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Linda Metcalf

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# *The Parent Conference: An Opportunity for Requesting Parental Collaboration*

*Linda Metcalf  
Mansfield Independent School District*

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*This article represents an example of how a solution-focused conversation can assist everyone involved with a school problem in the creation of an atmosphere where everyone is involved in stopping "the problem." For example, identifying the role of the teacher during times when the problem is occurring less gives the teacher clues as to which lesson plans are more effective. Discovering the times when the parent observes more successful academic production at home gives the teachers clues as to how to help the student in class. Together with the student, all three parties are more likely to come up with a solution that fits the child rather than prescribing a tried and true remedy that worked for other students but not the concerned student. The result is a conversation that leaves both parent and teacher consciously working on the same issue with an understanding of what their roles are with the student and helps the student to be more successful.*

*Le présent article se veut un exemple d'interaction où la discussion est orientée vers l'élaboration d'une solution. Ce type de conversation a pour but de permettre à toute personne vivant une situation scolaire problématique de créer une atmosphère où chacun est impliqué dans le processus d'élimination du problème. Par exemple, identifier les périodes où le problème est moins fréquent en classe donne des indices à l'enseignant sur le type de planification d'activités les plus efficaces avec l'élève. Identifier les moments où les parents observent une plus grande assiduité au travail scolaire chez leur enfant à la maison peut être utile à l'enseignant pour aider l'élève en classe. C'est également avec la participation de l'élève que les trois parties (parents, enseignants, élève) ont le plus de chance d'en arriver à une solution adaptée à l'enfant. Cette démarche permet donc aux parents et à l'enseignant de travailler conjointement à l'atteinte d'un objectif tout en étant conscients du rôle de chacun dans l'aide et le soutien qu'ils peuvent offrir à l'élève.*

*"The Wright brothers flew right through the smoke screen of impossibility."*

Charles Franklin Kettering (Pearls of Wisdom)

School problems can be bewildering and frightening. The problems are usually dealt with when teachers become concerned about student performance, call the student's parents and gather everyone together to talk about possible problems that may be bothering the student. The meeting sometimes begins with parents feeling as if they have failed and with teachers stating the problems

that keep their child from succeeding. Often those descriptions include complaints from the teachers, who need compliance with classroom rules in order to teach effectively. Other descriptions may paint a dire picture that alludes to a student's incompetence. While parents and teachers come to the meeting with the intentions of solving the school problem, they also often leave without individualized strategies for the student. Teachers may discuss traditional types of interventions and parents may describe what they want the school to do for their child. All of this occurs while somewhere a student is sitting in a classroom, possibly with answers for everyone.

### ***Creating A New Context for Solutions***

Creating a context in which parents are collaborative with teachers involves taking on a new perspective about the conference event. Instead of viewing the conference as a reporting session for what is not working in school, teachers can construct an opportunity to discuss what is working with the student, even if grades are poor and motivation is lacking. The teacher can then open up the discussion to the parents about their opinion on how the school can work to assist their child. By focusing on past successes in other academic or behavior-based settings, even if slight, everyone involved can tailor the interventions to the child and alleviate blaming. The following case represents how a collaborative conference can result in a specific strategy that had proved helpful in the past.

### ***Brent: A Review of What Works***

Brent, a troubled high school sophomore, was constantly in trouble at home for his poor school performance. I asked him once how he thought he learned best. He told me that he learned best from review sheets. As a matter of fact, in four out of six of his high school subjects, he was able to make grades in the 90's on his tests when his teachers gave review sheets the week before a test. With this information we began to discover together:

- LM: How would you like things to be for yourself?  
 Brent: I'd like my parents to lay off. I'm not as smart as they think I am... I can get by but it's hard.  
 LM: So, what would it take to get them to lay off?  
 Brent: Pass the classes.  
 LM: You told me earlier that you make 90's on some tests because the teachers give you review sheets. What do the review sheets do for you?  
 Brent: I take them and read them the night before and then again before the test. I always get 90's when I do that.  
 LM: Have you had the chance to ask teachers for review sheets or papers before, when they did not give them out?

- Brent: I didn't know I could do that.
- LM: How might you try to do that?
- Brent: Well, probably if they thought I was really interested, they would give me notes or something when they didn't pass out review sheets.
- LM: How would they know that you were really interested?
- Brent: Probably I would stay after class and talk to them.
- LM: What else would they say would be some small signals that you were really interested in your grade?
- Brent: Probably turn in all of my homework. See, sometimes I don't do it and then when the tests come up they aren't interested in helping me.
- LM: So, turning in homework and staying after class might begin to show your teachers that you are serious now, instead of the past.
- Brent: Yeah.

I asked Brent:

- LM:
- How would you like things to be?
  - What would it take to get that to happen?
  - When is it that you are successful?
  - What does that (strategy) do for you that makes a difference?
  - What could you begin to do on a small scale?

For Brent, review sheets or outlines given to him by his teachers pulled the information together and helped it to make sense to him. His teachers had previously told him to just go home and review the chapter. However, Brent had a slight problem in reading and comprehension, which the outlines clarified for him. He had difficulties organizing the information as well. His idea to improve his grades was to ask the teachers for a review sheet early every week or, to ask for a copy of their outline that they used to lecture to the class.

In a parent conference with Brent, then, it would be important to ask his parents how Brent studied best. It is recommended that Brent be present so that his ideas can be shared. As the conference proceeded, Brent could talk more about what worked in the past in other classes, such as the usefulness of the review sheets. His parents could be asked the following:

As you look back over Brent's years in school, what have you noticed about how he learns best? What type of teachers, classes, or study habits have worked, even slightly?

What have you done that has assisted Brent to be more successful with studying at home?

What do we need to know about your son so that we can do our best to help?

If you could ask us to do something different for Brent during the next

week or two, what would it be?

Speaking with parents and students in this manner allows the teacher to appear collaborative and respectful of everyone involved. Parents typically come to conferences feeling like failures, as if it is their fault that their child cannot succeed. By asking about past successes, it is assumed that the student has succeeded in school. This complimentary assumption begins the conference with a tone for success and lessens parental resistance.

### ***A New Description for Success***

*"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

If our perceptions of others can influence how we act towards others, then redescribing our actions (Epston) may also change our behavior towards them. For example, observe the following descriptions. On the left are some common words parents and teachers may use to describe children and adolescents when they are upset or concerned about them. On the right, are some re-descriptions.

#### **Problem-Focused**

failing school  
depressed  
anger problems  
ADHD  
isolative  
defiant  
  
disruptive  
anxious  
unmotivated  
irresponsible

#### **Solution-Focused**

isn't passing at this time  
is sad sometimes  
gets upset at times  
is energetic-needs a place to focus/structure  
likes privacy  
is afraid of change, is not flexible yet, has his opinion, is self-protective  
does not know how to follow the rules yet  
excited/careful  
without a reason to work/get involved yet  
hasn't learned to take care of things for himself yet

Changing the description of the behavior does not minimize nor ignore the symptoms or complaints. Instead, it does offer the possibility for people to see themselves and each other differently, relieving stressful, negative and unproductive thoughts which can prohibit new solutions. For example, many teachers have heard students describe themselves as:

"I'm bad."

"I'm a failure."

"They think I have serious problems so I know I can't do this."

"There must be something wrong with me."

No amount of praise can change these perceptions when a student believes them intrinsically. What can change them are experiences, which allow the student to notice that he/she can be competent. Sometimes these experiences must be generated by teachers who can then identify successful times and mention the success to the student. Comments or questions such as:

“Justin, I know that you have had a lot to do lately at home. I am really impressed that you were still able to pass your quiz with a 78 in spite of all the troubles. How were you able to do that?”

This question sends a message to Justin that: a) his teacher understands his dilemma, b) his teacher noticed that he did something well, c) he can be competent even when times are challenging, and d) he is a competent person.

*“You cannot solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it.”*

Albert Einstein

Eliminating hopelessness in parent conferences through re-description will promote collaboration with parents as effectively as it does with students. As teachers reassure children and parents that they see them as only being temporarily stuck (Durrant, 1995) and not problem-ridden, they are more likely to get cooperation and motivation from them. It makes giving consequences easier as well, since we see them as making a temporary mistake, not as kids who have something seriously wrong with them. This consideration is helpful to parents since it tends to make them feel less guilty and follow through with the strategies to help their children to be more successful.

Utilizing a new description with a parent conference is at the core of the next case. As you read through the case, observe how Annie changed her perception of the teacher and how her Mom’s new involvement assisted her daughter’s teacher to watch for something different.

### ***Check Out the Teacher***

Annie, age 9, was sent to talk to me by her school principal for “disruptive talking and a belligerent attitude.” She was enrolled in gifted and talented classes in which she excelled with little effort. Her mom accompanied her during my first conversation with Annie. Bright and articulate, she admitted to me that she knew why she was in trouble constantly:

Annie: My teacher always catches me talking to my friends at our table when we are working. Then, she puts a huge check by my name in front of the entire class. It is so embarrassing. It makes me mad so I just keep on.

LM: Annie, what is Ms. Johnson missing that you wish she

- could see?
- Annie: That I'm nice. I just like to talk to my friends. She's mean to me. I bring home a checklist every day and every day she puts bad things on it. There are always minus signs next to my behavior. That gets me in a lot of trouble at home. Then, she always writes down something mean at the bottom of the page.
- Annie's Mom: Her teacher is sometimes negative. I have tried to talk to her and all she does is tell me how we should put Annie in a different class or school. I'm afraid to do that because she does so well in school. Besides, so much has happened over the past few years. I remarried two years ago and recently had a baby. I know I am impatient with Annie, but I need her help sometimes. She and I have begun arguing more and she has become harder to manage at home recently. She probably needs a lot of counseling too, since she has not seen her real father for almost seven years and she sometimes does not get along with her step-dad.
- LM: Gee, you all have so much happening. Annie, how do you explain how you are able to get such good grades with so much going on?
- Annie: I just do it.
- LM: Are there times when Ms. Johnson is not being mean to you?
- Annie: Yeah, when I am doing my work and not talking.
- LM: When else?
- Annie: Sometimes I help other kids at my table. She never gets on me when she can tell I am working.
- LM: If I read her mind, what would be different during those times?
- Annie: I guess I don't laugh or anything...I just work. I don't talk back. I don't get up from my chair.
- LM: Would you like to do a little experiment? I would like you to give Ms. Johnson something to fill out that is very different from the checklist you bring home each day.

At this point, Annie and I completed the form on the next page, entitled: Teacher Observations of Good Behavior. After we finished, we brought the paper to show her mom and step-dad. Annie really liked the idea of the form. Her Mom liked the idea of getting positive feedback on her daughter.

- LM: Mom, what I have learned about Annie, is that she knows how to have good behavior, but apparently people are missing it. Would you mind, when you walk Annie to school this morning, giving the form to Ms. Johnson in front of Annie? Please ask Annie's principal

to sign it first, okay?  
**Annie:** (Smiling) Okay. (Annie really liked the idea of the form. Her Mom liked the idea of getting positive feedback on her daughter.)  
**LM:** Mom, what I have learned about Annie, is that she knows how to have good behavior, but apparently people are missing it. Would you mind, when you walk Annie to school this morning, giving the form to Ms. Johnson in front of Annie? Please ask Annie's principal to sign it first, okay?

Teacher Observations of Good Behavior

Principal's Signature

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Date:

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Dear:

We are interested in the times at school when (*child's name*) has good behavior. We are trying to assist this student in being more successful at managing behaviors in school.

During the next week, please watch for times when good behavior occurs and write those times on the lines below. Please be as specific as you can so that the student will know how to repeat the good behavior more often. The student will pick up this sheet on (*date*) .

Thank you very much!

1.

---

2.

---

3.

---

4.

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5.

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Teacher Signature

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**Annie:** (Smiling) Okay.

**LM:** Mom, would you mind if Annie brings this home each Friday, to show you how she is changing her image in Ms. Johnson's eyes?

**Annie's Mom:** Yes! I think, too, as we have talked, I realize that I haven't spent enough time with her lately. In fact, I think I'm too critical sometimes.

**LM:** How do you approach people at work whom you need to assist in doing things differently?

**Annie's Mom:** Actually, I'm really patient with them.

**Annie:** Mom, you used to be patient with me too.

- LM: When, Annie?
- Annie: She used to not work so long and she and I would fold clothes together and sometimes I even helped her to put them away...we would play a game then.
- Annie's Mom: (Crying) She's right. I think I need to begin doing that again.
- LM: Then, since you have come up with such a nice idea, Annie, would you mind watching at home this week, for times when Mom is patient with you?
- Annie: Sure.
- LM: Mom, what would you think about showing Annie the same type of patience you often use at the office?
- Annie's Mom: Good idea.

Annie's Mom gave Ms. Johnson the Teacher Observation of Good Behavior form when they returned to school that morning. An appointment was made for two weeks later. Two weeks later, Annie's stepdad called to cancel the appointment. Apparently, Annie's behavior had improved so much that the teacher was complimenting her daily on her improvement. She had improved relationships with other students and she and her mom were getting along better.

In a follow-up conversation with Annie two months later, she appeared happy, confident and completely assured that if she ever encountered a teacher who "failed to see my good points," she would just "show them" who she really was. What occurred in the conversation between Annie, her Mom, and myself?

- Annie began to see herself as someone bothered by "talking" instead of as a bad child. This allowed her to take responsibility to get in control of the talking so Ms. Johnson could see the "nice" person she was.
- Annie's Mom became more involved with the school process, making herself an assistant of the teacher and Annie by presenting the form to Ms. Johnson and asking for her help and then encouraging Annie to "show" Ms. Johnson her "nice" side.
- All of the change between Annie and her Mom occurred by reminiscing back to a time when they got along better. This "resistance buster" allowed Mom to realize that perhaps she needed to spend more time with Annie, who valued her, instead of accusing her of neglecting her.
- Annie became the expert on her changes. Ms. Johnson became the expert on watching for the changes.

### ***Conclusion***

The parent conference can be an integral tool in changing the academic and behavioral productivity in students. The ideas and dialogue in this article were designed to give parents the opportunity to see their child or adolescent's teachers differently. These exercises will also promote good school-home relationships and encourage students and parents to take responsibility for changing their school life, collaboratively. The activities do not ask anyone to invent new strategies, lessening stress on teachers and eliminating blaming between home and school. Instead, the exercises allow students to become successful people who can learn more themselves in the process. When a student and parent learn how learning occurs best, the gift lasts a lifetime and can be used in many situations.