



**Parent
Organization
Network**
Breaking Through Barriers

“I am the parent. I know my child best!”

By Dr. Shulamit Natan Ritblatt
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The night before my daughter started transitional kindergarten, I could not sleep. I tossed and turned from side to side and wondered restlessly how my child was going to react to this major transition and milestone. How is she going to behave? How am I going to leave her there?

I woke up as if from a nightmare with a pounding heart and sweating. While sitting up in bed trying to regulate my breathing and regain my calm, I tried to figure out the cause of my distress.

I realized that I worried about leaving my girl with strangers (even if professionals) who do not know her. They do not know what scares her and what can help her calm. They do not know that she needs time to get used to new places and situations. That she needs time to think before she gives an answer.....

Many parents share my distress and are concerned about leaving their young children in a new place with unfamiliar adults. In the new report [“*Through the Eyes of Parents: California’s Flawed Implementation of Universal Transitional Kindergarten*,”](#) parents shared their concerns. One parent indicated that:

“I would like for there to always be a relationship between the teacher and the parents. A very close relationship where they always at all times make us feel that the teacher cares about how that, how our children's academic development is going and to always take us into account and if we have any problems at home that might be impeding our children's learning.”

Another one said:

“Sad because the kids are so little and one thinks about them during the day and lunchtime. They don't know how to open their water or the juice. It'd be great if we could help them, but we can't even be there to help them.”

My dog, Choco, sensing my distress, came to comfort me by letting me pet him. Suddenly it dawned on me that when we travel and board our dog, we provide the caregiver with detailed information about its temperament, health conditions, likes, dislikes, food preferences, socialization, and more. We also have ongoing communication with the boarding kennel’s staff during our time away so we can guide and offer them information based on our lived experience with our dog so they can provide the best care for it while we are away.

Laying down again in bed, I suddenly remembered one of the leading psychologists, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005), who studied children's behaviors in their natural environment, their family, school, peer group and community. He developed the Ecological System Theory, where he claimed that children develop within the context of their environments; and the most significant one is their family. Bronfenbrenner summed up the critical role of parents saying: ***"Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her."*** This adult is the one whose eyes lighten up when they see the child. This adult listens attentively to the child and is there to protect and advocate when needed.

I fell asleep carrying the answer to my worries: **I am the parent. I know my child best.** I am going to make sure to share my knowledge with the new adults, educators, who are coming into my child's life.

8 Recommendations for Parents

How can we be actively engaged with the school and its teachers to ensure the wellbeing and academic success of our child? Here are some suggestions:

1. Assume your role as a parent or caregiver, with all its power/rights and responsibilities.

You know your child best and part of your role is to advocate for the child! Hence, partner with the new adults (teachers, administrators, and staff) in your child's life by informing them about your child, collaborating and working together to support your child.

2. Pay attention to your children's behavioral cues when they go and come back from school.

- Do they share what they did during the day?
- What is their emotional mood? Happy? Sad? Frustrated? Avoidant?
- Do they seem excited to review what they studied, do homework?
- Are they happy to wake up in the morning and get ready to go to school?
- Do they have nightmares and crying spells?
- Do they eat well/ or are there changes in their food intake? Do they eat their lunch? Breakfast? Dinner?
- Is there any change in their behavior? Are they irritable? Aggressive? Get in trouble easily?
- Does their tummy hurt? Does it happen frequently?
- Do they tell you about friends and how they spend time during breaks?
- Are there any issues separating when you drop them off? Are they clingier?

When you notice a change in your child's behaviors, you need to talk to your child and inquire about their worries and fears. It is important then to share the information with the teacher and get their input about what is going on in class and school.

3. **If there is any change at home (for example, the birth of a new sibling, parents' separation or divorce, moving to a new home, illness or death of a loved one), make sure to inform the school and communicate the information to the teacher.**
This will help the adults at school to understand the changes in your child's behavior and provide the needed support.
4. **Initiate communication with the teacher, you don't have to wait until there is a school event (i.e., Back to School Night or Parent/Teacher conferences).**
Have ongoing reciprocal communication with the teacher exchanging information either via text, journal, email, or a weekly meeting. You know your child best. Do not hesitate to connect and communicate with the teacher so your child's needs can be met.
5. **Establish routines for homework, reading, dinner, and bedtime.**
 - a. Make sure to check daily your child's backpack and teacher apps or the parent online portal for information on homework and school/class events, assemblies, or news. If you need support using technology, ask the principal for training or request help from another parent or friend.
 - b. Review and work with your child daily to repeat and understand the content learned in class. If the child needs more help understanding a concept, or is not progressing, ask for the teacher's help or request a meeting with the teacher and principal. Don't be afraid to look for resources outside of the school, in the library, community center, and nonprofits.
6. **Attend the school/class events.**
If you cannot attend an event, try to find an adult who is known and dear to your child to be there for your child. Make sure to share this with your child and inform the teacher prior to the event. Observe your child's classroom. Parents have the right to observe their child's classroom, but you need to request permission from the principal in the main office before exercising this right. While you cannot interact directly with children or your child during class, simply observing can provide insight related to instruction, curriculum, how to help children focus, and see how children and your child interact with each other so you can help your child at home.
7. **Volunteer when you can.**
Volunteering in school is another opportunity for you to be an engaged participant. It is true that sometimes it can be a daunting experience to apply and get cleared to volunteer. However, most often parent volunteers have satisfying experiences, feel effective contributors, and help educators foster a positive school climate.
8. **Lead in school committees.**
Once you are comfortable advocating for your child, take the next step and advocate for other children in your school or community. Schools need parent leaders to provide input and co-create plans, budgets, and programs to better serve children.

Your child's educational journey starts in the early years. You are an important "driver" in this journey. What you do matters! You are your child's first teacher! According to research, family engagement in the earliest years is the most powerful predictor of a child's well-being and academic success. Establishing strong home-school connections supports children's success and long-term developmental achievements. Be your child's advocate. Remember that ***"Your child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her. Your child needs you as you know them best."***



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