



*A Union of Professionals*

# Classroom Tips

## **Building Parent-Teacher Partnerships**



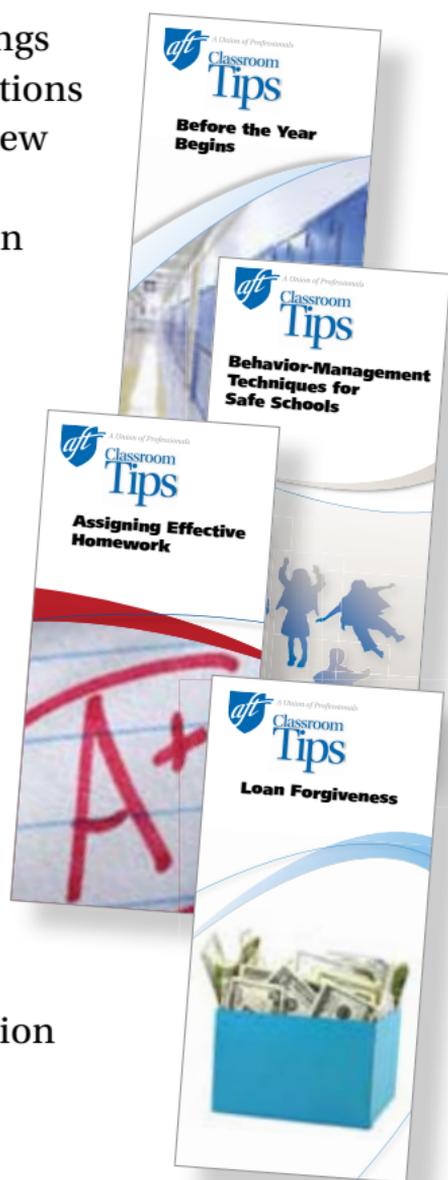


# Classroom Tips

Each new school year brings high hopes, great expectations and challenges for both new and seasoned educators. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed a series called *Classroom Tips* to help educators start the year off right and anticipate the year ahead.

*Classroom Tips* is developed with you, the educator, in mind. The tips in this collection are taken from real classroom experiences and are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development program.

The AFT is a leader in providing educators the resources they need to help them succeed. Visit AFT's Web site for classroom resources at [www.aft.org/tools4teachers](http://www.aft.org/tools4teachers) today.



**E**ffective communication is essential for building school-family partnerships. It constitutes the foundation for all other forms of family involvement in education.

## **Parent Benefits**

Positive parent-school communications benefit parents. The manner in which schools communicate and interact with parents affects the extent and quality of parents' home involvement with their children's learning. For example, schools that communicate bad news about student performance more often than recognizing students' excellence will discourage parent involvement by making parents feel they cannot effectively help their children.

Parents also benefit from being involved in their children's education by getting ideas from school on how to help and support their children, and by learning more about the school's academic program and how it works. Perhaps most important, parents benefit by becoming more confident about the value of their school involvement. Parents develop a greater



appreciation for the important role they play in their children's education.

When communicating with parents, consider your remarks in relation to the three categories that influence how parents participate. For example, are you communicating about:

- Classroom learning activities?
- The child's accomplishments?
- How the parents can help at home with their child's learning?

## **Student Benefits**

Substantial evidence exists showing that parent involvement benefits students, including raising their academic achievement. There are other advantages for children when parents become involved—namely, increased motivation for learning, improved behavior, more regular attendance, and a more positive attitude about homework and school in general.

## **Teacher Benefits**

Research shows that parental involvement can free teachers to focus more on the task of teaching children. Also, by having more contact with parents, teachers learn more about students' needs and home environment, which is information they can apply toward better meeting those needs. Parents who are involved tend to have a more positive view of teachers, which results in improved teacher morale.

## **Good Two-Way Communication**

Good two-way communication between families and schools is necessary for your students' success. Not surprisingly, research shows that the more parents and teachers share relevant information with each other about a student, the better equipped both will

be to help that student achieve academically.

Opportunities for two-way communication include:

- Parent conferences;
- Parent-teacher organizations or school community councils;
- Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for parent review and comment;
- Phone calls; and
- E-mail or school Web site.

For more information on building relationships with parents, visit [www.aft.org/tools4teachers](http://www.aft.org/tools4teachers).

The screenshot shows the AFT website's 'Tools For Teachers' section. The main heading is 'Building Parent-Teacher Partnerships'. The page is divided into several sections:

- Working Together:** Lists 'Parent-Teacher Partnerships', 'Creating a Classroom Team', and 'BP Teams'.
- Tools For Teachers:** Lists 'Classroom Management', 'Working Together', 'Teacher to Teacher', 'Teaching as a Career', 'Classroom Materials', 'Working with Special Populations', and 'Funding Opportunities'.
- Application Deadline:** A blue box with white text stating 'Application Deadline is March 31, 2010'.
- Quote:** A quote from Corina Clark, AFT Corpus Christi, TX: 'When you come down to it, this really is about the student.'
- Share Good News:** A section encouraging teachers to share good news with parents instead of only bad news.
- Teacher's on the phone:** A 'Try It!' section featuring a story about a retired high school science teacher, Thomas Hurlburt, who makes 'sunshine calls' to parents.
- Tips for Using the Phone to Communicate with Parents:** A list of tips for preparing for a call, such as introducing yourself, telling parents what their child is studying, and informing them of special achievements.
- Listen to a sample "Get Acquainted" phone call.**
- Meeting with Parents:** A section on 'Face-to-Face Meetings with Parents' that emphasizes establishing trust and shared information.
- Open House, Orientation or Curriculum Nights:** A section on events that provide an opportunity for parents to learn about school policies and programs.

## Communication Strategies

Personal contact, including conferences, home visits, telephone calls, and curriculum nights or open houses, seems to be the most effective form of communication and may be among the most familiar. However, the establishment of effective school-home communication has grown more complex as society has changed.

The great diversity among families means that it is not possible to rely on a single method of communication that will reach all homes with a given message. It is essential that a variety of strategies, adapted to the needs of particular families and their schedules, be incorporated into an overall plan. Some strategies to consider include:

- Parent newsletters;
- Annual open houses;
- Curriculum nights;
- Home visits (where applicable);
- Phone calls;
- Annual school calendars;
- Inserts in local newspapers;
- Annual grandparents or “special persons” days;
- Board of Education spokesperson or communications officer at PTA meetings;
- Homework hotlines;
- Annual field days;
- Notices and handouts in local markets, clinics, churches, mosques, temples or other gathering sites;
- Web site for the school;
- Workshops for parents; and
- Communications that are focused on fathers as well as mothers.

Effective communication strategies involve:

- **Initiation:** Teachers should initiate contact as soon as they know which students will be in their classroom for the school year. Contact can occur by means of an introductory phone call or a letter to the home introducing yourself to the parents and establishing expectations.
- **Timeliness:** Adults should make contact soon after a problem has been identified, so a timely solution can be found. Waiting too long can create new problems, possibly through the frustration of those involved.
- **Consistency and frequency:** Parents want frequent, ongoing feedback about how their children are performing with homework.
- **Follow-through:** Parents and teachers each want to see that the other will actually do what they say they will do.
- **Clarity and usefulness of communication:** Parents and teachers should have the information they need to help students, in a form and language that makes sense to them.

## Surprise a Parent

Parents are not accustomed to hearing unsolicited positive comments from teachers about their children, especially in a phone call from the school. Imagine how you would feel, as a parent, if you were contacted by a teacher or the school principal and told that your son or daughter was doing well in school, or that your child had overcome a learning or behavior problem. When you make calls to share positive information with parents, be prepared for them to sound surprised—pleasantly surprised.

Research shows that school-home communication is greatly increased through personalized positive telephone contact between teachers and parents. Remember, when a phone call from school conveys good news, the atmosphere between home and school improves. When you have

good news to share, why wait? Make the call and start a positive relationship with a parent.

## Phone Guidelines

Sometimes, as a new teacher, it's difficult to make the first call to a parent or guardian. Preparing for the call will make it easier. Before making a call, write down the reasons for the call. One reason can be simply to introduce yourself to the parent or guardian. Here are several guidelines you can use as you prepare:

- Introduce yourself.
- Tell the parents what their child is studying.
- Invite the parents to an open house and/or other school functions.
- Comment on their child's progress.
- Inform them of their child's achievements (e.g., "Student of the Week").
- Inform them of their child's strengths or share an anecdote.

To hear a sample teacher-parent phone call, visit [www.aft.org/tools4teachers](http://www.aft.org/tools4teachers).



# Five Great Reasons to Join a Union of Professionals

## The American Federation of Teachers:

**1 Supports you in the classroom.** Effective learning only takes place when high-quality teachers, with the support of other competent professionals, have the materials and assistance needed to accomplish the task. Your union is a strong advocate for quality classroom materials that are aligned to the standards of achievement we expect our students to meet. We also insist that state and district assessments for measuring student progress are aligned with these standards and that the assessments be used appropriately to support student learning.

**2 Helps you prepare.** No matter how well prepared you may have been before entering the classroom, there is always room for improvement. Ongoing professional development that meets you at your point of need is vital for continued growth as an educator. The AFT and its affiliates deliver some of the finest professional development programs available; and in situations where ours are not available, we advocate and broker for you to receive the best training possible.

**3 Stands up for you.** Whether the discussion is taking place in the White House, in the halls of Congress, on the floor of your statehouse, in colleges of education or in your local editorial pages, you can be sure that union representatives are weighing in assertively, ensuring that the collective voice of educators comes through clearly and effectively.

**4 Advocates for your profession.** No one enters the teaching profession without a strong desire to help children reach their potential. Yet, at times the realities of life make this calling difficult to stick with. Adequate salaries and benefits are essential in order to keep the best teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff in our public schools. Working conditions such as manageable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and discipline policies that support teaching and enhance student learning are important factors in ensuring that the best teachers remain in the classroom.

**5 Keeps you informed.** *American Educator* is one of the most highly respected journals available to keep you informed on current thinking in public education by some of the most capable thinkers and doers in the field. *American Teacher* will keep you on top of the challenges and successes of your colleagues across the country. And a host of optional publications, as well as a comprehensive Web site that will assist you in addressing the particular needs of your school and classroom, provide the balance of a professional literature package that is second to none.



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