

Phoning Parents



High-leverage
moves to transform
your classroom &
restore your sanity

Michael Goldstein

“An engaging, actionable, and provocative book about phone calls to parents? I was skeptical at first, but then I read it. When you combine Mike Goldstein’s cut-to-the-chase smarts with Match’s proven learning about what actually works, you get a potent, witty, and behavior-changing exploration of one of a teacher’s most important tools for accelerating student learning.”

Steven Farr, Chief Knowledge Officer,
Teach for America

“Too many books about teachers, students and families just focus on bake sales, behavior challenges, or missing backpacks. While those things have a time and place, this book highlights the why, what, and how for teachers building strong and productive relationships with families. It is full of practical training advice, clear rationale for family outreach, and simply no excuse for not making it happen. As someone who obsesses about teacher time, I was impressed how the book spells out how long outreach will take and why it is worth it. If only this book had existed when I was teaching!”

Maia Heyck-Merlin, author of *The Together Teacher* and founder
of The Together Group, former Chief Talent Officer of Achievement First

“I’ve been teaching a number of Match Education’s practices and procedures to my pre-service teachers for several years now—including phone calls with parents—to great effect. I’m thrilled that *Phoning Parents* (which I’ll be assigning!) codifies Match’s insightful, straightforward, and good-humored approach to a crucial tool for building powerful, productive relationships with students and their parents.”

Scott Seider, Assistant Professor of Education,
Boston University

“Children benefit when there is good communication between home and school, and respect between families and teachers. Although widely acknowledged, these important connections often don’t happen. *Phoning Parents* provides specific ways for teachers use phone calls skillfully to build these bridges: when to call, ways to say specific things, how to consider particular situations or challenges. With its clear focus on practice, it can help beginning teachers get started and support more experienced teachers refine their use of phone calls home.”

Deborah Loewenberg Ball,
University of Michigan School of Education and TeachingWorks

**Phone Call Story:
Ray Schleck,
History Teacher**

Priscilla was a sharp kid who didn't seem to care what anybody thought of her, therefore everyone kind of ended up liking her. She was kind of a leader in an accidental way.

Teachers at my school didn't call home very much. Our school sent home progress reports every two weeks. So parents were never surprised. If a kid missed homework, an automated call was made by a computer that the student had homework detention. My attitude as a teacher, and that of our school, was that between these two things we do a lot of parent communication.

Priscilla's family also came in for conferences all throughout the year. And they were visibly upset. Part of it was general frustration with Priscilla. They would say things like, "We know she's smart, we don't know why she's not doing her work, we don't know what's going on, we don't know what to do." Typical parent of a rebellious teenager stuff.

But part of it was, "Well this has never happened before. She was fine until now. What is going on in this school that caused these negative changes to happen?" The subtext was: "What are you teachers doing wrong?" They had no trust in us. Some tears. Some accusations. One time the dean had to suggest that Priscilla step out of the meeting.

I just was thinking, 'Why are you, the parent, carrying on in front of your kid? This is a horrible message to be sending...'

In her second year at our school, I was her advisor, and ended up having many phone conversations, usually with Dad. There was a huge uptick in her academic success that seemed to come from the calls. What would we talk about? We usually had about 3 different types of calls:

- 1** Big assignments coming up made up about 20% of the conversations.
- 2** A big chunk, maybe 40%, were general mood/behavior updates on Priscilla. Parents reacted well to that, "Okay good to know." Sometimes they would apologize. I would reiterate: "Priscilla's behavior is not a reflection on you guys. Every kid is different, I get it. I know that; you need to know that too. When Priscilla gets in trouble, I know you guys are working really hard at home and that you are doing everything you can on your end. We're all going to keep working on it. Not every day is going to be a good day with Priscilla, that's the deal, I don't blame you guys."
- 3** The rest were conversations about Priscilla's academic effort. If she wasn't "into" an assignment, she'd openly skip

it or put in very little effort. So a lot of the parent conversations were like "Even if Priscilla thinks the assignment is stupid, it's not. Just trust my professional judgment here. The purpose is helping her practice these skills. Beyond that, her refusal to do the work is simply hurting her grade."

Result?

Her second year was a huge improvement. Moreover, her parents didn't complain anymore when they came into school. While I suspect the phone calls were not the only reason — causes are hard to untangle — I'm sure they helped a lot.

Chapter Six

The other 20 things you were wondering
about parent phone calls.

1

What if a parent doesn't call me back?

Don't take it personally.

Try calling at different times during the day. Parents may have an unusual work schedule and you may be able to reach them at a different time.

Leave clear, polite, brief messages. In the voice message, state that you would like the parent to call you back as soon as possible so you can work together to help the student. Sounding angry, frustrated, or annoyed will not help in your effort to contact them. Make sure to leave your number and several different times they can easily reach you. Give them at least two full days to respond to your voicemail before you try again, unless the matter is urgent.

Make sure you have the right number. Ask other teachers if they have alternate numbers. Ask the student for the number.

Send a note home with the student. Set it up so the student's lunch/recess/free time depends on her returning the note with a signature from the parent, so you know it was delivered.

Find out if the parent drops off the student. If so, you can try to meet them outside to talk.

Ask for help. If you believe that a

parent is deliberately not calling you back, ask the other teachers if they have a good relationship with the parent. They may be able to help you figure out what is going on. Finally, ask your principal for help contacting the parent.

2

What if a parent asks for parenting advice?

Parents who are frustrated or "at the end of their rope" with their child's behavior may ask you, "What do you think I should do?" In this situation, you want to be cautious, as you do not want to be responsible for the results. If you're not a parent, you might say:

"You're asking me for advice on how to parent, and I'm not a parent myself. I know this is a common problem for kids, so you may want to ask kids of parents his age what they do."

"Well, I'm not a parent, so I'm not sure. But I have seen some parents do [insert strategy]. Other parents have tried [insert strategy]."

If you are a parent, you should be conservative about what you share. You might agree that parenting is extraordinarily challenging. Your status as a parent grants you a certain privilege to convey empathy. But don't share too many details of your personal situation—every child is different and you need to ensure the focus of the conversation remains your student.

3

Why are you so specific in shooting for calls that are 2 to 5 minutes?

We sort of made that number up, but it seems reasonable. Ten minutes seemed too long — you simply won't have that much to say most of the time. Thirty seconds seemed too short and tends to feel abrupt. So we picked some numbers in the middle. Keep in mind it's going to average out to 2–5 minutes per call, so you'll have some 30 second and some 10 minute calls in there too. Our larger point is you can accomplish a lot with several short "touches" rather than thinking of phone calls as complex, long conversations.

4

What if a parent is unloading problems on me and I can't get a word in?

This is a tough one. Sometimes, a parent needs to unload something, and will really appreciate being listened to respectfully. At other times, it may not be helpful for either of you to go on and on about something negative.

Use your judgment.

You could gently cut into the parent's rant and say, "That sounds really hard," and then try to shift the conversation toward a more productive topic. Or you could wait until the end of the rant and say the same thing.

You'll just have to use your judgment. Be compassionate.

5

What if I'm getting really frustrated with children and feel the parents are at fault?

Sometimes, when parents aren't cooperating as much as you'd like, and their children are frustrating you, it is tempting to bash parents and blame them for the issues in the class. Don't.

If you just need to let off a little steam, talk to a friend or colleague.

Even there, however, don't let yourself blame parents for difficult things happening in your classroom. It is self-defeating.

6

What if the parent starts literally yelling at their kid while I'm on the phone?

Parents yell at students in front of other people because A) they feel embarrassed that someone is calling their child out for his behavior, B) they are frustrated at their child, C) they want to show that the problem does not stem from leniency in the home, and/or d) they're not sure what else to do at that particular moment to express their disapproval.

To assist the parents in undoing this cycle, you can do two things: A) come up with an improvement plan before you make the phone call, and B) start out the phone call by acknowledging what the student is doing well and attributing it in part to parental influence. Sometimes you're stretching to find what he's doing well, but it's okay.

Before the call, ask yourself, "How can this child improve in the area I'm calling about? What is it that I want the parent to do to help the child improve? What is my role in helping the child improve?"

When you first reach the parent, say something like, "I'd like to talk with you for five minutes about _____. Is this a good time? Okay, great. I'd like to just talk over the situation with you first, and then we can bring in _____ to talk. Is that okay? Great."

First, you acknowledge things that the child (and, therefore, the parent) is doing well. "First of all, I wanted to let you know Carlos has been a really active participant in class the last two weeks. He is obviously an enthusiastic math student. Has he always been so full of zest?" Something like this will make the parent feel less defensive and frustrated when you get to the negative part.

Next, to introduce the correction conversation, you might say, "Carlos has been struggling in class lately with _____. Today, for example, he _____. I have some thoughts for what you and I can do, and what he can do, to help him improve in this area. I'd like to run these by you and get your input before we talk to Carlos about it."

At this point, you have signaled several times to the parent that you do not wish for the student to be brought in and scolded at that point. If the parent still wants to yell at his or her child, there's not a whole lot you can do, except to say, "Actually, Ms. _____, I was hoping that you and I could talk about Carlos first. I think that would be much more productive at this point."

7

What if a parent is punishing their kid really severely for really minor behavioral infractions?

The issue here is usually that you, as a teacher, believe a certain parent is calibrating consequences to actions in an inappropriately harsh way. That is, some parents take drastic steps when a child receives even one demerit. The child is terrified of getting a low level behavioral consequence, like a 'demerit' or even a 'warning.'

We've seen two versions of this. Sometimes the parent is just way too heavy on consequences. If that's your conclusion, then your correction phone calls may be counterproductive, and stick with praise calls.

Other times this kind of situation occurs with a parent who is new to the idea of giving small consequences for small misbehaviors. Emphasize that the purpose of these consequences is to help students change and improve their behavior. Explain that one demerit does not trigger a consequence at school and that therefore it should probably not trigger one at home.

Instead, come up with a goal for the student's behavior at school with the parent. This will depend on the student's starting point for

behavior. The parent can then decide the consequences for not meeting the goal and the rewards (if any) for meeting it.

Re-calibrating the parent's discipline system to the school's will help the student to accept the school's system without fear of parental punishment.

As for the specific consequences the parent gives, that is up to his discretion, including spanking for younger kids. Unless there appears to be abuse going on in the home, or indiscriminate physical punishment, it is a parent's right to physically discipline his child. You just want to make sure that what the parent is doing at home supports, rather than undermines, the discipline system at school, which hopefully tilts heavily towards noticing the positive.

8

How do you distinguish between “lip service” and “responsive” parents?

The only difference between these two categories of parents is in whether or not they follow through with what they say they'll do.

Usually, you'll be able to tell which of your kids have lip service parents and which have reactive-but-supportive parents, because the latter students will usually change their behavior to some degree after you call, whereas the former students will not be affected by your phone call.

Parents who pay lip service but don't act according to your call may have a variety of different reasons for not acting. They may not be home very much when their child is home, so they don't get the opportunity for extended check-ins. They may have other, more serious issues going on in their lives, such as a sick parent. Or they might feel that they have limited influence over their child, and they use it only for the “big fish,” such as keeping them from hanging out with the wrong kids. Therefore, be patient with lip service parents, and continue calling them and brainstorming different ways you can collaborate to help the student.

9

What if a parent doesn't think his child has behavior problems, and blames you for problems in class?

This means the parent is giving a resistant response, as we describe in Chapter 3. As with other resistant parents, use data to bolster your argument, make sure other teachers are calling with the same issues (if they are happening in other classes), and call to praise as well as correct.

For example, if you tell the parent, “Daphne got into arguments with three different students today. The other three students did not get into arguments with any other students,” then it's going to be difficult for the parent to blame you or the other students for this one, though he or she might try. Continue relationship-building with the parent and student. Eventually you will see some success.

10

What if a parent complains about other teachers to me?

The best thing to do in this situation is to avoid getting directly involved in the relationships between the other teachers and the parent. Don't try to defend the teacher against what the parent is saying. At the same time, don't agree with the parent.

If the other teacher is someone that is open to parent communication, you can connect them. While still on the phone with the parent, you can say, "I know that _____ really cares about your daughter's success. I think that if you let her know that you feel this way, she would want to work with you to fix the situation. I'll let her know that she should call you."

At this point, they may continue to complain about the teacher, or tell you that talking to her won't help. Listen quietly without agreeing. When she finishes, continue with the same message, "Again, I know _____ would want to work this out with you personally."

If you teach in a school with some colleagues that you believe are not going to try to communicate with an unhappy parent, you're in a little bit of a bind. It's probably not productive to engage too much. "I really can't speak for Mr. X, I hope you understand."

After the conversation, go directly to the teacher or teachers involved, and the principal, and tell them what the parent told you. Don't be overdramatic. Simply pass along that XYZ parent is frustrated, that you explained you know Ms. Other Teacher(s) cares, and ask if they phone can phone the parent that night.

11

What if a parent doesn't speak English?

See chapter five.

12

What do I say to parents if I've tried "everything" with a difficult kid and it's just not working?

Yes, some students are really challenging. Sometimes, though, what they don't need is a new strategy. Sometimes they just need the same strategy applied consistently for a prolonged period of time.

So start out with one simple plan (i.e. reminders in class, track demerits daily and call home each night to report,

congratulate every time he has a good class or day) and then stick to it for at least two weeks. Call the parent during the two weeks to reaffirm both of your commitment to the plan, even if the student is still struggling. If you see any improvement by the end of the two weeks, continue with the plan. Some kids just take awhile to change.

13

What do you tell the parent when you see a student putting in tons of effort and still failing?

The student in this case probably has a severe skill deficiency. The parent needs to know this ASAP.

Talk to your principal and the other teachers in your grade. Consider having the parent in for a Summit.

If you decide to go with a meeting, have materials ready beforehand. Give the parent evidence as to how severe the child's skill deficiency is. Lay out a plan of action for the student (tutoring, calling teachers at night, attending extra help sessions, studying a lot for tests). If the skill deficiency is so severe that the student is likely to fail the grade, let the parent know now, and consider a special education referral.

14

How do you overcome an inclination to be apologetic in conversations with parents?

Teachers feel apologetic when they perceive a call home to parents as an attempt to punish the child or exact retribution for bad behavior. It feels to you like you're lumping pressure and stress onto the parent, so you feel bad. In order to feel better about corrective phone calls, you need to re-frame how you think about them. They are not about the past. They are not about punishment or about making the parent stressed or getting back at the student.

You make phone calls because you care about the student and you want to help him or her improve.

If you have a reason to call, the student is not making good choices for herself and needs to change course. The best people to help her with that are her parents and you. Working together, you can be an even greater force to help her change and be successful.

When you look at phone calls in this light, you shouldn't feel the need to apologize, and you won't be condescending because you're asking the parents to partner with you to help their children.

15

Is email a proper substitute for phone calls if the parent prefers it?

If the parent asks to be contacted that way, you can definitely use it. However, it's not a pure substitute, as it makes the back and forth of verbal conversation harder to achieve.

16

Should I ask about how the parent is doing at the beginning of a phone call?

You can if you'd like. Some parents appreciate the courtesy; others just want you to get to the point; a few "over-answer" that question and ramble on. You'll quickly be able to tell which is which.

17

What if a parent feels like the home visit is to check in on them? Won't they be defensive?

Not if you set up the home visit with the parent well beforehand. You have to frame it as a strategy to benefit the student. Explain to the parents that kids can be powerfully affected by the power of seeing you sitting in their house with their parents. It tells the student that:

A I'm not going to give up on you—I will do whatever it takes for you to succeed.

B What we are doing is important enough that I am taking the time to come to your house.

C Your parents and teachers work together, as one, to make sure you get a good education and great opportunities in life.

If you frame the home visit as a way to reach the child, parents are unlikely to object.

18

Are home visits possible for all categories of parents?

In our experience, parents even of high school seniors have felt positive about home visits. It's much more convenient for them than having to come to the school.

19

How do you effectively utilize the other person you bring along on a home visit?

The other person should be a teacher or school official who interacts with the student. You can lead the discussion, and this other person can provide additional comments and insight. Sometimes they will just be there to provide support and make you feel more comfortable.

20

What if on the phone call, or what I overhear, makes me fear abuse by a parent or relative, or some other serious issue?

You treat it like any other information that makes you fear abusive parent behavior. That is, bring your concerns to your principal immediately. When you do, try to separate your judgment from the facts. "Mrs. K has made several remarks that made me feel uneasy. For example, she said X."

In most states, there are rules for principals that trigger automatic reporting to state agencies; moreover, good principals will bring a wealth of experience and concern to each such case. Each state has different rules about what to do.

Here in Massachusetts, the general idea is that "suspected abuse" must be reported to the Department of Children and Families. However, there's a lot of nuance for the principal in deciding how best to ascertain if something meets the criteria of "suspected abuse." The important thing is that you give your principal all the relevant facts of the situation (less your judgments, more what you've directly observed or been told).

Other Logistics

1 Where To Call From

Some teachers do this heading home in their car or on the bus. Hard to take notes.

Some go for a walk (we encourage this).

Some sit at a desk or on the couch; this is easiest if you're going to take notes on the calls, or refer to notes.

2 Parents Who Do Not Speak English

Parents who do not speak English, of course, can be in any of these 4 categories. Generally, you will find that you can communicate reasonably well with them simply by using 3-way calling on your cell phone.

The translator? Four choices:

1. A middle or high school student often does the translating for his parent. While you may wonder if the translation is being done accurately, kids are usually pretty good about this — even the “Correction Calls!”
2. Another option is a family member (cousin, older sibling) who is fluent. You get his/her cell number early in the year and establish whether they're willing to translate calls all year.
3. A third option is a volunteer that you befriend who likes to talk on the phone. Your sister's Brazilian

nanny; your buddy's colleague at the consulting company; your sorority sister who is still in college — all of these folks may be volunteers in waiting.

4. Another option is bilingual parent in your school who wants to make a time commitment. If you happen to teach in a school where many parents speak the same language (Spanish, Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, etc), you can sometimes arrange for a big Sunday phone call session as a routine, and then take the translator to brunch as a thank you.

You can also buy an excellent interpreter for 3-way calls. The price of these services is falling rapidly, and some schools are willing to pay. These services are changing so fast, it's probably best to just Google “interpreter services” so you have up to date information.