future lives, not the least of which is the opportunity to experience their schooling with the full support of their teachers and parents. The teachers who contributed their views, experiences, and requests of parents as part of this survey are highlighting issues to enable children to get the best out of school through education – the cooperative enterprise of parents, teachers, and students.

NEiTA and the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) wish to thank the teachers who participated in this survey. Each of the teachers has received recognition through NEiTA's teaching awards programs run in Australia and New Zealand that celebrate the work of outstanding and excellent teachers and the impact they have on educational outcomes for children.

ASG has proudly supported the NEiTA program since its inception with the aim of supporting children's education for the benefit of Australia's and New Zealand's future generations.

The Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) is Australia's largest member-based organisation specialising in education benefit programs that assist parents in planning for their children's education.

Its vision is to support children and families.

ASG supports the NEiTA teaching awards program.



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