Talking with Teachers

Starting a new school year can be an exciting yet stressful time for any family. Every child and parent needs time to get comfortable with a new teacher and a different set of expectations. It also takes teachers time to get to know each family’s child and to understand their unique needs and individual learning styles. In the case of the adoptive family this time of year can present even more than the typical challenges.

Children who have experienced less than optimal care in the beginning of their life (orphanage care, abusive and/or neglectful birth home, extended or multiple foster care placements, etc) often have challenges (attachment issues, behavioral or learning issues, developmental delays, sensory integration needs, etc) that impact their school experience. And all adoptees (even those adopted at birth in their own country) have a need for their school environment to be an example of positive adoption language, and understanding. For these reasons and more adoptive families often benefit from beginning each new school year with a parent teacher conference.

As an adoptive mother and teacher I have sat on both sides of the conference table and offer the following suggestions for a successful parent / teacher chat.

Make the appointment to conference with your child’s new teacher before or soon after the beginning of the school year.

Although many schools have a “meet your teacher” or “back to school “open house, most do not have a formal parent teacher conference until October or November. This simply is not soon enough to talk about specific needs. And remember, an event like open house is never the time to talk to your child’s teacher about individual needs. He or she is distracted with hosting many families and this also exposes your child in a public and unfair way.

I recommend (and most teachers appreciate) asking for a private conference before or soon after the start of the school year.

Disclose necessary information about your child’s past in a non-exposing way.

This means protecting their privacy by only disclosing necessary information. For example:

“Her birth parents were drug addicts and alcoholics. Her birth mother drank all through the pregnancy. Then she was neglected for 2 years before social services removed her. She has learning disabilities because of this. She is FAS.”

VS

“She had a difficult beginning in life before the adoption. Because of this, we deal with learning disabilities and other issues. She has been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.”

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Don’t assume that your child’s teacher understands the effects of institutionalization, abuse, neglect, extended foster care or any other issues that relate to some adopted children.

As a teacher myself I can attest to the fact that most teachers do not know about the effects of these things. Prior to becoming an adoptive parent I knew (as a teacher) a lot about typical childhood development and a lot about struggles that might occur in the typical population of students (ADD/ADHD, learning disabilities, behavior disorders, etc) but I knew nearly nothing about the what the effects of institutionalization would look like in a classroom setting or how to deal with it. I knew very little about sensory integration or attachment. As a parent you need to know that many teachers are used to seeing ADD/ADHD or similar conditions but do not understand that issues common to the adopted child (attachment issues, sensory issues) can present with similar symptoms. If these are issues for your child, provide your teacher with resources for understanding these issues and make suggestions for dealing with them in the classroom setting.

Similarly many teachers do not understand why behavior modification techniques which work wonderfully for a great many students often do not work for children that have experienced a difficult beginning in life. If your child is struggling with attachment or still working on skill development in the areas of impulse control, self regulation, or cause and effect thinking traditional behavior modification models often used in schools will likely be challenging for them to navigate. Discussing this with your child’s teacher will help the teacher to understand your child’s needs and plan accordingly.

Help your teacher with inclusive language and potentially problematic assignments before there is an issue.

Whether it is the dreaded family tree project, the bring a baby picture guessing game, or an unexpected intrusive question from a new student, the beginning of the year seems to be a prime time for disappointment in the area of adoption understanding at school. Head this off at the pass by giving your child’s teacher resources about inclusive language and assignments that can be difficult for non traditional families. Heart of the Matter Seminars’ Katie Prigel Sharp has put together an excellent resource for teachers on these two topics. This resource can be viewed [here](www.heartofthematterseminars.com/images/stories/pdf_files/non-traditional_family_inclusiveness.pdf).

It’s also important that your child’s teacher is ready to assist your child in managing intrusive questions from other students or adults. Share with your child’s teacher some examples of intrusive questions along with answers that your family uses when such questions come up in other settings.

Intrusive Question: Your mommy doesn’t look like you. Is she your real mommy?

Child’s answer: Yes she is. We looked different because I was born in another country and adopted. But she is my real mom.

Teacher’s answer for stuck child: Yes, that is Eric’s real mom. Eric looks different from his mom because he was adopted.

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Talk in a way that encourages your child’s teacher to listen.

This simply means talking about your child’s needs without dictating expectations.

**Talk about your child’s needs...**

Johnny is better able to focus when he is near the adult in charge. For seating arrangements you might consider a placement close to you.”

**Don’t dictate expectations...**

“I need you to have Johnny sit in the front row.”

**Talk about your child’s needs...**

Alice requires a lot of stimulation in order to achieve sensation. Because of this she moves a lot and even NEEDS to move to think. At church and similar situations we have taught her to move in quiet ways like rubbing her leg or twiddling her thumbs. You might remind her of these during quiet work times or lessons. If you do, it will help her to not be disruptive to others. I’d also be glad to help you think of other ideas for specific situations that come up.”

**Don’t dictate expectations...**

“Alice needs to be able to move to think. Don’t make her sit for story time or lesson time.”

Listen in a way that encourages your child’s teacher to talk.

Listen actively to what your teacher has to offer in this conference and in any future conference. When you acknowledge his or her view points and concerns you show yourself as a person who wants to work collaboratively on a successful school year instead of someone who has a list of unreasonable demands. Make sure that when you end the conference you recap some of the important things that you heard from the teacher. For example, “Thanks for talking today Mr. Jeffries. I’ll make sure to email you with that article about sensory integration you wanted and I’ll talk with Alice about the quiet movement ideas for story time. I’m glad you told me that she’s struggling during that part of the day.”

If these suggestions don’t seem to help...

If you’ve talked with your child’s teacher but things don’t seem to be working, or you don’t feel that you’ve been heard, don’t be afraid to follow up with a phone call, email or by requesting another conference. Most teachers want very much to make school a positive experience for your child and will be glad to have an opportunity to continue to work with you to make things better.

Sometimes, however, despite our best efforts a teacher -family match is not a good one. Let’s face it. Teachers are people too and sometimes personalities or management styles clash with family expectations or children’s needs. If this happens to your family don’t hesitate to request help from other school staff. Sometimes including the principal or school counselor in a conference session can offer both parent and teacher the support they need to have their views heard.

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