

Supporting Collaboration Through Active Listening



Active listening is a skill that teachers can learn and use to help establish meaningful relationships with parents. Strong collaborative relationships are important so that teachers

and parents can work effectively together to ensure students are supported and successful learners.



Active listening involves empathetic comments, appropriate questions, and paraphrasing or summarizing for the purpose of verifying what has been heard.

There are four parts in active listening:

- Listen, empathize and communicate respect
- Ask questions and ask permission to take notes
- Focus on the issue
- Find a first step

LISTEN

- Empathy communicates that the listener is doing his or her best to understand the other person's thoughts and feelings.
- Respectful listening communicates that how the speaker is feeling is important to the listener.
- In active listening, the goal is not to reach agreement. In fact, there is no expectation of agreeing or disagreeing; the goal is simply to understand and acknowledge the other person's point of view.
- Activelisting involves listening not just with your ears, but also with your eyes and heart. It involves listening for feeling and listening for meaning. It uses skills, but it is rooted in our attitudes.
- The process of talking, explaining and being listened to can be very powerful for a parent. It can serve as a release of emotion, particularly if the parent was feeling anxious about the meeting with the teacher.
- It can also help the parent clarify his or her own thinking, feelings and beliefs about a concern.

ASK QUESTIONS

- It is respectful to ask for the permission of the parents to take notes. Let the parents know that a copy of the notes will be provided to them at the end of the meeting to check for accuracy and to ensure everyone has a record of what was decided.
- When asking questions, phrase them as open-ended questions that cannot be answered by a simple "yes" or "no". An easy beginning for open-ended questions is "Tell me about..." Another, non-threatening beginning for open-ended questions is to use a statement instead, such as "I wonder..."
- If the teacher is the person taking notes (which will then be shared by both teacher and parents), repeating or paraphrasing what has just been said is a good way to ensure the accuracy of what is being written down as well as checking for understanding.
- The process of asking questions, paraphrasing, clarifying and writing notes down is also a strategy that will help the teacher to organize the information the parent is sharing, so that it will be easier to summarize what the parent has said. This summary is critical in the next step of the process.



FOCUS ON THE ISSUE

- This step brings the information gathering to a close, and begins to focus on the issue or problem.
- Signal the change to this step in the process by saying, "I want to make sure I have everything" OR "I want to make sure my notes are accurate."
- Then carefully review the notes with the parents, checking that the content is accurate.
- At the end of the review, ask if the parents would like anything changed or added.
- Make sure that there is a clear understanding of the issues – what they are, and what each issue involves – before moving on to the final step.

FIND A FIRST STEP

- Stephen Covey talks about the Circle of Concern and the Circle of Influence. A person's Circle of Influence includes those things s/he can affect directly. A person's Circle of Concern comprises all matters about which s/he cares.
- As we look at our concerns, we realize we can control some issues, but we cannot control others. Proactive people focus their efforts on the Circle of Influence. They work on issues they can directly influence. By undertaking and making positive changes, these people can gradually enlarge their Circle of Influence.
- By focusing on issues they can influence, teachers can expand their knowledge and experience, and build trustworthiness.
- A reasonable "first step" is often to find out more about the issue. This might involve observing the student and speaking with other teachers to find out what they have observed.
- If the issue is outside the teacher's Circle of Influence (for example, a challenge in riding the bus) then the role of the teacher is to link the parents to someone who can help them.
- When an issue is outside the Circle of Influence of the teacher, it is important to clearly state to the parents what the teacher's role will be. Clearly defining the teacher's role helps to eliminate confusion or unrealistic expectations.



Covey, S.R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

