



# Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management

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## BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR STARTS - PHONE CALL

### Preamble:

In order to maximize our precious time as educators, we need to find “practices” that give us the best results for our time (in other words, “the best bang for our buck”).

Contacting parents, before the school year starts, is one of those activities that can help in so many ways. It is an investment of time and energy that can reap enormous benefits.

Imagine that you are a parent of any one of the following students – a 5 year old, just starting school; a 7 year old who struggles with reading and writing; a 9 year old who spent most of last year at the Principal’s office; an 11 year whose best friend just moved away, or a 10 year old, who is the apple of your eye, (and aren’t all our own children just that, especially when they are asleep!) facing a new teacher and a new year.

As parents we worry about how our children will do in school, both academically and socially. We hope that they will find teachers who will help them to navigate both sets of challenges.

Now imagine that the phone rings. The caller ID indicates that it is your child’s school. Your heart races as you go to answer or as you check your messages. You pause for a moment and reassure yourself that it must be OK (it can’t be a “crisis”) because school hasn’t started yet! In fact, the “apple of your eye” is sitting beside you. On the other end of the line, or on your voice mail message, you hear the voice of your child’s new teacher who is calling to introduce him/herself. Imagine how you would feel towards someone who cares enough about your child to take the time to contact you. Imagine how your eyes would shine as you told your child what had just happened. Imagine how your child might feel knowing that his/her teacher cared enough to call. Now imagine the smiles and warm feelings likely to permeate the classroom on that all-important first day.

The “Before the School Year Starts Phone Call Procedure”, described below, is meant to help teachers (and principals) to make this phone call as efficiently as possible. It is also designed to help the teacher plan for and enjoy that all-important first day of school.

Imagine as a teacher, knowing, before the year starts, that Mary is going to feel sad and lost because her best friend moved away over the summer; that Johnny (one of the school’s biggest “bullies”) hasn’t slept all week because he was worrying about whether his teacher would like him this year; that Sandra (another of the school’s terrors) has developed a new interest in gymnastics and that she has to keep up her grades to stay on the gymnastics team; that Billy is sad because his dad went to jail two weeks ago. Imagine already knowing key things about the group that is going to be “yours” for the year. Imagine what the first day might be like if “your” students are actively and eagerly looking forward to having **you** as their teacher because their parents are excited. Just imagine how the school year could start.

**e-mail from a teacher who made these calls:**

August 25, 2005 4:11:11 PM

*Hi Eva,*

*So, this is the result of my 26 calls, which were made around 2:00 pm.*

*No answers on 4 calls.*

*I left 11 messages on answering machines.*

*I spoke to 2 siblings that will pass on the message.*

*I spoke to 5 of my students since their parents weren't there. Four of them seemed really surprised and didn't know what to say. I had to stop the last one since she wouldn't stop talking...she was nice though...*

*I spoke to 4 parents.*

*The first one was very surprised and very happy that I called. She knew exactly what I should work on with her daughter.*

*The second one was surprised and didn't know what to say.*

*The third one was very happy to talk to me and couldn't wait to see me.*

*The fourth one seemed cold at first but then warmed up and hung up laughing. What I had first interpreted as "coldness" might have been "surprise".*

*Of course, if I were to call tonight, I might be able to reach all of them...*

*I hope this will help you. **I know it helped me!!! Thank you. K.***

**E-mail from a parent received by a Grade 6 teacher who made these calls:**

**August 27, 2005 4:11:26 PM**  
 From: Mr. G  
 Subject: Fwd: Grade 6 Immersion at 123 Elementary School  
 To: Eva de Gosztanyi

I'm forwarding this message that was sent to me by one of my parents. Thank you so much for your great suggestion. K.

Dear Mr. G.

We received your telephone message this past week. Paul is looking forward to his upcoming school year. We called on Friday afternoon, but you had already left. We will be able to meet you on September 15, 2005 when the parents are invited to school to meet the teachers. We are looking forward to this opportunity.

**We would like to thank you for calling us at home and introducing yourself. It feels like this year is going to be a great year. See you soon!**

Paul C and Family

<b>PHONE CALL PROCEDURE</b>
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**This procedure is designed for a phone call that lasts at the most 10 minutes.** As some of your students' families will still be away or out for the day, a number of the calls will last only a few minutes. **If you call a parent who wants to talk longer, then it is suggested that the parent(s) come to school for a meeting to discuss their concerns with teacher and administrator.**

This script is only a suggestion and a guide to keep the calls realistically short. Included are a few variations to help teachers deal with special situations.

**THE STANDARD CALL:** (after asking for one or other PARENT and if the parents are not home the teacher could ask to speak with the student)

***“Hello, this is Mr/Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_. I am calling from \_\_\_\_\_ school to let you know that I will be your child’s teacher this year.”***

(Don't be put off if there is a stunned silence on the other end – remember this is not a usual situation and the parent is still trying to figure out what is going on. One teacher, making this call for the first time, realized that the “coldness” was in fact surprise, which soon melted into laughter and pleasure.)

***“I just wanted to let you know that I am looking forward to having \_\_\_\_\_ in my class this year.”***

(Remember that a “white” lie is appropriate in some circumstances – this is one of them, even if you had nightmares all summer about this child. And if this is the case be prepared for even more stunned silence, and even disbelief – most parents of challenging students know that their child is not a “favourite”.)

***“Is there one thing you could let me know about your child that would help me to be the best teacher I can be for your child this year?”***

Variations if there is no response:

***“What is your child’s favourite activity? What is something that is likely to upset your child? How can I help your child when s/he is upset?”***

Try to keep the discussion focused and brief – enough to let the parent know you care, but short enough so you have time to make the other calls.

***“Thank you so much for helping me to learn about your child. Please tell him/her that I will be looking for him/her in the schoolyard on the first day of school. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to call me at school. I look forward to meeting you at our Open House on September \_\_\_\_.”***

Some teachers (with due caution) even give their home numbers, and nearly all tell me that they never get called at home.

**This should take no more than 10 minutes.**

1. **Variation 1 – (The teacher’s Nightmare) “There’s no way I want my child in your class”:** (Or something along that line.)
  - *“Oh! I’m so, sorry, but **thank you** for letting me know that. I would be most happy to pass your concern on to Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ (the principal). I am sure that s/he will be able to help you to sort this out. Have a good day.”*

When teachers did this at a rather large school, this was one of their big concerns. I am happy to report that this did not happen to any of them. But, having this prepared response at hand, gave a few very hesitant ones the courage to make the phone calls. Our most reluctant teacher is now one of the most vocal proponents of this procedure!

If, indeed, the parent does not want his/her child in your class, at least the principal will have warning and can take preventative action. Most principals really appreciate NOT having their office stormed by parents who are NOT HAPPY with their child’s placement.

## 2. **Variation 2 – Answering Machine:**

- *“Hello, this is Mr/Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_. I am calling from \_\_\_\_\_ school to let you know that I will be your child’s teacher this year.”*
- *“I just wanted to let you know that I am looking forward to having \_\_\_\_\_ in my class.”*
- *“If you would like to call me back, I can be reached at the school at these times....”*
- *“I was hoping that when you call back you could let me know something about your child that would help me to be the best teacher I can be for your child.”*
- *“Looking forward to your call. Please let your child know that I called and will be looking for him/her on the first day.”*

## **Other Variations:**

3. **Post card:** Some teachers prefer to write to their students.
4. **Picture:** One perceptive and creative kindergarten teacher sent a photo to each child – but not of herself, of her SHOES (I imagine shocking pink or lime green with a big bow.) to let the children know how they will be able to find and identify her in the school yard on the first day.

## **FAQ: Why can’t we wait until school starts?**

Because as soon as the child is in school the parent (who actually picks up the phone and many don’t) is anticipating that the phone call is about “bad news”. It is much harder to convince them that you are really looking forward to having their child in your class. You also miss the opportunity to bask in the children’s positive anticipation of the first day with you, his/her new teacher.