

Guidelines for Engaging with Parents

The following guidelines were excerpted from the manual, *Check & Connect: Implementing with Fidelity*, published by the Institute on Community Integration. For more info and to order the manual, visit checkandconnect.umn.edu/manual.

Specific guidelines for Check & Connect mentors to strengthen the family-school relationship illustrate that the family-school interaction process (e.g., understanding each other’s perspectives, co-constructing the main concern, problem solving) is the means to changing student behavior and improving learning outcomes. A positive, solution-oriented, problem solving approach is used in home-school communication, whether between the parents and mentor or among parents, the mentor, and school personnel. Guidelines for mentors include:

- Maintain a positive, honest orientation to communication with parents
- Develop a two-way communication system
- Focus all communication on the student’s engagement at school and progress in learning
- Ensure that parents have the information they need to support their children’s education
- Recognize that trusting relationships develop over time.

Examples for each guideline appear in Table 19.

Table 19.
Guidelines and examples of what mentors do in interaction with parents

<p>Maintain a positive, honest orientation to communication.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors keep the parent informed of the student’s academic progress and progress toward goals. The “check” data on the Monitoring Form is often shared with the parent. • Mentors explain the student’s level of progress (including information about relative standing among peers if needed) and answer the parent’s questions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For example, they may inform the parent that Jose is 9 credits behind what he needs in order to graduate on time and provide suggestions for credit recovery for Jose. • Mentors communicate the value of implementing a plan to keep the student engaged at school and with learning. • Mentors affirm the parent’s contributions to the child’s success.
<p>Develop a two-way communication system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors establish the most effective way to communicate with each family. • Mentors go beyond setting up a system for when and how to communicate with parents. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mentors strive to understand the parent’s perspective while also sharing the school’s perspective. ○ Mentors encourage dialogue. They ask the parent for his/her observations and input. They solicit the parent’s ideas for addressing school concerns. ○ Mentors create opportunities for dialogue as they are working with the child – e.g., a quick phone call to say, “I think Jose is on the right track right now. What do you think?”

<p>Focus all communication on the student's engagement at school and progress in learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors maintain a focus on what the student needs in order to have the best school experience each year. Mentors engage with parents to improve the student's educational performance – never to judge or fix the family. • Mentors use realistic (describe the student's actual level of performance) but optimistic (describe what is possible with intervention support) messages. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For example, the mentor may say: "Brianna is currently on track to receive 3 Ds, 2 Cs, and 1 B this semester. Ds mean barely passing and barely learning the course content; therefore, these grades will not help her future plans. Her performance in those 3 classes could improve if we implemented an intervention. Would you talk with us about the best strategy? I was thinking we might want to discuss encouraging homework completion, providing tutorial assistance, or setting other academic goals."
<p>Ensure that parents have the information they need to support their children's learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors explain school policies and practices. • Mentors encourage parents to ask questions. • Mentors seek access to resources for parents. • Mentors provide ideas for home support for learning from which parents can choose. • Mentors highlight the importance of both in- and out-of-school learning time for students' educational progress.
<p>Recognize that trusting relationships develop over time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors work to earn the trust of the parent/family – they know that trust building is a process and that it takes time to get to know and be receptive to each other's ideas. • Mentors follow through on parental requests and mutually-determined action plans for the student. They know that their behaviors and timely actions will build parental confidence that they genuinely care about the student.

In Check & Connect, mentors also consider how they are interacting with families. We have been guided by family-centered practices, which include:

- Adopting a family orientation
- Thinking the best about families
- Walking in the parents' shoes (i.e., perspective taking)
- Responding to parents' concerns
- Treating parents as equals
- Being a resource (McWilliam, Tocci, & Harbin, 1998)

Examples for each guideline appear in Table 20.

Table 20.
Guidelines and examples for how mentors interact with parents

<p>Family orientation: Open the door</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors consider how interventions affect the whole family, not just the student. • Mentors establish enough trust with parents to be able to ask them about their concerns.
<p>Positiveness: Think the best of families</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors think the best about parents without passing judgment on them. • Similar to “unconditional positive regard,” mentors believe in parents’ abilities, hold a nonjudgmental mindset, and maintain an optimistic view of the student’s ability to change. • Mentors are willing to work with parents and enthusiastic about it.
<p>Sensitivity: Walk in the parents’ shoes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors recognize, understand, and value parents’ concerns, desires, and priorities. • Mentors have a perspective-taking attitude. They think about the parent’s position in order to anticipate how the parent might feel instead of prejudging or thinking for the parent.
<p>Responsiveness: Do whatever needs to be done</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors pay attention and take action when parents express a concern (e.g., a need for information or support) or complaint. • The mentor’s responsiveness incorporates a personalized and flexible approach to intervention support.
<p>Friendliness: Treat parents as equals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors develop a reciprocal relationship with parents, building trust, taking time to talk to them about their concerns, listening to them, encouraging them, offering practical help, and conveying caring for both parents and the student.
<p>Child and community skills: Be a resource</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors are knowledgeable about how to help children become engaged with school and learning (child-level skills). • Mentors are knowledgeable about issues related to socio-economic status of the community, cultural climate of the community, and community resources for referrals (community-level skills). • Mentors are willing to collaborate with community professionals (community-level skills). • Mentors are not experts with all necessary knowledge; rather, they problem solve and collaborate with others.