

# Key Words and Code Phrases: How to Talk So Teachers Will Listen

By Tracy A. Elford

Being the parent of a gifted child (or children) often entails a continuing series of discussions, meetings, and communications with school personnel for several years. Though most interactions will be with teachers, we also may need to talk with counselors, school psychologists, and principals. I was lucky enough to have a vibrant and active parents-of-gifted group in my school district where I learned so much about how to be a good advocate in order to help my children. I have now worked in a middle school for 2 ½ years and have learned even more about communications from the school's perspective. I have seen how words affect both parents and teachers.

I have found that there are words and phrases that will grab a teacher's attention and make us partners on behalf of our children. I have also seen, first-hand, words and phrases that will alienate and offend teachers and create a wall between them and parents.

As we enter another new normal after a long hiatus of in-person learning due to COVID-19, parents should be mindful that teachers are only human, too: Just as your child will be adjusting to being back in the classroom, teachers will be adjusting to new

district and school protocols while trying to meet the varied needs of every child they serve.

I'd like to offer the following dos and don'ts for interacting with teachers and other school personnel and some of the real-life overheard conversations that relate to them. Whether your child has been newly identified as gifted or you're a veteran advocate, these tips are good reminders that what we say and how we say it are important factors that impact our success.

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# 1

**Establish a Relationship.** While you do not want to overwhelm your child's teacher on the first day of school, it is appropriate to reach out and connect within the first few weeks. Be sure to attend any "back to school" event offered at your child's school.

**Do** acknowledge that last year was difficult and this year will be unique.

**Do** be seen attending, volunteering, or helping.

*"I can't imagine how difficult and crazy last year was for you. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make this year better."*—Parent to teacher in email

*"We are excited to have you as our teacher this year. I believe what you do matters."*—Parent to teacher

**Don't** allow your first interaction be negative.

**Don't** wait to establish a relationship with your child's teacher.

*"These parents never completed the 'get to know you' sheet about their child, never came to conferences, never replied to a single email, and now at the end of the year they say their child was unhappy? It's too late for me to fix anything!"*—Overheard frustrated teacher speaking to a colleague

# 2

**Words and Manners Matter.** It is important to be as professional and respectful as possible in your teacher and school interactions.

**Do** introduce yourself in a new or group setting.

**Do** use mature, professional, and proper communications.

*"The first thing I do at conferences is sit down and say 'I'm Sue Smith, mom of John Smith. John is in your 3rd hour Advanced Algebra class.' Some teachers will look at me oddly because we've known each other for years but others will look relieved and will say 'Thank you.'"*—Parent, speaking with other parents about her parent-teacher conference

**Don't** bully or threaten.

**Don't** communicate only when there is a problem or complaint.

*"Yelling at me does not make me want to help you. I will help your child because I am a professional."*—Teacher response to parents on a phone call

# 3

**Timing Matters.** Remember that teachers and school officials are busy people. Be mindful of the number of contacts you make and how much of their time you ask for. Also, confine most of your contact and conversation about your child to official in-person, phone, and email conversations rather than at informal events.

**Do** make an appointment.

**Do** give the teacher an idea of what you want to discuss in advance.

*"Mrs. James, when you have a moment this week, we'd like to talk to you about the current spelling list levels and whether there is a challenge list available. Could you suggest a few dates/times to talk?"*—Email to teacher from parents

**Don't** try to talk about your child one-on-one at ice cream socials, carnivals, class parties, in the pick-up line, or while passing in the hallway.

**Don't** demand an immediate response.

*"During our 15 minutes of social studies class at parent night, I had a parent want to talk about their kid's IEP goals during the Q&A session!"*—Frustrated teacher to colleague

# 4

**Team Language.** Parents should view teachers and other school leaders as partners in supporting their gifted children. Keep language respectful.

**Do** recognize that teachers are important members of your team.

**Do** use inclusive, team language, like "we" and "all" and "us."

*"What can we do to make sure James has something productive to do when he is finished with his in-class assignments?"*—Parent question on a phone call with teacher

**Don't** use "won't" and "don't" carelessly.

**Don't** use "you" in an accusatory tone.

*"The parents kept saying that I don't support their son's needs and that I am responsible for solving his frustrations in class. I have sent written suggestions to them, but they have not responded. It does not feel like we're working together."*—Teacher's conversation with the school principal after a parent meeting

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**Observations and Assumptions.** Teachers cannot know what a gifted child is accomplishing outside of school or specific personality traits, like perfectionism, without help from the parents. Share information about your child that will be helpful to the teacher. Be sure to keep track of weekend and summer accomplishments related to coursework in school.

**Do** make observations about what you see and hear at home about your child’s classroom experience to share with the teacher.

**Do** summarize any problem or concern early in the school year.

*“I know we are still in September, but I am concerned that my daughter often says that she completes the homework assignments before the end of class. Can you tell me how she is doing in class and if there are more challenging assignments available? I don’t want her to disengage from learning.”*—Parent email to classroom teacher

**Don’t** wait until there is a problem to engage with your child’s teacher.

**Don’t** assume you or your child know everything about a given situation.

**Don’t** think there is only one answer or solution to a problem or concern.

*“I was a little upset that the new vice principal was the administrator for our IEP meeting— she’d only been a VP for 2 months! It turns out she had new ideas that had not been considered before and came up with great ways of achieving goals. She brought a fresh perspective and I had to take back my judgmental attitude about her.”*—Parent speaking with another parent

## Talking with Teachers & Administrators

HELPFUL WORDS & PHRASES	WORDS & PHRASES TO AVOID
We are open to suggestions about...	...boring...stupid...dumb...
What do you see?	You can't give him an F.
Help me understand...	You won't...
How can we work together?	You don't...
My child thinks that...	Don't you know who I am?
Thank you for meeting with us.	My son/daughter would never...
I realize your time is valuable.	You're not helping us.
What can we do at home?	You don't like my child.
I understand that...	I heard that you said...
We appreciate all that you are trying.	What are you going to do about...
We need help.	Mrs. Jones does xyz with her students, so why won't you?
Can you tell me...	You are wrong.
Can we set up a time to talk about...	I don't care what you say.
What you do is important.	You don't care.
Thank you.	This is a waste of time.

## 6

**Respect and Trust.** Always treat teachers and school officials with respect. It will help build trust should you have concerns about your child later. If you become upset, try to cool down before responding in writing or leaving a voicemail. If you think you are being emotional then you probably are. Wait 24 hours before you send any written response or leave any voice messages. When you can, allow your student to build self-advocacy skills by encouraging them to communicate directly with the teacher.

**Do** let teachers know you care about your child, school, and schoolwork; alert the teacher to the amount of communications you would like to receive.

**Do** give people the benefit of the doubt.

*“This is the first time we are hearing about this. I will talk with my child and get back to you.”* –Parents to teacher after the teacher said he had sent several notes home with the child

**Don’t** let your emotions get the better of you.

**Don’t** forget that trust and respect work in both directions.

*“I hope you will come to me first if you have concerns about what occurs in my classroom.”* –Frustrated teacher to parent in a follow-up conversation

*“I had to be firm and polite and explain that I would not sign anything that didn’t feel like it met the best interests of my child. I was willing to compromise but not give up what was important.”* –Parent to parent after meeting with school administrators

## 7

**Knowledge.** Take the time to learn all about gifted education in your child’s school district; it will help you better understand what is happening in your child’s classroom and make you a stronger partner with your child’s teacher.

**Do** realize students earn grades, they are not given grades.

**Do** find out the facts and educate yourself on processes and procedures.

*“I came into the meeting with teacher observations and several years of grade reports and state testing scores. After sharing the information, I asked the school to start the process to have my daughter evaluated for gifted services. My preparation helped speed the process.”* –Parent comments to the local parent group

**Don’t** act as if the grade is all that matters.

**Don’t** make excuses for your child’s behavior, actions, or lack of action.

*“I want your children to succeed. I want them to learn and be excited about learning. I want them to be good students and good people. That is more important than a report card.”*

–Gifted education teacher’s remarks to local parent group

It often takes a lot of effort for parents to secure appropriate services and programming for their gifted children. Treat the process as an initiative similar to other investigations that families undertake for their children (e.g., hiring a music instructor or sports coach or a math tutor). Educating yourself as best as possible, seek advice from other parents in your area, and treat the professionals in your child’s classroom and school with courtesy and respect. Words matter in any conversation. Some are productive, while others can turn off the very individuals you seek to partner with. Use words and phrases to build bridges with school professionals to best support your gifted child. ☺

### Resources

Blue Valley Advocates for Gifted Education. (2019, April 27).

*Advocating without alienating.* [bit.ly/BVPAGE19](https://bit.ly/BVPAGE19)

Blue Valley Advocates for Gifted Education (2021, January 6).

*Advocating without alienating: The discussion continues.*

[bit.ly/BVPAGE21](https://bit.ly/BVPAGE21)

Brulles, D., & Brown, K. L. (2016, Summer). How to start the school year on a positive note with your gifted child’s teacher. *Parenting for High Potential*, 5–7.

Smutny, J. F. (2015, August). Communicating effectively with your gifted child’s school. *Parenting for High Potential*, 4–8.

Smutny, J. F., Georgiades, S., & Nilles, K. (2016). *Classroom advocacy*. [bit.ly/NAGC\\_TIP](https://bit.ly/NAGC_TIP)

### Author’s Note

Tracy A. Elford has been active in the gifted community for 13 years. She is currently the communications chair for the Kansas Association for Gifted, Talented, and Creative; past speaker at NAGC’s Leadership & Advocacy Conference; past president of Blue Valley Parent Advocates for Gifted Education; administrative assistant to the principal at a middle school; and parent of two gifted children who are as different as apples and oil. Tracy wishes she had found her local parent group 5 years earlier than she did because every parent should know that they are not alone.