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Email Dos and Don'ts for Educators

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Facebook and Twitter may be the newest tools for communicating with families, and good old-fashioned phone calls may still be in order when problems arise. But according to educators and at least one survey, email has become a preferred method of communication between teachers and parents. And, when done right, email can be manageable as well as effective.

Digital communication is popular with teachers and parents alike. A 2012 survey found that 78% of parents and 58% of teachers agreed with the statement that technology is a “very valuable” tool to help teachers effectively and consistently communicate with parents. The national survey was sponsored by the [Leading Education by Advancing Digital \(LEAD\) Commission](#), which is supported by the Federal Communications Commission and the U.S. Department of Education, in part to support the latter’s National Education Technology Plan. And according to a 2011 survey conducted by the [National School Public Relations Association](#), email was parents’ preferred method of communication from schools, beating out phone messaging systems, text messaging, and social networking.

Email is valuable because it is quick, efficient, and asynchronous, according to principals and teachers who use it regularly. It can also overcome long-standing barriers to family-school communication (like work schedule conflicts) and can be translated for families who don’t speak English, these educators say. For many schools, one of email’s biggest attractions is its ability to reach many families at once, while avoiding the problem of the black-hole backpack. Elementary school teacher Patricia Seidler says, “Parent communication is a critical part of my ability to help my students, and email is a vehicle for communication that often makes things easier for everyone involved.”

But the asynchronous nature of email can also be a challenge, educators report. Emails are often misconstrued due to ambiguous tone or lack of facial cues. Such misunderstandings have big implications for educator-family relationships, which according to research are sometimes already tense due to differing expectations, lack of trust, and real and perceived discrimination. And despite evidence that the “digital divide” across socioeconomic and racial groups is closing, lack of access remains a concern.

The challenges of email are certainly not new, but they can be difficult to navigate for even the most seasoned educator. Few schools have guidelines for staff, and the laws governing electronic communications are murky. How can educators avoid these pitfalls and get the most out of email?

DO establish relationships with families through other methods first. There’s nothing like face-to-face contact for building the foundation of a relationship, and many educators find that email is most effective when it follows an initial in-person contact. Because it’s not always easy or comfortable for families to attend school events, some educators go into the community to establish relationships. Strategies include home visits, attendance at community events, and partnerships with institutions like libraries, community centers, and hair salons. Once these in-person contacts are established, some educators find that email can actually increase parent attendance at school meetings and events.

DO create an email policy. Policies should be shared with families at the beginning of the year. They should explain how quickly staff will respond and specify what kinds of information are and are not appropriate for email. School-wide policies can facilitate consistency, but experts say that few schools have them. Teacher-level policies appear to be more common, though they are rarely formalized. Seidler, who has taught in both Virginia and Massachusetts, encourages parents to email, but sets a guideline that they should call or set up an appointment if an email becomes longer than 2–3 paragraphs. “I set this guideline because I found that parents would sit and spend an hour writing an email at night when we could have had a 20–30 minute conversation the next day and solve the issue at hand.”

DO have a plan for managing email communication. In a [small but intriguing study](#), Blair Thompson of Western Kentucky University found that teachers reported a surprisingly small amount of time spent on emailing with families (30–60 minutes per week). This was true even though parents preferred email to other methods of communication. Thompson believes that the reason email hasn’t become unmanageable is because teachers are skilled at adapting and being efficient. But it’s easy to see how time spent on email could spiral and become unmanageable, especially for teachers with a large number of students. Some teachers decide when and how long they will spend emailing. Eighth-grade science teacher Donna Peruzzi, who teaches in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says it’s important to “respond in a timely manner, but set boundaries (e.g., I don’t respond to work email on weekends).” At the Bowling Green Junior High School in Kentucky, Principal Cynthia Jones West includes in her email signature how quickly parents can expect to receive a response.

DO use email to provide basic information. Principals and teachers advise that email is a great way to communicate information like logistics (e.g., school schedules and closings), reminders about school events, and appointment scheduling. Many teachers also use it to share assignments and classroom highlights. Special education teacher Yvonne Williams in Washoe County, Nevada, sends home “dailies” every Friday, which “consist of a photograph of a student or group of students, sometimes with a teacher, engaged in learning. I write a few paragraphs about the purpose of the activity. Sometimes I include suggestions to extend similar learning activities at home.” Dailies are also posted by the classroom door, but because many students ride the bus, Williams finds that emailing “ensures the parents see [the dailies] and also have access to make copies.” Many teachers say that this kind of general information is the only content for which they use email. Others also use email to share positive feedback about individual students’ progress.

DO keep supervisors and colleagues in the loop. It’s always a good idea for school staff to coordinate their communication with families, but this is particularly important with email because of the potential for miscommunication. Mike LaTorre, who teaches performing arts and technology in Lake Oswego, Oregon, says that, “There may be times when a parent contacts you with a confrontation, a message that makes you uncomfortable, or inappropriate contact. I always forward these with a draft of my response to my administrator and/or union representative for approval and guidance before replying to the parent.” Some educators say that it’s good policy to always copy a colleague or two.

DON’T use email as the only method of communication. Families should always be offered a choice of communication formats. According to the [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#), the “digital divide” has been decreasing over the past decade, but 22 percent of American adults have no Internet access and gaps across income and education levels remain. Principal Jonna AuCoin of Sierra Vista Elementary School explains that email is not a viable method of communication at her school in Reno, Nevada, where almost all of the families live in poverty. After a group of the school’s families participated in a computer training course and received free computers, they still could not afford Internet connection services. Even in affluent communities where it can be assumed that most if not all families have access, some may not be comfortable with emailing school staff.

DON’T use email for negative feedback or sensitive situations. Parents never like to hear bad news about their children, but receiving bad news by email is even harder, because it doesn’t give parents an opportunity to ask questions, provide information, or discuss solutions. Deb Socia is a former principal in the Boston Public Schools and currently the Executive Director of [Technology Goes Home](#), a program that aims to bridge the digital divide and build family-school relationships. She says that email should never be the first way that families hear about a behavior problem, but that it is helpful for follow-up. She shares the example of a time when she set up behavior contracts with a group of students and their parents, then used daily emails to keep parents apprised of progress.

DON’T share confidential information. Email communications are usually not secure, and they may be considered public record in some cases. For this reason, administrators warn that any content that could be confidential or that seems risky in any way should be reserved for phone calls and meetings. Some teachers even suggest referring to students only by initials.

DON’T get into email battles. Teachers and principals say that it is critical to be calm and collected whenever writing email to families, and to avoid responding with strong emotions. It can be tempting to fire off a message immediately after an incident, but it’s better to wait and take the time to reflect and cool off. If parents send angry or hostile emails, many teachers ask parents to set up a phone call or an in-person meeting.

DON’T forget to proofread and pay attention to tone. Because of the crucial, and sometimes strained, nature of family-school relationships, all communication should be carefully considered and phrased. Emails are often drafted and sent quickly, creating opportunities for misinterpretation. Teachers recommend taking a few extra minutes when crafting a message and asking a colleague for a quick read if there is any concern. LaTorre says, “Proofread and try to change the tone of the email in your head. If you can interpret your email another way than what you intend, you may need to rewrite it.” Educators say that it’s particularly important to be aware of tone when discussing student problems. It is best, they say, to describe such situations in neutral terms and to avoid phrases that suggest any party is to blame. Likewise, they suggest avoiding phrases that make it sound as though there is no hope for improvement. But LaTorre says that tone issues can also arise in positive situations from the use of emotion-laden words like “love.” For example, a phrase like “I love having your child in the classroom” could be misinterpreted to mean that the teacher has an inappropriately close relationship with the child. LaTorre suggests avoiding such strong words, even when they are intended casually.

Navigating the Digital World

Many of these tips can also be helpful as educators navigate newer methods of family-school communication such as text messaging. But like email, each of these technologies will have a unique learning curve, requiring educators and parents to keep their eyes open for potential pitfalls as well as opportunities. Regardless of the method or the “how,” in family-school communication, the “what,” “when,” and “why” always matter.

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