

Best Practices for Communicating with Families During Crisis



LISTEN

Listening Lenses: Families are juggling a lot right now (jobs, kids, finances) and we as teachers are likely juggling similar things. However, in our role of serving as a support to students, it's important that we are fully listening to families. To engage fully as a listener, we recommend using one of the [listening lenses](#) outlined in Elena Aguilar's book *The Art of Coaching Teams*.

- **With Love:** Listen with an open heart, with the knowledge that your heart will not break, and that it can hold the pain and suffering of many; be present with and understand the humanity of the person who speaks.
- **For Pain:** Listen for pain, without trying to fix it; listen to hear the raw emotions under the story.
- **With Compassion:** Suspend judgment of yourself and others, appreciating and accepting that everyone makes choices based on their knowledge and skills and what makes sense given their history and worldview.
- **With Hope:** Listen while remaining unattached to outcomes, but with the deep conviction that transformational possibilities exist that you may not perceive.

Voice, Choice, and Empowerment: Consider using multiple avenues for families to share their thoughts or respond to specific feedback questions. You might try one of the following.

- **VideoAsk:** Send a question you want insight on or a general pulse check on how parents or guardians are doing. This platform allows parents to respond with a video message, voice message, or text message.
- **Survey:** Create a survey to ask about how parents or guardians want to be communicated with and what kind of support they are looking for with an electronic survey.
- **Social Media:** Pose key questions on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook; get creative! For example, you can host a Tweet Chat on Twitter.
- **Traditional:** You can always use traditional methods of phone calls, text messages, email, or virtual one-on-one meetings.



EMPATHIZE

Verbalize Empathy: A practice to couple with listening is to empathize. Using simple phrases to show empathy can go a long way. Consider adding these phrases to your toolbox:

- *You're allowed to feel this way*
- *You may not get "over this", but we'll get through it*
- *I don't know what to say...*
- *I'm right here*

Extend Grace: We are living in unprecedented times and extending grace in small ways can make all the difference in someone's day. Here are some ways you can extend grace to families.

- **Checking in:** Try to check in with families just for the sake of checking in—ask how their day was or how they are feeling.
- **Accepting Disruptions:** Be gracious when a child or pet interrupts a conversation or a family member needs to reschedule at the last minute.
- **Modeling:** Extending grace also means showing grace to yourself. This can be difficult to do, so modeling this to families builds trust and psychological safety.



PROVIDE STRUCTURE

Cadence: How often should families expect communication from you?

During times of crisis, consistent structures can bring a sense of normalcy and hope to families. Families are living with many unknowns and a consistent cadence for when they receive communications from you can bring a small, but constant known to their lives. Whatever that cadence is, communicate it clearly to families; e.g. "You will receive a weekly email newsletter from me every Monday with key updates."

Type: What form will your communication take?

Communication can come in many forms—newsletters, email, social media, text messages, etc. A best practice with communication is to follow the 3x3 rule. Share things you want to be understood three times in three different ways.

Content: What is the purpose of your communication?

Along with cadence and type, it's important that each communication serves a purpose. To share an update is the most common, but give yourself the space to get creative with the purpose. You might Tweet out a midweek message to spread joy. Or create a weekly video message to share tips for how parents can support student learning. Just be sure to ground the purpose with the needs you are hearing from families.



BE TRANSPARENT

Say it fast and often

New information is coming in weekly if not daily. As you receive information, think about how time-sensitive the information is to families. For example, sharing a new grading policy two weeks after the fact makes the information seem less relevant (especially if they've learned about it from another source) and leaves a gap in knowledge that people will naturally fill with assumptions. In addition, depending on the rate of new information and/or changes, you may have to communicate with families on a daily basis.

Foster trust through transparency

Transparency is a great strategy to build or maintain trust with families. However, it should be consistent and authentic. Common pitfalls of transparency are treating it as one and done or being selective about when you are transparent. Be clear and open about what is known and unknown in communications with families during a crisis.

WANT MORE? CHECK OUT THE RELATED RESOURCES BELOW!

- [Communicate with families during COVID-19 | K-12 Research](#)
- [Family and Children Communication Tools During COVID-19 - COVID-19 Information](#)
- [Best Practices for Communicating Effectively with Critical Parents](#)
- [Five Keys to Successful Parent-Teacher Communication](#)
- [9 Tips for Successful Parent-Teacher Communication](#)