

HASMONEAN MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

HASMONEAN



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Guidelines for Communication between Parents/ Carers and Staff

Introduction

Research consistently finds that children achieve more when schools and parents/carers/carers work together. However, the unique relationship that a parent/ carer or teacher has with a child might at times lead to differences of opinion as to what is best for the child. Both parties need to appreciate and respect the special skills and insights that each brings to their relationships with a child and understand and appreciate each other's perspective.

Tension in the parent/staff relationship can arise when both parties are strongly motivated to do the best for the child but occupy fixed positions about how to achieve this. The ability to voice differences of opinion, respectfully and with understanding, is key to a successful relationship and to minimising conflict.

The development of positive relationships between families and school staff takes effort from both parties and typically develops over time rather than over a single event.

School staff bring a range of interpersonal and communication skills to the table which are important for building successful relationships. Reports suggest that parents/carers identify with and respond best to the following attributes:

- Warmth
- Approachability
- Positive discipline
- Child/young person-centredness
- Effective classroom management
- Reliability
- Trust
- Positive relationships and effective communication.

When dealing with issues related to young people, schools and families can sometimes fall into a trap of blaming each other when things are not going well. It is important to avoid this where possible and seek to create an environment of trust, honesty and respect. The capacity to understand and show some empathy for the respective challenges each party faces is likely to engender the type of mutual respect required to develop a positive working relationship.

Both school staff and parents/carers can feel vulnerable when communicating or interacting, particularly if the purpose of the meeting or communication is to discuss a concern.

Some other challenges to effective communication include:

- Being time poor or stressed when attempting to communicate
- Lack of confidence in one's skills as a parent or a teacher
- Lack of experience in teacher/parent communication
- Previous negative experiences when communicating or interacting (some parents/carers may be reluctant to engage with their child's school because of negative experiences they had as a student; some staff may be reluctant to engage with parents/carers because of their own bad experiences)
- Preconceived ideas about the parent/family or teacher/school
- Not recognising the benefits of developing a positive working relationship.

Recognising the advantages of effective communication, as well as the barriers, will enable teachers to deal with communication from parents/carers in an empathetic, helpful way, thereby minimising conflict, ensuring that parents/carers feel heard and as a result, issues do not escalate unnecessarily, taking up precious time.

Guidelines for Staff

- Endeavour to acknowledge receipt of an email or phone call within 48 hours (workdays). If it is something that will require a longer period to investigate, make it clear that the concern has been heard, that it is being investigated and a more detailed response will be sent within a specified timescale.
- If the matter is urgent, acknowledge that and ensure a response is sent within that limit or explain why that will not be possible.
- You are not expected to monitor or respond to emails outside of your normal working hours (including weekends and published school holidays). Whilst parents/carers may compose emails at all sorts of hours to suit their own needs, they need only be addressed during working hours.
- If you receive an email which is of an aggressive tone, sets unreasonable demands or could otherwise be interpreted as harassing, or if the email exchange is not moving

forward constructively, refer this to your line manager in the school, who will decide if this needs escalating or if it can be addressed in a different manner.

When contacting/responding to parents/carers

- Read the email carefully/ listen to the call with an open mind, and try to understand what their concern is.
- Empathy is the key. Most parents/carers just want to know that you have their child's best interests at heart. If you can convince them of that, they are much more likely to accept your decision even if you are not able to give them what they are asking for.
- The parent will initially only have their child's version of events about an incident, so be prepared to hear what they have been told, and then gently set out your version.
- If this is your 10th communication about a particular matter e.g. setting, remember that the parent does not know this and their query needs the same patience that you showed to the first parent's query.
- Always use a respectful and polite tone, avoiding jargon, being careful to explain any acronyms e.g. CATS/ MEGs etc.
- If what is being said by the parent seems unfair, ensure the tone of the email/ your telephone call remains calm and make it clear that you have heard and understood what the parent's concern is. Usually this will diffuse matters.
- Inevitably, the hardest emails to deal with will arrive during the busiest period or after a hard day. It is easy to get defensive when someone seems to be challenging your methods. But this is when empathy is needed the most to prevent the problem escalating further.
- Try to avoid a response which only says that the decision was a result of the application of a school policy. Whilst that may be the case, the parent is concerned about their child and wants to know that you see them as an individual. For example, a child may have to move down a set due to the way in which setting is arranged but focus on what that child can do to improve in your subject.
- To successfully resolve confrontation, try to use language that expresses your desire to work in partnership with the parent to find a solution, rather than shutting down discussion. For example: instead of "*the only thing we can do*", try "*the best option, I think...*". Instead of a simple "*no*", try "*I don't think so, but let me find out*" or "*I would suggest...*". Instead of "*you should have/why didn't you*", try "*I understood why you...*".
- Before sending an email read through it again and check that it constructively addresses the issue raised in an empathetic way. If in doubt, check it over with a colleague or line manager.
- If, for whatever reason, the email exchange is not going well despite your best efforts to resolve the issue, escalate it to your line manager.

Positive communication

When time permits, celebrate the positive. Reach out to parents/carers regularly to celebrate their child's academic or social successes in the classroom. This positive reinforcement strengthens your bond with parents/carers and provides a communication balance for the times that you have to reach out with concerns.

Staff Checklist

Before sending emails or letters to parents, staff should first ask themselves, whether what they have written is:

POLITE? Is the tone polite and respectful?

POSITIVE? Does it approach the issue positively, in a spirit of collaboration with parents?

EMPATHETIC? Does it show that you empathise and care about the individual child, and that you actively seek opportunities to give praise?

APPROPRIATE? Does it explain the situation in sufficient detail? Does it signpost where extra information/ support may be found? Is it timely - does it give plenty of notice about an event/ have you responded to a parents' email within 48 hours or sent a holding email?

Complaints about parents'/ carers' communication with staff

The MAT recognises that all its members of staff are dedicated professionals who are committed to delivering high standards. We expect all parents to respect this and to raise any issues in a polite and calm manner.

If a staff member feels s/he is not being treated in a polite or calm manner by a parent and wishes to make a complaint about this, they should in the first instance discuss this with their line manager. If their line manager is unable to resolve the situation through discussion with a member of the SLT, this should then be escalated to the Headteacher of the relevant school.

The Headteacher of the relevant school will then write to the parents to ask them to adjust their approach, reminding parents of the above Guidelines for Communication between parents/ carers and staff.

If the parent/ carer does not adjust their approach, the CEO may write to them stating that if they fail to improve their conduct the school will cease to deal with them until they have apologised to the relevant member of staff and improved their behaviour.

Guidelines for parents/carers

- Please remember that most teachers, including Subject Leaders and Directors of Learning, will be teaching when you try to contact them. While it would be ideal for them to respond to your query immediately, this is simply not possible in all cases. Staff will endeavour to acknowledge receipt of your email or phone call within 48 hours (workdays). If it is something that will require a longer period to investigate, they will make it clear that the concern has been heard, that it is being investigated and a more detailed response will be sent within a specified timescale.
- If the matter is urgent, staff will endeavour to deal with the matter urgently or will explain why that will not be possible.
- Please be aware that staff are not expected to monitor or respond to emails outside of their normal working hours (including weekends and published school holidays). Whilst parents/carers may compose emails at hours to suit their own needs, they need only be addressed during working hours.
- If you send an email which has an aggressive tone, sets unreasonable demands or could otherwise be interpreted as harassing, or if the email exchange is not moving forward constructively, staff will ask the school to contact you to ask you modify your approach. Regrettably, if this persists, the school will be unable to help you further with your query.

When contacting/ responding to the school

- It is worth reminding yourself, when you are about to raise an issue, that the vast majority of school staff in this country really do care about children and want them to succeed. If, from the outset you make it clear you want to work collaboratively with the school to resolve your issue, the staff member will be genuinely motivated to help you.
- Expect staff to be respectful and polite, but it is helpful if you approach them in a way that naturally elicits this response.
- Remember that you may initially only have your child's version of events about an issue, so be prepared on occasion to hear an account which may run counter to this.
- It would be very much appreciated if parents could raise any issues they may have with one person in the first instance as raising an issue with multiple staff members slows down the process of the issue being dealt with.
- Teachers are not short of empathy but they are short of time. A full time secondary school teacher may teach up to 200 children and will have only a handful of hours in school time for marking and preparation. The vast majority would dearly love to give each child and their parents/carers more 1-1 attention but their time to do this is limited. If they seem in a hurry or unable to give the issue the time you think it deserves, it is worth remembering that for a teacher who teaches 150+ children (and many teach more), to give each child or their parents/carers just 10 minutes extra 1-1 time each week would amount to an extra 25+ hours per week. Many teachers give of their own time freely before school, at lunchtime and after school, but they simply

cannot give students and parents/carers the amount of time they would ideally wish to give them.

- School policies e.g. in regard to discipline, setting or entry to the sixth form are devised by school staff and governors to be in the best interests of the majority of children. There will always be instances when the policies do not seem to favour individual children (e.g. those who were just a few marks off getting in to a higher set) regardless of the nature of the policy. However, they are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they are as fair as possible to the greatest number of children.
- If what is being said by a teacher seems unfair, please try to ensure that the tone of the email/ your telephone call remains calm and make it clear that you have heard and understood what the teacher's concern is, just as we will expect them to respond views which they may not necessarily agree with in calm and empathetic manner.
- Inevitably, the hardest emails to deal will concern a child's disappointing behaviour or academic performance. It is easy to get defensive when someone seems to be questioning your child in this regard. But this is when empathy is needed the most: the problem will not resolve itself unless it is first acknowledged and understood.
- To successfully resolve confrontation, try to use language that expresses your desire to work in partnership with the school to find a solution, rather than occupying an entrenched position. For example: instead of "*the only thing we can do*", try "*the best option, I think...*". Instead of a simple "*no*", try "*I don't think so, but let's consider that*" or "*I would suggest...*". Instead of "*you should have/why didn't you*", try "*I understand why you...*".
- Before sending an email read through it again and check that it constructively addresses the issue in an empathetic way. If in doubt, check it over with someone else.
- If, for whatever reason, the email exchange does not going well despite your best efforts to resolve the issue, escalate it to the staff member's line manager.

Positive communication

When time permits, celebrate the positive. Reach out to the school to celebrate what has gone well. This positive reinforcement strengthens your bond with the school and provides a communication balance for the times that you have to reach out with concerns.

Parent Checklist

Before sending emails or letters to staff, parents should first ask themselves, whether what they have written is:

POLITE? Is the tone polite and respectful?

POSITIVE? Does it approach the issue positively, in a spirit of collaboration with staff?

EMPATHETIC? Does it demonstrate empathy the constraints in which staff operate, and acknowledge what they/ the school is doing well?

APPROPRIATE? Are the nature and scope of your enquiries, and the timeframe in which you would like matters to be resolved, reasonable?

Complaints about staff members' communication with parents

The MAT recognises that all its members of staff are dedicated professionals who are committed to delivering high standards. We expect all staff to communicate with parents in a polite and calm manner to reflect this.

If a parent/ carer wishes to make a complaint about the way in which a member of staff has communicated, they should follow the Complaints Policy on the school website.

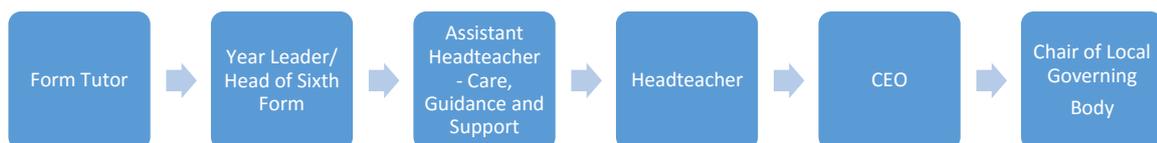
Contacting the School

In order to ensure that your query is dealt with as quickly as possible it is important that your query is sent to the appropriate person.

It would be very much appreciated if parents could raise any issues they may have with one person in the first instance as raising an issue with multiple staff members slows down the process of the issue being dealt with.

The first point of contact for queries about care guidance and support is your child's form tutor. The first point of contact for queries about academic matters is your child's subject teacher. Should you feel that your query has not been resolved satisfactorily at any stage, the way on which you can escalate your query is set out below.

Queries about care, guidance and support:



Queries about academic matters:



A full list of contact details for staff (including how to raise safeguarding concerns and speak to staff about special educational needs, mental health issues, medical issues, student absence etc) can be found on each of the school's websites:

<https://hasmoneangirls.org.uk/contact/>
<https://hasmoneanboys.org.uk/contact/>