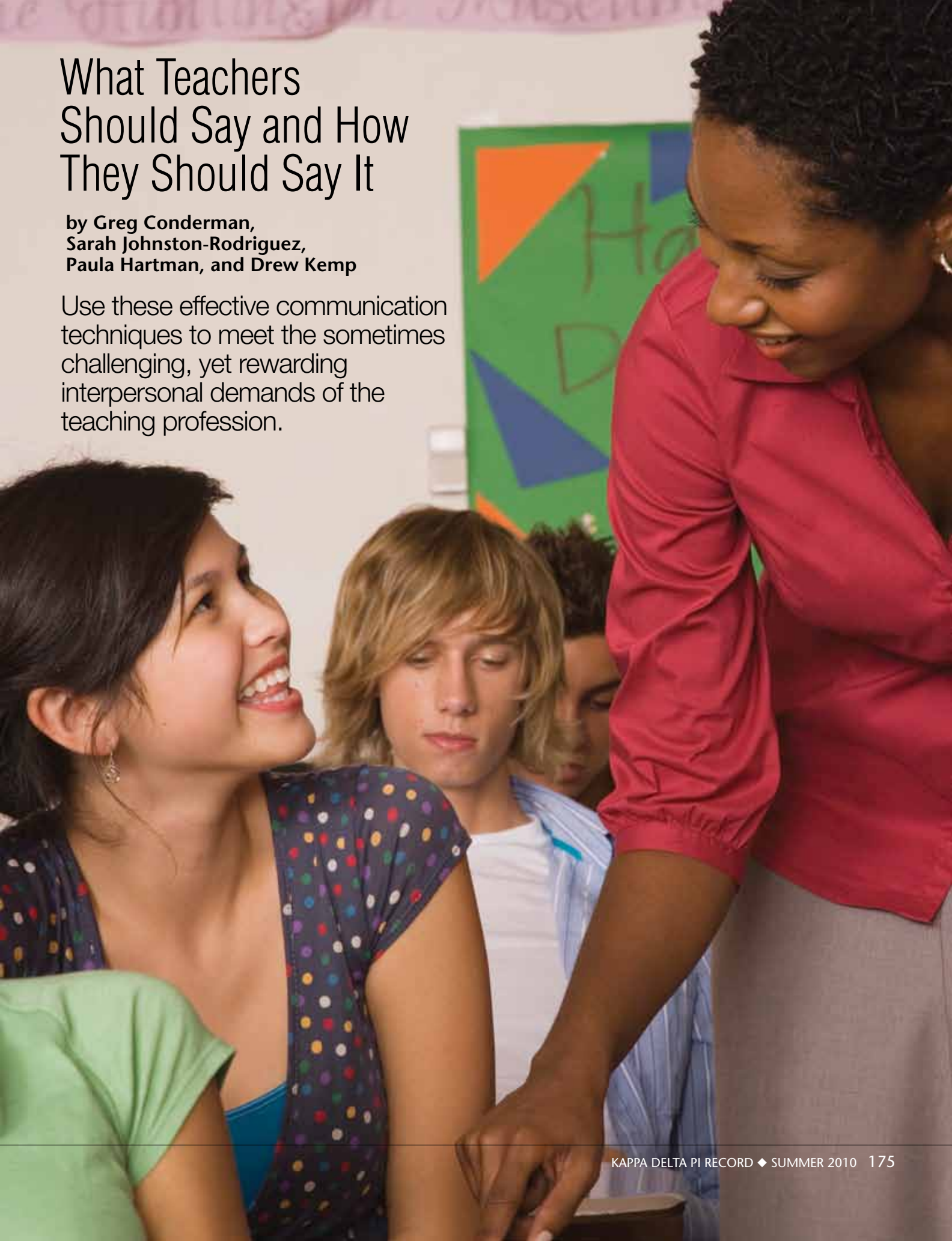


What Teachers Should Say and How They Should Say It

by Greg Conderman,
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Use these effective communication techniques to meet the sometimes challenging, yet rewarding interpersonal demands of the teaching profession.



As second grade teacher Ms. Wachal plans for an upcoming parent conference, she begins to feel anxious and nervous. She wonders how she will share her recommendation with Kenny's parents that he attend summer school. Previous meetings with his parents have been uneasy and unproductive. Across town, middle school special educator Mrs. Knapp prepares to facilitate her first individualized education plan (IEP) meeting. Though she learned about parent conferencing in her teacher preparation program and observed an IEP meeting during student teaching, she has never led one. She is concerned she will forget important information, get sidetracked, or respond too forcefully if team members voice different opinions. At the high school, science teacher Mr. Hartson decides he must confront the paraprofessional who provides support to students in his classroom. Though he appreciates the paraprofessional's help, Mr. Hartson believes she is providing too much assistance to students and is preventing them from being fully included in the classroom. He wonders how to best approach this well-meaning individual who will be in his classroom for the remainder of the school year.

These three teachers, like many others, have discovered that their positions require them to communicate effectively with families, team members, and other colleagues. In fact, teachers today indicate that much of their day is spent navigating adult-to-adult interactions for which they feel ill-prepared (Conderman, Morin, and Stephens 2005). Specifically, teachers may not know what to say or how to react when communicating with families, during meetings, or when discussing sensitive issues.

The Need for **Effective Communication**

No longer do teachers work in isolation as they did even a few decades ago. In the past, teachers generally worked

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alone and handled learning situations with minimal outside assistance; asking for help was often perceived as lacking competence (Dettmer et al. 2009). Today, however, teachers simply cannot meet their growing responsibilities alone. Recent changes in school policies and practices—such as the accountability movement, inclusion, and response to intervention—necessitate that all teachers possess effective communication skills for successfully meeting the needs of a diverse student population (Friend and Cook 2010).

General educators, for example, now assume an active role in developing IEPs by clarifying appropriate accommodations and modifications needed by students to access the general education curriculum (Turnbull, Huerta, and Stowe 2006). Additionally, general and special educators communicate about students' needs, problem-solve, describe instructional techniques, lead professional development initiatives, and network with other professionals and outside agencies (Dettmer et al. 2009). These expanded roles place a greater emphasis on communication skills.

Teachers also communicate with a wide range of school personnel and families, many who represent situations or cultures different from their own (Dettmer et al. 2009). Therefore, teachers are expected to reflect on cultural differences in their communication exchanges by examining their own cultural beliefs and ways of communicating, realize that communication patterns vary across cultural groups, and understand that parents may have different expectations for their child than school personnel (Kampwirth 2006). Further, because families and family structures in the United States have changed dramatically within the last decade, teachers continuously seek innovative ways to communicate with single-parent families, families living in poverty, families who speak little English, families in which one or more of the parents has a disability, and families who have had negative experiences with schools (Turnbull, Turnbull et al. 2006). Some of these families may be more likely to reciprocate communication from school personnel through nontraditional means of contact such as planned home visits, conferences scheduled away from the school site, meetings that include extended family members and friends, or meetings facilitated by a member of their culture (Kampwirth 2006).

In the past, teachers communicated with families primarily regarding information about their child—specifically, for referral and evaluation purposes, during IEP meetings, or during student conferences. However, communication between teachers and families now involves a wider range of scenarios that go beyond typical meetings and student conferences—such as discussing

special health care needs (e.g., student allergies, special diets, acceptable birthday treats), debating proposed school-wide behavior policies (e.g., policies regarding bullying, Internet bullying, harassment), and considering the consequences of students failing a standardized test.

Because the roles assumed by teachers and family members have changed, teachers need to continue to maintain ongoing contact with families through problem-solving, decision-making, and goal-setting situations involving their student. Consequently, teachers need to be proficient in using communication skills that elicit family members' opinions and promote a sense of equality through shared decision making. Clearly, of all the many complex challenges facing teachers today, none is as demanding nor as critical as applying effective communication skills (Friend and Cook 2010).

Communication Basics

Communication is a complex process involving speakers and listeners who share reciprocal roles by sending and receiving information and constantly checking that their message has been understood. Communication consists of more than words. Effective communicators also are aware of how they say their words and how the listener hears and understands those words. Speakers convey information through gestures, movements, facial expressions, body posture, and words (Covey 2004). When all these behaviors are congruent, the listener perceives the communication as authentic or approachable. When the speaker's behaviors are conflicting, the listener notes this incongruence and often wonders whether the speaker is concealing feelings or attitudes. Accordingly, effective listening requires the listener to attend to what the other person is saying and respond with a signal indicating that the person's message has been heard. Effective listening, therefore, involves both communicating an understandable message and obtaining intended information (Patterson et al. 2002).

When considering communication practices, many sources provide valuable information regarding the fundamentals of effective communication. The idea of effective communication has a long and vibrant history. From the Aristotelian roots of rhetoric, effective communication traditionally included five components: discovery (deciding on the topic), arrangement (organizing information), style (choosing and ordering words), memory (memorizing speeches), and delivery (presenting information) (Corbett and Connors 1999). In the classical sense, memorization has lost most of its significance today because technological advances like TelePrompTers have made the need to memorize speeches and arguments unnecessary for some.

The remaining components are still critical to effective communication practices.

Essentially, classical rhetoricians knew that an effective communicator is aware of the audience and carefully chooses how to communicate an idea through *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion), and *ethos* (character). The combination of these three persuasions, joined with style, is the key to understanding tone. In addition, for communication to be effective, speakers must carefully consider word choice, word order, and other stylistic devices with the audience in mind. In short, effective communicators carefully organize and purposefully deliver their message (Crowley and Hawhee 2004). These ideas form the foundation of contemporary communication practice.

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Aside from considerations made regarding style and organization, other aspects of the communication process also are important for effectively delivering and receiving messages. According to Bavelas (1950), the organizational structure of a group, as well as the ultimate performance of the group, is affected by the communication. Communication patterns within groups can be studied using structures such as (a) the “wheel,” in which a central authority disseminates information to the rest of the group in a two-level autocratic hierarchy (Bavelas 1950; Guetzkow and Simon 1955); and (b) the “circle,” which is a pattern of linear communication among members of a group in a three-level hierarchy—each person can communicate with two peers in adjacent positions (Bavelas 1950). Guetzkow and Simon (1955) found that “wheel” patterns organize communication easier, but they are less effective than the slower developing “circle” patterns.

On the practical side, communication is an ongoing process that involves real people. Keil (2005) suggested five main communication issues that must be considered that lead to changes in thinking, attitude, or understanding. First, “is the right person communicating?” (Keil 2005, 29). The message must be delivered by the person who has the correct information to share. Second, “is the information valuable and meaningful?” (Keil 2005, 29). Third, does the audience feel informed? Fourth, is the communicator listening to the audience? Finally, is the practice of communicat-

Table 1. General Communication Do's and Don'ts for Teachers

Do	Don't
Reflect upon the situation before reacting; calm down before saying something you will later regret.	Respond when you are angry or upset.
Use neutral terms such as concern, issue, or matter.	Use words that have a heavy negative connotation such as trouble, problem, deficiency, failure, won't, or can't.
Use descriptions that are specific and supported by data (e.g., Billy is missing three out of 10 homework assignments).	Use labels (e.g., hyperactive, slow, gifted, lazy, underachiever).
Speak to parents in person and in private to share confidential issues.	Use e-mail or notes home to convey confidential issues.
Adjust your communication style and approach to the listener.	Use the same communication approach for everyone.
Consider the culture, language, and socioeconomic level of your listener.	Make assumptions about the communication skills of others based on your frame of reference.
Observe nonverbal reactions to your messages.	Ignore the voice tone or attend only to verbal comments.
Take notes when important information is being shared.	Trust your memory to remember the details of important verbal exchanges.
Encourage the speaker to continue talking by nodding, making eye contact, and maintaining silence.	Talk just to avoid silence.
Continuously reflect on your communication skills.	Neglect professional growth opportunities associated with collaboration and communication.

ing ideas ongoing? According to Keil, if these issues remain the focus of the communication, both the communicator and audience will feel that their messages are understood.

How does the theory guide the practice? Teachers must be aware of both the theory and the practice of effective communication. In short, effective communication is essential for successful educational professional partnerships (Turnbull, Turnbull, et al. 2006). Table 1 reminds teachers about additional important communication principles that inform their practice.

Teachers can reflect on the practices noted in table 1 to ensure that they are choosing words carefully, using the most appropriate forum for their message, and remaining calm and in control even during stressful situations.

Communicating with Family Members

Blue-Banning et al. (2004) noted that parents and family members (a) desire frequent communication from teachers, (b) want teachers to convey information truthfully, openly, and without “sugar-coating” negative information about their child, (c) expect teachers to present positives along with negatives, and (d) appreciate teachers who effectively convey private and sensitive information. In other words, parents and families want teachers to be honest and forthcoming with information about their child’s education, and they want teachers to communicate such information with sensitivity and respect.

Establishing positive relationships is the foundation for effective communication exchanges. Building a solid relationship with a family member hinges on that person feeling respected, having a voice, and experiencing a sense of equality (Dettmer et al. 2009). The following six suggestions (Barge and Loges 2003; Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Dettmer et al. 2009) promote successful teacher-family communication.

1. **Be tactful.** Be aware of the sensitive nature of some information and realize that families may be very emotional about issues concerning a child. Also, respect a family’s privacy by disclosing information discreetly. Share confidential information in one-on-one situations. For example, a teacher might say to a family member: “Sam is struggling to keep up in reading. He sometimes refuses to join the group and acts as though he is embarrassed by his difficulties. I would like to have one of our reading specialists work with him because I think this would help him feel better about himself and his reading.”
2. **Be forthright.** Provide information about the student in a sincere and straightforward manner. Family members sense if teachers are sugar-coating or holding back information. To illustrate, a teacher could say: “I have

observed that Jimmy has difficulty going immediately to his classroom after he gets off the bus. I have some ideas that I would like to discuss with you. I think it is important that we work on this issue now, so Jimmy can have smoother transitions from the bus to his classroom.”

3. **Be clear.** Talk to family members in language that is free of jargon. If team members use educational terms, be sure everyone understands them. Using clear language helps level the playing field and creates a connection between teachers and families. For example, a teacher could say: “Our psychologist spent time testing Brad to identify the areas of learning in which he is struggling. The results show that Brad has a learning disability and that it takes him a long time to read and understand the words he is reading. In a few weeks, we will schedule a meeting to discuss these results and plan ways to support his learning.”
4. **Be a constant communicator.** Families like frequent and ongoing communication, even if the news is not good. Do not wait for challenging situations to connect with families; instead, build trust and rapport through regular contacts. Ongoing communication can occur in many forms, such as newsletters, phone calls, e-mails, communication logs, or progress updates. Use the communication system preferred by each family. Some families require more effort than others; but remain persistent in connecting with them, even if this means using emergency numbers, sending

certified letters, or enlisting the support of colleagues and administrators.

5. **Be positive.** Even when discussing challenging situations or poor performance, focus on issues, not personalities. Be sure to mix positive with negative statements. Avoid personalizing the issue, and do not blame the student or family. To illustrate, a teacher could say: “Tanya has been doing well in social studies. I am having her divide her time between group work and independent work. Because she prefers not to work in groups, for now I am having her work with one of her peers she really likes and works with well.”
6. **Be a good listener.** Remember that communication is a two-way process. Securing information from families and understanding what they want requires paying attention to them and soliciting their views and input. For example, a teacher might say: “Last week we discussed some ways to increase Louis’s involvement in his assignments and homework. I wanted to check and find out what you were seeing at home and what suggestions or concerns you might have.”

Communicating **during Meetings**

Teachers can use specific communication skills during meetings such as family conferences, department meetings, or grade-level meetings. Table 2 indicates what a teacher might be tempted to say, and a more appropriate alternative method for sharing that message with others.

Table 2. Communication Skills for Meetings

When you feel like saying	Use this skill	Which sounds like this
“Let’s start our meeting.”	P-P-P (purpose, procedure, and permission) statement	“Today we are here to discuss Juan’s absences in school and brainstorm next steps. First, we will discuss his absences and reasons for them, then we will brainstorm solutions, and finally we will determine a plan of action for Juan. With everyone’s permission, we will now begin.”
“What did you say?”	Paraphrase (checks for understanding)	“So, you’re saying that Juan oversleeps in the morning, no one is around to get him up on time, and he is embarrassed to arrive late at school. Is this correct?”
“Okay, our meeting is over.”	Summarization (wraps up the meeting)	“In summary, then, today we reviewed Juan’s attendance records, determined why he is frequently absent, and developed a plan to help him improve his school attendance. Starting this Monday for the rest of the school year, Juan’s uncle will stop at the house at 7:35 on his way to work and pick up Juan for school. If Juan is not in homeroom by 8:00, the school attendance secretary will call Mrs. Garcia at work.”
“Juan has made nice progress this year, hasn’t he?”	Open-ended question (requests honest opinions)	“How do you feel about Juan’s progress this year?” “Could you tell me more about your thoughts about Juan’s progress?” “I am interested in knowing your thoughts about Juan’s progress.”
“I have something to tell you, but it is not really that important right now.”	Seed planting (suggests a meeting later)	“Mr. Garcia, it’s nice to see you here at the school basketball game. You know, I have noticed Juan seems tired lately. I realize I caught you off guard, but I was wondering whether we could visit about this later in the week. Can I give you a call on Friday?”

As noted in table 2, teachers may use several communication skills during meetings. The P-P-P method, for example, is especially helpful when facilitating a meeting. The three Ps stand for purpose, procedure, and permission. Mrs. Knapp (mentioned at the beginning of this article) could use this skill to begin the IEP meeting by sharing the meeting's purpose and procedures and then asking permission to begin. The P-P-P method provides an agenda and an organizational schema for participants in the IEP meeting to follow. If unrelated topics arise, Mrs. Knapp can use the P-P-P method to professionally remind everyone of the agreed purpose of the meeting and continue with the planned agenda.

Paraphrasing and summarizing are effective for recapping salient issues from short or longer interactions, respectively. Listeners tend to interpret messages and words from their own perspective and, therefore, frequently make inaccurate assumptions. Difficult conversations are often the result of conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values; so it is important to periodically clarify these during meetings (Stone, Patton, and Heen 1999). Checking for understanding by paraphrasing and summarizing clarifies the accuracy of the message and thereby prevents future misunderstandings. Mrs. Knapp can paraphrase when team members use educational terms that may be unfamiliar to others or after assessment reports given by team members. She can summarize the IEP meeting before team members are dismissed to ensure that everyone leaves the meeting with the same message. Paraphrasing and summarizing are critical for clarifying words and intentions and receiving feedback regarding how words were received and perceived.

Teachers also can use open-ended questions during meetings. These can be stated in various formats. To invite honest opinions, a teacher might ask: "How do you feel about . . . ?" Alternately, the question may be asked indirectly: "I wonder what your thoughts are on inclusion." A third option is to offer a polite prompt or command: "Tell me more about your experience with special needs students." When asked sincerely, open-ended questions give people permission to respond in genuine and honest ways that contribute to an honest dialogue (Conderman, Bresnahan, and Pedersen 2009).

If the meeting was impromptu (such as seeing a family member in the grocery store) and after some polite conversation, the teacher would like to share a small issue of concern, seed-planting would be an appropriate technique to use. This technique is useful if the issue is not pressing or the environment is not conducive to a lengthy discussion. As illustrated in table 2, in this method, the teacher notes the issue, signals that the issue is not serious, and indicates a time or method for follow-up.

Discussing **Sensitive Issues**

Though the communication skills typically used in meetings are also appropriate during day-to-day interactions, additional communication techniques, noted in table 3, are especially suitable when discussing sensitive issues. With a little modification, some of these same techniques also can work when communicating about positive issues.

'Response to Affect' Technique

The "response to affect" technique described in table 3 may be used when the listener needs to—or wants to—sincerely connect with the speaker on an emotional level (Friend and Cook 2010). Acknowledging feelings is critical in any relationship (Stone et al. 1999). When using this technique, the speaker uses an emotion word to signal how he or she senses the other is feeling. This approach helps people identify their feelings, creates a bond between the speaker and listener, validates the listener's feelings, and thus makes the listener less defensive.

For example, Ms. Wachal (introduced earlier) could use this technique if Kenny's family members show strong negative emotion about her recommendation that Kenny attend summer school. She could say, "I can see how upset you are about having Kenny attend summer school" or "You seem frustrated about Kenny's lack of growth this year." At that point, based on the family's reaction, Ms. Wachal can decide how best to continue the conversation—for example, by inviting additional ideas for supporting Kenny, providing reasons why summer school will help Kenny, or suggesting that Kenny's family think about this suggestion. Though the group may disagree on an outcome, by using this technique, Ms. Wachal shows sensitivity to the family's feelings.

Sandwich Technique

The sandwich technique is often used to share information about a sensitive issue. The issue is "sandwiched" between two other positive or neutral statements. Often the first statement introduces the concern with a reason for sharing the concern, and the last statement invites collaboration (Conderman et al. 2009). Ms. Wachal could use this technique with Kenny's family by first sharing Kenny's strengths (e.g., "Kenny has made considerable growth in math this year and now completes math problems with few errors"), then sharing her concern (e.g., "However, Kenny's most recent reading test results indicate that he still struggles in reading, especially sounding out words containing several syllables"), and then following up with an open-ended question that invites collaboration (e.g., "I am wondering how we can work together to help Kenny improve his reading skills over the summer"). Using this technique, Ms. Wachal presents information about Kenny professionally and directly, and indicates an openness to consider suggestions offered by the family.

Table 3. Communication Skills for Sensitive Issues (and Positive Ones)

When you feel like saying	Use this skill	Which sounds like this
“Don’t be so upset about that little thing.”	Response to affect (connects with someone on an emotional level) (example illustrates a negative issue)	“You seem upset about that low grade on Joel’s report card.”
Didn’t Greta do a great job on her report?	Response to affect (example illustrates a positive issue)	“I can tell you are proud of Greta’s work on her book report.”
“I caught Ben cheating today.”	Sandwich technique (for use with sensitive issues)	“Mr. and Mrs. O’Bradley, I know you want to be informed about Ben’s performance and behavior in class. That’s why I need to share with you that I saw Ben cheating on our spelling test today. I’m wondering how we can work together to address this issue.”
“Where were you during our team meeting?”	I message (example illustrates a negative issue)	“When I notice that you are not at our team meetings, I get frustrated because now I will need to schedule a separate meeting with you.”
“You’re a great co-teacher!”	I message (example illustrates a positive issue)	“I am so relieved when I see you arrive to our co-taught class prepared because then I can implement the lesson as we had discussed.”

‘I Messages’ Technique

“I messages” show ownership of how the speaker feels. These statements usually contain three parts: (a) very specifically what the speaker sees or hears; (b) how the speaker feels about what he or she saw or heard; and (c) the tangible and concrete effect the behavior has on the speaker. “I messages” are especially useful when discussing sensitive issues because feelings often are the heart of difficult conversations, and the words “I feel” have a powerful effect on the listener (Stone et al. 1999). As shown in table 3, the three components can be stated in any order, and teachers can use “I messages” to share positive or negative concerns. Mr. Hartson could use this technique when he meets with the paraprofessional by saying, “When I see you providing clues to answers for Lonnie on his worksheets, I am concerned because we will not have enough information regarding his independent skills to make accurate instructional recommendations for him.”

In Summary

Teachers are encouraged to use the techniques described here to communicate effectively with family members, during meetings, and when discussing sensitive issues. To assess the effectiveness of their communication, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their current skills and practices, the words they use, and how they handle sensitive issues. When communicating with family members, be honest and sincere, and indicate a willingness to collaborate and explore nontraditional communication methods, especially for families that have traditionally been uninvolved in schools.

During meetings, share the purpose and procedure of the meeting and gain permission to begin, frequently paraphrase

and summarize to ensure that team members leave the meeting with the same factual information and interpretations, and use open-ended questions to elicit participation from others. Consider using the seed-planting technique when the situation is not urgent, but follow-up is needed.

For sensitive situations, use the “response to affect,” sandwich, or “I message” techniques. These approaches, in particular, acknowledge the issue and validate feelings. Collectively, these communication skills provide teachers with valuable tools to increase their effectiveness with families, colleagues, and team members. ■

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