

## 5. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Sameena Eidoo: Building a strong relationship requires families and schools to actively communicate with one another. Schools vary in how they develop a relationship with their students' families and how they welcome the families. Some parents may be unsure as to how they can create and develop a relationship with their child's teacher and need guidance as to how they should communicate and what the school's expectations are for parent involvement. The connection between a child's home life and school life is important and in order to sustain a connection between both spheres. Both schools and families need to work towards making a concerted effort that builds a relationship.

Somali Speaking Parent: The relationship between the parents and the teachers is very important because if there is a good relationship the child will succeed. But this depends on respective personalities. You will see some teachers with whom you have good relationship, and when you go to the school, that teacher will tell you about your child and his needs and treats you with respect. When you call him, he responds and sets up an appointment to meet with him. On the other hand, some did not even know you are a human being; they do not respect parents or students. This impacts both parents and students.

Sameena Eidoo: Due to language and cultural barriers some teachers and parents may rely on the student to act as a translator and a vessel for communication. This places an incredible amount of responsibility on the student and has the potential for creating a filter for communication.

Arabic Speaking Parent: Much of the relationship between the parent and the teacher happens through the child. The child talks to the teacher and then comes to talk to you. This makes communication far more complicated than if you were physically there.

Caribbean Community Parent: Sometimes the child probably do something at school, like the principal or teacher tried to discipline the child. Some parents, the child will come home and give their version of the story, the parent will just take whatever the child says, they go to the school and get upset with either the principal or the teacher, that's not good. You have to go sit the principal, your child and listen because once the child is in front of the principal or the teacher I don't think the child will be that brave to be lying, and if it's your child you know the child is going to lie. So I know most parents just go and blow up on the teachers or the principal but the best thing is to sit, work it out and talk to them.

Somali Speaking Parent: My relationship with my children's Elementary school was more frequent. Because I had to bring my child to the school and pick him up every day, I used to see and talk to the teachers more so we had a better relationship. Even the middle school the relationship was not bad. But in high school the child can go by him/herself to the school, and although I participate in the parent teacher nights but the relationship decrease as the child gets older.

Sameena Eidoo: New Canadians may be unfamiliar with the Canadian education system, and assume that the education their child is receiving will be consistent with the education in their

home country. As part of the relationship building process the school can clarify what is expected of parents, and outline the roles and processes that exist within the school.

**Somali Speaking Parent:** When we first came to Canada, we stayed home not realizing the importance of developing a relationship with the teacher. Our relationship with the teacher here is different than the one in Somalia because we can't get from the teachers here what we used to get from the ones in Somalia.

**Urdu Speaking Parent:** It's just that when we were new here, we did not know how to effectively approach teachers or the school; how to talk with them to resolve our issues or how to explain things to them. This was hard at the beginning, but slowly we have become able to understand them and they understand us. And the children are new, and there are people from many different cultures here. And the teachers are not at all the same, as we may have thought that there will be only English people here, but it's not only white people, but all colours are hired, are teachers. So obviously everyone has their own ways, so it can be an issue, but slowly one adjusts in this atmosphere.

**Mandarin Speaking Parent:** So that's what I'm concerned about. First, I wonder whether it works if I talk to the school. Second, Chinese children are very worried about the communication between their parents and their teachers. You know, In China at the Parent-Teacher conference, the teacher was at the front talking as someone authoritative and the parents and their children were sitting there listening. So we parents were very concerned that what we said might make the teacher think negatively of our children.

**Sameena Eidoo:** Before any meaningful or productive relationship is formed, contact must be made. Overwhelmingly this responsibility to establish contact is perceived to be that of the school or teachers.

**Educator:** My first steps in dealing with a parent is the first phone call home in the beginning of the year. I do spend quite much time during my interviews, I do have a meet the teacher night in the beginning of the year where I too set my expectations, my personal expectations, rather than school expectations. And I do tend to go really on a different angle in my expectations from what I've seen. I understand their backgrounds so I have an advantage, I must admit. The contact with them, making them understand that I believe and I understand where they come from, I do understand their struggles, I share my own experiences with them, so I tell them about my history, where I come from and the kind of life I've had, exactly the same way they've lived before. I do understand their expectations, they have extremely high expectations, the sacrifices they've gone through and they're still going through, they will be going through to the end of time, you know in here. So I do set this connection from the beginning of the year. I spend a lot of time calling, meeting; by the end of the first month I have already met all my parents, and this is for every year, and I keep it up, I do keep it up. I actually have quite many of them who are friends, whom I know it may not be right in the culture or the system but I do visit. I go out for coffees with them and I do share a lot about the kids whenever I have an interview about the kids, the kids are there, the students are there. I would never meet with a parent without the child

or the student being here, unless it's really serious or private.

Educator: When meeting with parents, this is where I want to start because newcomers come during the whole school year, so keep track of the new families that school has and try to involve them to different information sessions, which is not only in September one and in February another. But if it's possible I know that maybe it's up to busy school and busy teacher, if it's possible to get some kind of information session even just sort of parent-teacher interview once in the months, other months or term, especially with ESL kids or parents. If I have a good student, if my son or daughter is a good student, I don't know the way to the school and parents talk about this proudly, "I didn't know where my son's school were, because he was a good student." It was only school role to communicate, start to initiate communicate with parents, and it's all this, you know, bad news when a school, teacher call. It always bad news, it's always about discipline, about bad marks etc.

Sameena Eidoo: Is this in Russia?

Educator: Yeah, this is the stigma they came with, and this is how important to explain that even if your student get marks like 90 or something, it's better for his success if you will keep very, you know, very close relationship with school, if you will go to any meetings or parent-teacher interview, etc.

Caribbean Community Parent: First, I think they should have, like, probably getting to know parent, just have meeting, or a little maybe fundraising event or some social. Getting to know probably newcomer or some welcoming newcomers and getting to know parent and probably they'll have a better relationship in the future to come.

Caribbean Community Parent: But first of all, they have to just accept you for who you are, that's where they have to start and then build from there.

Sameena Eidoo: The school environment is of incredible importance to the development of the parent-school relationship. An environment where parents and invited and encouraged to visit and be an active participant in the education of their children is essential.

Educator: I think you need to make the parents feel welcome, that they're wanted there and make them feel comfortable, because if they don't feel comfortable they're not going to come in, no matter how much you try.

Sameena Eidoo: What about in the high schools, have you found that there's any other initiatives other than parent-teacher sort of counseling sessions? Is there anything else that they've been doing to try to get you involved?

Caribbean Community Parent: Concerts.

Caribbean Community Parent: And when is, what is the thing where you bring in the arts. I used to give my kids then my arts from my country. Yeah and they displayed the, what do you call it,

black history. Sometimes they keep it for a while.

Caribbean Community Parent: And I think that when our children go to school, they have, it's like an open house. So you can give your views too. They call on the phone.

Caribbean Community Parent: And I think this program is good too, where you let your kids go to the workplace for a day, I think that's a great program.

Educator: It's also important to have an open door policy, because if you have say an admin where they have the door shut all the time, you've got to make an appointment to come in and it may not be for a week or so, it doesn't work. But if you have where a parent comes in, they have a problem, like they can get right in. I've seen parents just walk in and, you know, say hello to you, and I think that's really important.

Sameena Eidoo: Because of the structures in place and the perceived role of the teacher, it is largely felt that the relationship need to be initiated and maintained actively by the teacher, new Canadians may be aware of their role in the education system, as well as the role and expectations of a Canadian teacher. It is for this reason that much of the onus is placed on the teacher to initiate and facilitate this vital relationship.

Arabic Speaking Parent: Yes this relationship is the children. If you understand the child you may be able to understand his teacher. This is because the teacher transfers to the child the ideologies of this society that are in turn transferred to us. Meeting should be arranged between the teacher and both parents. The teacher should tell us what the child is doing at school so we can understand what the teacher needs from us. And the parents need to understand that the teacher can ask many things of them.

Sameena Eidoo: What is also important for all parties in this relationship is that all parties are consulted and included in the process that any problems or challenges with regard to the student and their education be discussed and dealt with as a team.

Urdu Speaking Parent: When I first came, my son was small and my daughter understood English, but my son's understanding was limited, so it takes the child some time to pick it up. He was in kindergarten and I appreciate it that the teacher observed him for 3-4 days and then she contacted me and said, "I don't know what's the problem with your son, that, sometimes when I ask him to do something he just turns his back, he tries to ignore what I am saying. What could be the problem with this kid?" After I discussed this with my son I told her, 'This is the problem that he is not trying to understand what you are saying actually,' that he has just arrived and all this is new for him. Then the teacher paid more attention on him. She tried to explain more, in a much easier way. I like this, it could have been that the teacher could have said "I don't care if he is turning his back, let him do that, what can I say?" But she did tell this to me, and I liked it that I also helped my son. Within a month children pick up here.

Urdu Speaking Parent: We would try to persuade them that we are always prepared if there is something lacking in our children, if something is needed, or if he does not understand, they should call us immediately, write it in his Diary, or phone us somehow, and that we will

cooperate with you. Then we can go and meet them, and together resolve any issues. It should be like this, teachers and parents should maintain a relationship.

Urdu Speaking Parent: I think that the teacher should always, if there is a child who is not doing very well in the class, okay, so we condemn a child all the time for one thing, then he will keep on deteriorating, the bad things will go on multiplying. I see here that teachers appreciate even the small things. If you appreciate a child more then he will come up with more, instead of scolding the child or if you tell him 'you have done this wrong, you have done this wrong, you are not good in that'. Even if he does something minor in a good way, so she should... sometimes teachers say simply that 'He talks too much, he is too talkative, he is always disturbing the class and this and that.' If she does that all the time or this is all the parent is hearing, then parents will think 'She is after my child'. So the teacher should be a little cooperative. I don't mean that she should not tell parents about the bad points, she must tell these, but along with that she must appreciate him a little. Teachers... I mean... the child also feels good and the parent thinks that 'My child has a good side also'. This is important.

Sameena Eidoo: An important thing we must also remember is, as teachers, communication need not only occur to solve a problem. Instead, an ideal relationship would include two-way communication from the onset of the year, communication that builds trust between parents and teachers through the communication of student successes as well.

Urdu Speaking Parent: My daughter is in Grade 6. When she was in Grade 5, the teachers told me that 'Your daughter is doing very well, and I am going to do extra, there are a few children who I would like to place in a special educational program, so if you would permit it I will add your daughter's name to it because she is doing well in her class'. I agreed, which made my daughter happy and increased her confidence and she is doing better. So these small gestures from the teachers, from the school, it increases the child's confidence and they apply themselves more.

Sameena Eidoo: The issue is more than just communication, it is about building a relationship of mutual respect and acknowledging that parents have an interest and role in their child's education, as well as acknowledging their efforts to advocate on behalf of their kids.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: Also, after talking about my daughter's English, because she was not good at English, she appeared to lose her self-confidence. She was very good at math and other subjects, but her English was not as good as other students. So she felt very bad about it and developed low self-esteem. So I kept in touch with all the teachers, any teacher who taught a subject to her. Sometimes I wrote them a note when I did not have time to see them and talk to them. As the teachers often arrived at the school very early in the morning, usually around 8 o'clock, I sometimes went to their classroom to connect with the teacher. I would ask the teacher about my daughter in the subject area that he or she was teaching. I would ask, 'Does she participate in class actively?' 'What do you do if she does not answer the teacher's questions actively?' 'Can you place her in a seat that is not around Chinese students although they may speak Cantonese? Can you have students from English-speaking countries be her neighbours? Hence she would not have a chance to speak Chinese in class.' But these teachers, of course, they

might listen to my requests and might make some improvement. They did not really respond to my requests as I had expected.

Somali Speaking Parent: In Somalia I did not have any problems. I have graduated from university and people I used to live with in Somalia reached success that way. When I came here I was still expecting to become successful because I went to school and gained an education. But the immigration has impacted my children because we don't have enough income I will move to a low income neighbourhood that negatively impacts my kids education, success and knowledge. I realized that I am always in a struggle, you have to fight for your rights and the system struggle for your survival, advocate for your children. Because if you do not advocate for your children, involve yourself with the school, learn the rules and regulations the problems will impact your children. In this country you have to advocate more for your children in order for them to succeed.

Educator: Well and I think that's another area where we've really reached out to parents is we run a community council. And several of our Somalian parents, because they're also community workers for the settlement people or whatever, they're part of that process. We meet on a regular basis and we talk about what's going on in the community. How is what we're doing being perceived by our community? We want to know. So it's like a monthly, or sometimes more often checkup on our performance as a school. And are we a part of the community? Are we viewed as part of the community? So I think that's really important too. We're talking to the workers whether it's from social assistance or it's from the health centre or it's from the job placement people. They're all part of this community, we're all part of the same community. And so I think what we've tried to do, and I think for Somalian parents who come from a very sort of tribal existence in my sort of understanding anyway, that sense of community is so important, and what we're saying is it's important to us too.