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SPEAKERS

Chris

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. I am Chris Reeve. And in our last episode, Episode 160, I talked about the importance of building positive relationships with families.

And one of the best ways to do that is to make sure that you have a clear method of communication between home and school that works for both of you. And that can be tough. As I talked about, many of our students are unable to communicate what happened at school to their families or about home to the school. And that can cause a number of issues.

But the hard part about communication systems is deciding what needs to be shared, and figuring out how to make it happen within the time constraints of the classroom. Now, I know the same is true for families in terms of responding to communication. Often, there's more than one student, which means more than one set of communication and things like that.

But I want to focus in this episode on teachers. Because some parents I know, want to know every little detail of what happened in their child's day, and others don't. And most teachers don't have a ton of time in their day to write a play by play of everything that happened with the student throughout the day to send home. Certainly they do every day.

So the system that teachers need to use has to be quick and easy. And most of all, we want it to not get in the way of instruction. We're there to do instruction with their child, if we're writing a novel, we're not instructing their child.

So today, I'm going to talk about five things to do and five things that you don't want to do in your communication with families, so that you can build important positive relationships.

Now, these are all things that I have seen, I may have done some of them at one point or another. And I have some solutions for you at the end. And in fact, the fifth thing on the list of things to do is one that probably that really doesn't have a lot to do with positive relationship, but one that if you haven't learned it, you want to learn it now.

So I also have a free download for you if you didn't grab it last week, that can help you set some expectations for phone calls and emails and meetings as well. So I'll talk about that. And I'll link to my home notes that are in my store that I use in classrooms, because they're light on time requirements from teachers, that they're high on specific information for families. And they include ways for families to send information back. So with all of that on the agenda, let's get started.

I'm going to start with the things that you don't want to do, primarily because I want to end on an up note, which means ending with things you do want to do.

Number one, you don't want to respond to families only when the parent asks for something. The concept of let the Sleeping Bear lie does not apply here. You do not want to just wait for them to tell you what you need. You want to make sure that you as a teacher, have a proactive system for communicating with families that is going home on a regular basis, rather than one that only responds when there's a problem.

I always think about when I'm flying, and Delta, which is one of the airlines that I frequently flight sends me a text. That's not good. When Delta sends me a text, and I'm standing in an airport about to get on one of their planes, I get a knot in my stomach, because I know that when I see it, it means they've either canceled or delayed my flight almost every time. If they text me and call me it's even worse.

You don't want the parents of your students to feel that way when they see the school number or your number on caller ID or to get your email or text. You don't want that pit in their stomach because that's all they ever hear from you.

In addition, if you want to get information from home like when a medication was changed, or how much sleep a student got last night, you can't ask for that, if you aren't sharing information about what's going on during the day, you can't ask them to send you information when you're not sharing.

On the flip side, just because the family isn't sharing that information, doesn't mean you shouldn't be sharing that information, the information that you need to share. Educators are the professionals in this situation. We have to be the professionals and that means taking that extra step, reaching out, even when we're not getting what we want back. We have to take on the burden of making sure that we do that. That's our job. These are families, part of raising their children, this is their job, but it's a very different circumstance.

And that leads me to the second note, don't expect parents to share everything with you. Consider that you may not be hearing from the family because one, they can't handle anything other than getting food on the table. And I referred to this in last week's episode that I talked about the fact that they're focusing on Maslow need, they're focusing on the things that get them to the day.

It may be that there is stuff going on in their family that you have no idea about, that a grandparent is sick or dad lost his job or things that you would have no way to know. It could also just be that they are exhausted from raising their child with special needs, because it's exhausting. Or it could also be something like they can't read and you're sending home written information. Or they don't know that you expect them to respond.

Parents lives are just as busy as yours. And teachers lives are just as busy as parents. Sometimes parents will have their own reasons for not sharing information with you. The information about what goes on in their household is private. And sharing this intimate moments with someone outside the family can be difficult.

Also, different cultures have different perspectives on what should and shouldn't be shared outside the family. So all of those may be combining to influence whether or not they are responding. While, I really encourage parents to share information about medication changes in particular, many times they feel or in the past, they have experienced judgment about them using medication in the past.

Maybe they don't know what information you want. Because for them, it's just another piece of their day, and they just didn't think to tell you that his medication had changed. Maybe you can structure for them the information that you would like to know, and share it with them in a way that they can answer the questions easily and quickly, in a format that's easy to use to share that information with you.

The third don't is not to have paraprofessionals be the primary communicator with families. I've worked in a lot of small town school districts, where everybody knows everybody and everybody knows everybody's business. And that's always an exciting thing in some ways

knows everybody's business. And that's always an exciting thing, in some ways.

It's always the meetings where I'm sitting there going "SHH confidentiality," and the parents like where are you know this. I don't care, they're still allowed that tell you about the other kids.

I'm talking to all of the teachers out there that are working in those kinds of districts where the paraprofessional is a family friend, and works with the child outside of school and maybe even couples with him on the way in to school every day. That's just one of the situations I've encountered.

And I know in those situations, particularly in situations where students have one to one with a paraprofessional that the para is spending the most time with this student, but they're not the teacher. And here are the reasons why you want the teacher to be the primary communicator instead of the paraprofessionals. Even if the family has a relationship with a para in some other way.

First, not to be discounted, it's the teacher's job. It's not the para's job to communicate information from school to home. That is the teacher's job, that is his or her responsibility.

Number two. One of the reasons that I hear a lot for why the paraprofessional ends up being the primary communicator is often that they know more about what's going on with the child. That's a huge red flag. The paraprofessional should never know more about what's going on with the child than the teacher. And what that means is there needs to be a way that the information is traveling from the paraprofessional to the teacher and from the teacher to the home. So there needs to be communication that's coming back to the teacher about when they weren't with that student what happened.

And the third reason is that paraprofessionals may not have the whole picture of what's going on with a student's case, or how it fits into the overall program or curriculum, but the teacher should have that information. And so the information that they're sharing should be within the context of that larger picture.

So, when you're thinking about a system of communication, make sure that you have one that allows the teacher to get the needed information from the para about the day and that it's the teacher who ultimately decides the information that goes home.

I've even been in situation where there have been lots of teachers involved with the student. And we actually found that it was best to limit communication to one teacher, unless there was a specific question that could best be answered by another member of the team. Because otherwise, we found that there was a lot of confusion happening with so many people communicating with the home. So that may be important, too.

The fourth don't is don't avoid telling families bad news. It is really easy to think this isn't really that big a deal. I don't think we need to share. Along the same lines, you want to make sure that you aren't, you know, telling the parent that everything is fine when it's not.

So for instance, I once worked with a student who was sent home because he had really severe behavior and his parents were shocked. When I looked at the home notes and the communication that had been going home over time, I was shocked. Because the communication literally said that everything was going great.

What the parents didn't know because it wasn't communicated to them, as it happened was that the child had been exhibiting increasing behaviors over time. And the incident that led to him being sent home, which we can talk about the effectiveness of that strategy as a strategy in another episode, that's a whole episode of its own.

But that incident was not out of the blue the way it seemed to the parents. But instead it was accumulation and escalation of everything that happened over the past weeks. To the parent, it was out of the blue, because nobody had told them about it.

So don't avoid telling the bad news, because it's better to get it out there out front, address it, and focus on it.

The fifth don't is don't use a simple good, day bad day system. I once had a parent who referred to this system as a smiley face system. I believe her exact words were "if the only kind of notes I get about his school day are smiley face or frowny face, I don't need it." And she's right, because it doesn't really tell her anything.

Most of the time, the child gets only one type of face on the note for a whole day. And we all know the students can have a beautiful first hour and a lousy next three hours, followed by a beautiful last couple of hours. We know how much they go up and down. So do we even know what that kind of note really be?

Parents need specific information. But it doesn't need to be a novel. It just needs to be specific about what their concerns are. So that leads us to what are we going to do when we put together a homeschool communication system.

Number one is be specific. I know there's often way too much going on to write everything out that the student did today. And I know that you have parents that are saying, but I need to know this. But

that's a conversation to have about a compromise to get the parent the information that they need. And get it in a way that is doable within the classroom.

Maybe weekly, you could share more specific information, while the daily note is just shorter lists or checks. You could make a checklist to complete of important information that you and the paraprofessional that's with the student check off as the day goes on.

How much of his lunch did he eat? All of it, most of it, some of it, none of it? What kind of behavior did he have today? In the morning? What kind of behavior do you have any afternoon? Maybe we add our data from our behavior data in there for some of our students.

As the day goes on, it gets filled out. And then at the end of the day, the teacher reads through it, gets the information, finds out more information from the para if it's needed, writes comments, signs it and sends it. So they know the information that's going home and they know what else is going on when they're not with the students.

I have a set of home notes in my TPT store that do exactly what I'm talking about. They're checklist that you can use easily, you can give specific information about how much the student ate today, what special they had, how their behavior was with a rating for different parts of the day.

You can also send him weekly notes. I had a family who said they were overwhelmed by getting a note every single day. And that's why it wasn't making it out of his backpack. Daily notes can turn out to be as overwhelming to families as they are to teachers. So some parents would rather have one note with more information about every day of the week, at the end of the week, and there's actually a weekly note in my home notes as well.

Number two, as our dos, is ask what information they would like. I know this seems counterintuitive, and a lot of you are thinking that you're going to open Pandora's Box by doing this. We're afraid sometimes that we're going to have families who want every little thing counted and written down throughout the day. Has that happened? Of course it has.

I've worked with families who would really like it, if somebody would just walk behind the student all day long and write down everything he does and send that. I don't know when they're going to have time to read it. But that really is what they want.

True story though. We once ask the parent what information they wanted. And the answer was, please stop sending me notes every day. Please stop telling me this, this, this and this, and it eliminated half of our home note. So then we could focus on the things that they wanted to know. You

don't know what's going to be beneficial for families unless you ask, then you can work with that request to see if you can make it feasible.

With some good problem solving and probably a little bit of compromise on both sides, you can probably find a way that will make something work for both of you. It's okay for the teachers to say you can't send home a day by day blow by blow account of the students day. But sometimes giving some specific information that's really important to a parent is going to be more helpful anyway than giving them so much information that they can't find what's important.

The third thing that you want to do is you want to make sure that you're sharing the good things just like you don't want your phone number or your email to spike a pit in their stomach feeling in the pit of their stomach that the world's caving in. We don't want to only be telling the bad things. We want to make sure that we're sharing positive thing that we've seen. They can be anecdotes, they can be something he did independently today.

You can even in some cases, take a quick video of a student doing as independent work system independently for the first time or buttoning his coat for the first time on his own or having a conversation with a peer. Depending on what the restrictions are on the use of video in your school, I found that to be a really nice way to send really positive things home, that families can actually get a glimpse of what the student was doing.

Number four is that when we do need to share bad news, we share it personally and not in a note. Let's say Jim had a very bad day, the worst he's ever had in the time that you've worked with him. Take the time to make a phone call, or at least send a personal email home that's not just the home note to give the information about exactly what happened today. And the things that the education team is going to do to try to prevent that type of day from happening again.

Okay, believe me. Parents understand that bad days happen because they happen to them to. The big question and the question you want to make sure that you are including an answering or providing some strategy for is what are we going to do about it?

A note telling a parent that he had a bad day does not tell them what happened specifically, and often makes parents feel like they have to fix the problem. One of the things that I see so frequently is staff will go up to parents and say, your child hit bla bla bla today. And the unspoken message even to me sounds like what are you going to do about it? And the truth of the matter is, there's not a lot a parent can do about the behavior that a student is showing at school with most of the students that we work with, because that long term thinking on the part of the student isn't really their strength.

So you want to make sure that you are sharing information in a way that doesn't make the parents feel worse about their child. They've heard over and over all the bad things that their child has done. Sometimes, you know, we're not even thinking it's that big a deal. But the parents are upset about it

Sometimes, you know, we're not even thinking it's that big a deal. But the parents are upset about it. I had so many parents who were like, they tell me that he does this, this and that's just not the way I want him to be. It's like we know it's not the way you want it to be.

And it's not just their job to help figure this out. It's not the parents' job to make them behave. It's our job as a team to work together to figure out a program to make that. Letting the parent know what you're going to do about it helps them cope with it and know that you got it and feel confident about sending their child back to school.

My best secret tip in this whole set is number five. Make copies of what you send home. Now, that doesn't sound like a big deal in relation to all the things I've talked about today. But it's important that we remember that home notes, notes we send home, emails we send home are a form of documentation about what has been communicated, and often about what happened during the day.

If you send home your only copy, and it doesn't come back, you won't be able to answer questions about what you communicated with the home. Further, sometimes information on it serves as data about specific things that if we don't have it, will be lost.

I can't tell you how many times we have lost crucial information about a student that was related to a disagreement between the home and the school because a notebook got sent home and never made it back. So we could never talk about what had or hadn't been communicated because we did not have that copy.

So that is my secret secret tip. Put it on carbonless copies and keep a copy for yourself. Make a copy on the copy machine or one of the things you can do with by home notes is actually complete them on your computer and print them out and send a copy home or email one copy and keep a copy in your files.

That is my very long list of do's and don'ts for home school communication. If you're looking for communication systems that are easy to use, and that meet the needs of families and classrooms, then I encourage you to check out my set of checkoff home notes in my store. They're one of my best sellers. I'll put a link in the show notes to check them out. They're daily notes, there's a weekly note and you can customize the choices on them. And there's lots of options for each age level to fit your need. There are symbols on them as well. So you can encourage students to communicate about their day or about their day home.

There are sets for preschool, one for elementary, and another for secondary so you can find the ones that you need. And best off in relation number five, as I said, you can do it in an easy way for you to fill it out, save a digital copy, and send the other one send a printed copy home.

Finally, one of the things I love the most about them is that with the checklists, the staff can complete the boxes when they're with the student and you're not there. And then the teacher can know what to follow up with and what they need more explanation about to send the information home because the teacher ultimately reviews those before they go home.

In addition to my home notes in the store, I have a free download that you can grab from the free resource library to help with managing home-school communication. It helps you set boundaries of knowing that you've given clear information about when you're available to talk to families, you can grab your copy at the link in the show notes which are at autismclassroomresources.com/episode161. Or you can go sign up for the free resource library at Academy.autismclassroomresources.com/library. You can also just get there from my homepage and clicking free resources.

Thank you so much for listening. I know we've gone a little long today. I know your time is valuable. And I hope that you have gotten something valuable from the podcast.

If you've listened and you've gotten something meaningful from it, I'd love to know. I'd love for you to leave a review on your podcast app, or just tag or DM me on Instagram @autismclassroomresources and let me know. I always love to know if someone was listening and got something out of it.

For now that I hope you get out. Enjoy springtime. And I will see you back here again next week when we will start with a new theme. Have a great week.

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