

Creating Healthy Relationships with Parents:
A Study in Diplomacy, Support, Reflection and Empathy
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“Thank you, Ms. Golub, for everything you’ve done this year” is a sentiment that I have heard numerous times throughout my four-year teaching career. This was a great source of pride for me, particularly because in my teacher education program we barely talked about the importance of establishing a collaborative parent/teacher relationship, nor did we ever discuss how this could be done. In fact, when I finished graduate school, I had made a commitment to myself to work as hard on developing such relationships as I did on curricular matters; like any thoughtful educator, I knew that families played an imperative role in a child’s education. Furthermore, I knew that without solid parent/teacher collaborations, having a classroom where students and teachers were doing their best work would be exponentially more difficult for everyone.

This philosophy was woven into my daily teaching practice, even from the first day of school. I was stunned, then, when I had received an angry email from a mom in my classroom on the third day of school. This mom was mistrustful of every choice I was making as a teacher; when I assessed her daughter in reading, she disagreed with my conclusion, when her daughter came for extra help during our extended day session, she did not think I was teaching the right things, when I told my class it was important for them to complete their math homework in ink, so that I could see and assess their process as well as their answers, I received a handwritten note stating that I should “be advised that [mother] would like ALL of [child’s] work done in pencil” (personal communication, October 9, 2007), as she believed “it is important to use pencil while doing math as you cannot erase your mistakes” (personal communication, October 9, 2007) when working in ink.

No matter how I responded to her emails or notes, the frequency and severity of them increased. To loved ones and colleagues, I began to refer to this mother as “Crazy Email Mom.”

There were mornings where I would feel helpless. There were afternoons where I would begin to question my own practice, despite my love of teaching. Finally, there were evenings where I would just feel so broken down that I would cry. Those around me tried to assure me that she was the wrong one in this situation, not me. Over some time, I realized that I could not beat myself up anymore and I had to take action to get to the root of this problem. Here is where my action research became clear.

It is important to note that from the beginning of this process, I had never made a clear intention towards changing my relationship with “Crazy Email Mom.” The goal of the research was to get to the root of the contention she had for me, so that I could look at my own practice to make sure I was honoring my post-graduation commitment. There was little-to-no chance that she would change, but I knew that I could change, beginning with my new role as a teacher-researcher. The data would not be difficult for me to attain, as I was dealing with the mother on a daily basis.

At the time of the research, I had entered into my fourth year of teaching at PS 725. For the first three years of my career there, I taught in a second grade Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) class; this past year I taught 5th grade CTT. PS 725 is located in a historically affluent section of Manhattan, New York. The school serves this neighborhood’s children, as well as children who have transferred under No Child Left Behind. Since PS 725 has an extensive CTT program, as well as two self-contained classrooms, it also admits out-of-district students who qualify, under Public Law 94-142, to have special education services that guarantee them a Free and Public Education.

PS 725 has 733 students, from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 5 and shares space with a middle school in a building that is over one hundred years old. Sixty percent of PS 725’s

students are White, eight percent are Black, twenty percent are Hispanic and thirteen percent are Asian. Approximately twenty-five percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

In 2007, PS 725 was recognized on the honor roll in several categories of the Blackboard Awards, including “Overall Quality of Teaching,” “Receptivity to Parent Involvement,” “Acceptance of Diversity of People and Ideas,” and “Overall Social Comfort.” PS 725 is consistently known for its rigorous academics and highly involved parent body.

At the start of the incensed emails, I thought about this highly involved parent body. Did their involvement give them the right to mistreat teachers? To help answer this question, I reached out to my PS 725 colleagues for help. While many of them had shared similar experiences of displeased parents during their tenure at PS 725, no one had dealt with this level of severity. I then turned to colleagues who worked in different schools throughout New York City. I asked them questions, such as: “Why do you think she is treating me like this?” “Is this an Upper East Side ‘thing’ that gives my parent population a sense of entitlement?” “How do parent/teacher relationships in your school ‘go’?” One of my colleagues expressed to me that she thought this mother was trying to exert what little power she had in her own life through her relationship with me; that her behavior towards me was nothing more than an expression of her dissatisfaction with her own life.

I was incredibly grateful to all of my colleagues for helping me figure out just what was going on with this woman, yet my thinking was still all over the place. It became clear to me that I needed to look at this issue of parent/teacher relationships in an historical context: what did those before me have to say?

“Parent involvement” has never had one static definition and the term has never meant the same thing to everyone. Thus, there has been difficulty establishing a conclusive body of research. According to Casanova (1996):

Epstein (1995)...proposes six levels of parent involvement. At the most minimal level, parents provide for the basic needs of their children, prepare them for school, supervise and discipline them, and foster home conditions that support school learning. At the next level, parents may play a more visible role in the school as parent volunteers...at the higher level of involvement, parents may participate in their children’s learning activities with the help of their teachers, and at an even higher level, they may become involved in decision-making at the school. At the highest level of involvement, the resources of the community and the parents are integrated with those of the school in a total effort centered on the child. (p. 30)

In addition to a claim made by Drummond and Stipek (2004) that “parents rated the importance of helping their child with academic work very high” (p. 197), another well established facet to forming healthy parent-teacher relationships is that students, particularly those in elementary school, “gain more in achievement when they *and their parents* experience supportive relationships with teachers” (Hughes & Kwok, 2007, p. 46). *Emphasis added.* Unfortunately, the “relationship between parents and teachers [can be] highly competitive” (p. 32), which may cause the kinds of deep-seeded problems that prove more difficult to overcome. Add to this the fact that “conceptions of effective teaching in the United States have changed significantly over time” (Wayne & Youngs, 2003, p. 90) and there is the potential for much contention between teachers and parents to arise.

In her 1988 paper, “An Ethic of Caring and Its Implications for Instructional Arrangements,” Nel Noddings asserts that this discord can be changed if relational ethics are

implemented. Here, “one who is concerned with behaving ethically strives always to preserve or convert a given relationship into a caring relation” (p. 219). Further:

in every caring occasion, the parties involved must decide how they will respond to each other. Each such occasion involves negotiation of a sort: an initiation, a response, a decision to elaborate or terminate. Clearly, teaching is filled with caring occasions or, quite often, with attempts to avoid such occasions.” (p. 222)

While Noddings’ assertion, that an ethics of caring is necessary for schools to produce moral human beings, may have been new twenty years ago when her study was published, it does seem that this is more of a normative thought process for today’s teachers, even if “parent involvement” is such a nebulous concept. For today’s teachers, “it is very important to let parents know that you are an advocate for their child and that you want to work with them throughout the year to ensure that their child (your student) has the best possible experience” (Kihn, para. 1). Indeed, it is vital to “let parents know that you are concerned about their child as a person and a learner in your class...to provide the best possible learning experience” (para. 5).

All of this information, coupled with my concerns about what was going on in my classroom, led me to formulate two research questions, which I believed would help guide my research and my teaching practice:

- How can I understand the politics of parent/teacher relationships through my interactions with one set of parents in my classroom?
- More specifically, how can teachers develop healthy relationships with parents?

Certainly, it was important for me to get to the root of the problem with “Crazy Email Mom.” At the same time, it was crucial that through this research, I could find ways to help teachers better understand the dynamics of parent/teacher relationships in their own classrooms.

For all intents and purposes of my research, “Crazy Email Mom” became “Mom F.” Seeing that her interactions with me were hostile from the beginning of the school year, I did not

feel comfortable speaking with her directly about what had been going on between us. This, plus the fact that I, too, was playing a crucial role in this “relationship,” led me to research my own role in it more deeply. I needed to look at myself in order to gain a clearer understanding of Mom F’s reactions to me, so I decided to compare my interactions with her, to those of other parents in the classroom. I soon started to wonder if I was treating her in a way that was different from the other parents in my classroom. My thinking revolved around the idea that if no other parents were being this hostile, perhaps there was something, explicit or implicit, that I was doing to incite this negativity from Mom F.

Mom F is a single mother. This became hugely important in my research, especially after having reflected back on one of my colleagues’ idea that perhaps Mom F was behaving this way because she felt a lack of power in her life outside of her child’s classroom. Implicit in my methodology, then, became the idea that single motherhood was not the deciding factor in the creation of healthy parent/teacher relationships; it quickly became vital to my study to dispel this notion, if only to give the single mothers in the world a break. Plus, I knew that her parental status was too easy an answer to this greater problem of how teachers can develop healthy relationships with parents.

Of the twenty-two students in my class, nine had single mothers as their primary care givers. When selecting other single mothers to include in this study, I came up with two criteria:

- With whom was I in constant communication, via emails, handwritten notes back and forth, and phone calls?
- With whom did I have a healthy relationship?

It was also very important to me that I chose two other single mothers who had very different lives than Mom F, as I believed that including three diverse women, with the same parental status, would give me a greater understanding of my own teaching practice (in terms of

my interactions with them). Here again, I was set on continuing to work against the notion that single motherhood was the reason behind Mom F's unhappiness with my practice.

During the time of the study, Mom F had three children all under the age of eleven. She was embroiled in a divorce with the children's' father and, from what I could gather, did not have a good relationship with this man. Mom F would come to meetings alone, and it was not clear that she was sharing information with Dad. Mom H fit my criteria and also had three children, all above the age of ten. Her brother was currently living with her and her children, while her husband was working and living in the Middle East. While she was in communication with the father about school issues (she would fax report cards, essays, etc.), she was, for all intents and purposes, raising her children alone, as the uncle never came to school meetings or events. The third mother that was chosen was Mom S. While Mom S was biologically her son's maternal grandmother, she had adopted her son earlier in the year and had been raising him as her own since he was in second grade, when I also had him as a student.

All three moms would email me and write me notes on a regular basis; I began collecting these emails and notes to use as my data. I also started to jot notes to myself whenever I would have a meeting or a conversation with any of the moms, as well as whenever I would have a conversation with a child that concerned their mom. Here, I tried hard not to start such conversations with the children, so as not to inform my data, but being a practitioner who thinks it is important to listen to children, I would do so and, when appropriate, dispense the most objective advice that I could.

Over the course of the school year, these artifacts became my data. After I sorted the data by mom, I began to read through everything, hoping to find trends, particularly in my responses to them and then their responses to me. I started by looking at this data as a whole and

then, from each mom's pile, pulled out interactions where I had either written or said something similar to all three of the moms. I noticed that while I had been interacting with the moms in a similar fashion, only Mom S and Mom H were responding in much the same way back (kindly). Mom F was still the outlier in my data.

Through closer examination of the data, not only was I able to find the trends I was employing with these parents, I was soon able to name and define them. When it came to creating healthy parent/teacher relationships with the moms, I could look across my data and see that I had tried to apply diplomacy, support and empathy. These, coupled with my personal reflections, gave me four variables with which I could code my interactions: Diplomacy, Support, Empathy, and Reflection. Based on these data, I created tables that can be found in the appendix.

Diplomacy is defined as “1. The conduct by government officials or negotiations and other relations between nations; 2. The art or science of conducting such negotiations; 3. Skill in managing negotiations, handling people, etc., so that there is little or no ill will; tact” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/diplomacy>).

For this action research, however, I adhered to the third definition. It was important for me to make sure that I was not showing one mom more leniency or favoritism than another, or that I was responding to the moms in drastically different ways.

Support is defined as “1. To bear or hold up...serve as a foundation for; 2. To sustain or withstand (weight, pressure, strain, etc.) without giving way; 3. To undergo or endure, esp., with patience or submission; tolerate” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/support>). For all intents and purposes of my work, I implemented support as a combination of all three definitions. Whereas I did want to be a foundation for these moms, in order to help them feel

like they had someone in the school that was on their side, I also wanted to be a pillar of strength for them and their children, especially during the harder times of the school year (testing, middle school admissions). Finally, it was of utmost importance that I did this with care and patience.

Reflection is defined as “a fixing of the thoughts on something; careful consideration” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/reflection>). In order to assess my own practice in a deep and meaningful way, it was necessary for me to look back at my thoughts and feelings following each interaction I had. I wanted to make sure that I did not forget anything that I went through during this process, as this action research was a way for me to think about and change my own teaching practice, with a more far-reaching goal of better informing other teachers and, ultimately, educational policy, on how teachers can create healthy relationships with parents.

Finally, empathy is defined as “the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/empathy>). My interactions with each of the moms was largely aligned with Noddings’ “ethic of caring,” which I took to mean “empathy.” While I have never been a single mother myself, it was significant that I try to feel what that was like. Before any interaction I had with a mom, I had to remind myself of where she was coming from.

Diplomacy proved to be important in creating healthy relationships with the moms. Two moms, Mom S and Mom H, responded positively, as evidenced by follow-up interactions, like: “Thank you for your gentle way of telling me to stop making a big deal of the letter N! I really appreciate it and won't mention it to A. again. Thank you” (personal communication, November 20, 2007) and “OK. Thanks so much. I really like your idea. I will work with [my child] tonight.” For Mom F, however, diplomacy was not enough, as evidenced by her follow-up interaction:

First, I did receive the letter about J.'s reading level. I still have a problem with this. She is now reading a book at level Q that she read 1 year ago in between 3rd-4th grade...In between that time and this moment I am 100% certain that J. has grown as a reader. I do not want her reading a book that she read over a year ago. It makes no sense. Not to mention again that it is a book she has already read...what can she possibly be learning from it? (Personal communication, September 10, 2007)

The next step was to see if support, coupled with diplomacy, would be enough to create healthy relationships with the moms. Again, Mom S and Mom H responded positively: "Hi guys. Thanks for being so supportive and teaching 5th grade CTT" (personal communication, October 18, 2008) and "Many thanks! I really appreciate your support" (personal communication, January 20, 2008). For Mom F, however, this next step was not enough to build a healthy relationship:

I really do not think that it is good to put the meeting off for a week...I am not sure what you feel you will be accomplishing having a meeting in the classroom versus a conference call if this is something that needs to be taken care of. I think putting it off only facilitates the problem. I am available Friday morning not in the afternoon as I am a working parent...if you are available Friday morning I would appreciate that time. (Personal communication, September 12, 2007).

During each interaction mentioned above, I continued to reflect in my journal. With Mom S, my reflections focused on ways to make the child, and in turn the parent, feel even more supported: "I have been thinking a lot about how things have been going with A. and I hear what you're saying...I'll tone it down" (December 10, 2007). With Mom H, my reflections were like a big sigh of relief: "It's so helpful to have a parent who trusts me...this kind of collaboration makes life so much easier" (February 13, 2008).

With Mom F, however, my reflections showed the same sense of exasperation I felt each time I had to interact with her: “It seems everything I do with/for this woman is not good enough” (September 17, 2007). After I was able to read and further think about this reflective piece I was able to realize that more had to be done. Despite the fact that this woman was challenging me to my very core, I had to try and be empathetic, in whichever way I could. With Mom S and Mom H it was easy to be employ empathy since our relationships were healthy, seemingly without any effort (for more on how I was empathetic to these moms, please refer to the Appendix).

One night, I had spent the subway ride home trying to figure out if there was any possible way to connect with Mom F. She was becoming incredibly nervous about her daughter getting into a reputable middle school and her anxiety was causing her to send emails up to twice a day; the situation was exhausting for her and it was certainly wearing me out. I decided that when I got back to my apartment, I would call Mom F and talk to her, human being to human being, releasing the titles of “parent” and “teacher.” Needless to say, I was terrified.

We spoke for about 45 minutes, and during that time, she opened up to me in a calm and gentle way. I told her that her daughter reminded me a lot of myself as a young student, and she responded with an incredulous “*Really?*” Something had shifted. While diplomacy, support and reflection were not enough to create a healthy relationship with Mom F, once empathy was added into the equation, the healthy relationship I had worked for had started burgeoning. After this telephone call, I never received a nasty email or note again. Our relationship had shifted.

Diplomacy, support and reflection proved necessary to creating healthy parent/teacher relationships, yet it was empathy that allowed me to build such a relationship with one of my most challenging parents. Diplomacy strengthened my relationships with Mom S and Mom H,

but for Mom F, it did nothing. Support was recognized and accepted by Mom S and Mom H; not so for Mom F. Reflection allowed me to think deeply about each relationship I had with the moms, and what my next course of action could be in how to make these relationships strong and supportive. Again, this did not seem to have any bearing on my relationship with Mom F.

Empathy, on the other hand, helped me turn a corner with all three Moms. From Mom F's interactions with me following the phone call I made to her, I was able to imply that she just needed me to step out of my own comfort zone as a teacher. Mom F needed me to look at her concern for her daughter's education from her parent perspective; she needed me to listen to her, but first she needed me to break down the differentiation of power between us. Mom F needed me to step out of my role as teacher, and take on a new role as parent. This was incredibly challenging, considering I have no children of my own, yet I was determined to examine this relationship in order to help other teachers understand the amount of work it takes to create healthy parent/teacher relationships with the parent populations of their classroom.

Healthy parent/teacher relationships are absolutely necessary in a child's education. When a student has a parent and a teacher who are on the same page, supporting that child through all of her successes and struggles, everyone benefits: the teacher is able to individualize the child's educational experience, the parent is let in on the child's school life and will be more capable of supporting that child at home, and the child has a team behind her, working together to ensure that meaningful learning happens. This is a job that cannot be done alone; United States educational policy must help.

My first policy recommendation is that teacher education programs should offer classes that teach future educators how to work towards creating healthy relationships with parents; at least one of these classes should be a graduation requirement. Rather than the "sink or swim"

mentality that was related to me during my own teacher education program, perhaps I would have been better able to cope with Mom F's treatment of me had I been given a repertoire of strategies on how to build healthy parent/teacher relationships.

The second policy recommendation is that administrators and veteran teachers should offer ongoing workshops for new teachers in how to foster healthy relationships with parents. This would, again, give teachers more grounding in how to work with parents in a classroom setting. Particularly with younger teachers, there seems to be a fear that they are "telling parents what to do," or are "not old enough to know what they are talking about." These are two statements that a colleague shared with me when I approached her about my own situation; when a parent approaches a teacher in this way, that teacher should know concrete ways in which to handle that situation.

In this day and age, when public school education is constantly under fire for not being up to par, parents and teachers must learn how to come together to fight the forces that are constantly working against them. Parents and teachers must learn how to become allies as the public fights over how to "fix" education. Before examining how to fix entire systems, however, the conversation must begin by discussing how to "fix" the parent/teacher relationships in our classrooms. One way to start is to begin developing diplomacy, support, reflection and empathy in tangible and workable ways.

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Mom F	Diplomacy	Support	Reflection	Empathy
Used	<p>Email, 9/6: “We assessed J. today in reading and she moved up to level ‘R.’” We’re so proud of the hard work she has obviously been doing.”</p>	<p>Email, 9/11: “We’d love to schedule a meeting so we can talk about your concerns. We are available after school from 3:00-3:15, Monday-Thursday in the mornings from 7:30-7:45, and on Friday mornings from 8:15-8:30.</p> <p>Thanks.”</p>	<p>Journal Entry, 9/17: “It seems like everything I do with/for this woman is not good enough. I am beginning to think that this isn’t so much about me, but about her need to exert power over me.”</p>	<p>Phone call on 12/20: “I just want to let you know that I understand your concerns about middle school for J. Granted, she may not get into all of the middle schools you are both applying to, but that does not mean there is not a place for her in this world. She will find a middle school that fits her just right.”</p>
Results	<p>Email, 9/10: “First, I did receive the letter about J.’s reading level. I still have a problem with this. She is now reading a book at level Q that she read 1 year ago in between 3rd-4th grade...In between that time and this moment I am 100% certain that J. has grown as a reader. I do not want her reading a book that she read over a year ago. It makes no sense. Not to mention again that it is a book she has already read...what can she possibly be learning from it.”</p>	<p>Email, 9/12: “I really do not think that it is good to put the meeting off for a week...I am not sure what you feel you will be accomplishing having a meeting in the classroom versus a conference call if this is something that needs to be taken care of. I think putting it off only facilitates the problem. I am available Friday morning not in the afternoon as I am a working parent...if you are available Friday morning I would appreciate that time.”</p>	<p>Note sent 10/9: “Please be advised that I would like ALL of J.’s math work to be done in pencil. I believe it is inappropriate to use pen while doing math as you cannot erase your mistakes.</p> <p>Thank you.”</p>	<p>Email, 1/8 “This is for Ms. Golub. I went to ICE as you recommended. It is a pretty interesting school...different outlook on things. I like their philosophy... I have to tell you though...I am still really confused. I still think Baruch CTT has so much to offer...well Baruch in general I mean. 2 very different schools. This is really tough!!!”</p>

Mom H.	Diplomacy	Support	Reflection	Empathy
Used	<p>Email, 2/13: “We just wanted to let you know that K. got a bit upset at the end of the day today. There has been a situation with children packing up and cleaning up the classroom for dismissal and another child brought up the fact that the band members were always leaving their chairs down. K. got very upset and didn't think it was fair. We told him that he could present his (incredibly valid) argument to the class tomorrow after he practiced how to talk about it in a calm manner with you tonight. We feel like this is a great opportunity for K. to practice those communication skills we have been working on.”</p>	<p>Email, 1/30: “Thank you for this email, H. K. never expressed the problems that you mentioned to either of us, but Ms. Golub spoke with him today about being a good partner and how that means that it's okay to say no, as long as it is in a respectful way. He also shared some of the things you spoke about with him last night and we tried to reinforce that, as well. We're hoping that K. will be more open to expressing his feelings/concerns to his partners in a more constructive way and we will continue to encourage him to do so.”</p>	<p>Journal Entry, 2/13: “I am so impressed with K. and his mom. It's so helpful to have a parent who trusts me, as well as my expertise and care for children! This kind of collaboration makes life so much easier.”</p>	<p>Conference, 3/28: I can appreciate how hard it must be to be raising three boys by yourself.</p>
Results	<p>Email, 2/13: “Ok. Thanks so much. I really like your idea. I will work with K. tonight.”</p>	<p>Email, 1/30: “Many thanks! I really appreciate your support. I will continue this dialogue with him and we can work together to enforce positive behavior.”</p>	<p>Email, 2/15: “Hi, hope all is well. Appreciate your feedback on how K. handled the situation. He said he was a bit nervous. He practiced a lot. So I hope he managed to get his point across in a positive and constructive way without offending anyone. Best regards.”</p>	<p>Conference, 3/28: “Thank you. I try hard and thank you for all of your continued support throughout this year. I have seen K. grow so much and I am so appreciative of you two.”</p>

Mom S.	Diplomacy	Support	Reflection	Empathy
Used	<p>Email, 11/30: “We assessed A. last week and he is still on level N. He is omitting words altogether, or misreading them. We are afraid that if we continue to make a big deal about his reading level a roadblock may be created; he seems really stressed about the whole thing, so maybe if we all just let him develop naturally, he will begin to feel better about the entire situation and move out of the N basket once and for all. By no means does this mean we are not working with him. We are directly addressing the difficulties A. is having as a reader; we do not want to focus our conversations about reading only about reading level.”</p>	<p>Email, 10/17: “What exciting news! We're glad to hear you are feeling better, and will be able to enjoy this amazing occasion. Of course it is fine that A. will be late, we will be sure to catch him up when he gets here.”</p>	<p>Conversation, 12/10: “S., I have been thinking a lot about how things have been going with A. and I hear what you're saying [about me being 'mean' to him]. I will try to be easier on him, but I just want you to know that my expectations for him are super high and maybe for him that can be scary. I'll tone it down.”</p>	<p>Email, 11/30: “Thank you so much for being such a great partner to work with. We hope you are feeling better and if you want to meet next week, please let us know.”</p>
Results	<p>Email, 11/20: “Thank you for your gentle way of telling me to stop making a big deal of the letter N! I really appreciate it and won't mention it to A. again. Thank you.”</p>	<p>Email, 10/18: “Hi guys. Thanks for being so supportive and for teaching 5th grade CTT!”</p>	<p>Email, 12/10: “Hi. It was really great talking to you at the publishing party. It made a major difference to A.”</p>	<p>Conference, 3/12 “Thank you for being so good to A. when I got hurt. It really calmed him down.”</p>