

How To Avoid Unintended Consequences When Emailing Parents?

Email should be a convenient and efficient communication tool. However, it is also fraught with danger as messages can be misinterpreted, especially if a 'tone' is read into the content. It is important to remember these key points when communicating with parents using email.

Once you press SEND, your message is gone. You can't take back and it's "on the record". Filling in the TO section last, avoids making the mistake of prematurely sending the message. *(PS Retracting an email just highlights your mistake and is likely to make them pay even closer attention to what you wrote!)*

Avoid rushing your response. Time pressures and the reactive nature of email can contribute to us rushing our response to a confronting email. This can contribute to errors. It is far better to make a considered response rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

The same content can be construed differently, depending on the tone the reader interprets.

Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something.

Plato

Carefully consider, is email the 'best' way to communicate this message with this parent? Would it be more productive to set up a face-to-face meeting or even a phone call rather than putting it in writing via an email? Complex or challenging issues are best addressed through two way conversations where we have further information to interpret the other person's reaction to what we 'think' we have communicated. This may be in the form of their immediate response or voice (over the phone) or with the addition of non-verbals during a face-to-face discussion.

Only talk about that student and not other students in the classroom.

Don't place or displace blame, this only enflames the situation and takes you away from creating an optimal learning environment and partnership.

Resist the temptation to get defensive – our most challenging emails always arrive when we are exhausted and least likely to respond in a considered manner. It is very easy to become defensive and respond with a short barb or counter attack. This is far more likely to inflame the situation.

We are teaching all the time. We are even teaching when we respond to emails. We are modelling to parents how to communicate respectfully, respond to issues, solve problems and build partnerships. Your email is an opportunity to teach them about the culture you are creating in your classroom, about the ways students learn and the intent behind your actions. It can be helpful to see the communication as an opportunity that helps us all work towards the same goal: creating a better opportunity for students to learn.

No one is perfect. Parents too will make mistakes. They too are often time poor. Their email may have been sent in the heat of the moment. Approaching a parent with *curiosity* or *empathy* can go a long way in creating a strong partnership. Instead of leading with an accusation, try starting with **thanks** (*I appreciate the way you've been following up at home*), **empathy** (*I know how important your child's success is to you*) or **curiosity** (*I've been curious about how the homework process is going with 'Fred' and am keen to hear more about it*). These approaches are far more likely to open the lines of communication.

Create a context for the parent. Help them to understand the entire situation.

The following wording may be a useful framework for responding to a parent raising an issue...

Dear #,

Thank you for taking the time to share these concerns with me. I always want to know when issues like this may be getting in the way of learning. I am keen to work with you to address your concerns and develop with you a plan that will support X's learning. Is there a good time for us to talk by phone or in person?

Adapted from blog by Sarah Brown-Wessling

Key points

Filling in the TO section last avoids accidentally sending the message prematurely

It is far better to make a considered response rather than a knee-jerk reaction

The tone of an email can be misinterpreted

Your email models how to solve problems

Wherever possible meet in person or discuss over the phone

Instead of countering try leading with thanks, empathy or curiosity

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