

Letters That Invite Family Involvement

We've also found that summer is a great time to learn about students from their families. Parents often have unusual and important information to share about their children that might be easier to share through the mail, rather than during the hectic first days of school.

When Suzy Kaback sends out the letter described above, she also sends a separate letter to parents, encouraging them to share helpful information about their children. (See sample on pages 17 and 18.) Specifically, she asks parents to write a letter telling her what she shouldn't wait to find out about their child. Her letter makes it clear that the information should be positive. Troubled home lives, past difficulties in school, and peer problems are all important factors to know at some point, but not initially. Suzy wants parents to feel comfortable bragging about their kids. She also makes it easy for them to respond by enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Responses to this request disprove the negative notions many educators have about parent involvement in the upper-elementary grades. Suzy has never received responses from less than 90 percent of parents, and what treasures their letters prove to be! (See sample on page 19.) They always provide a sneak peek into the lives of her future students and a wealth of substantive comments for each child on the very first day of school.

Suzy Kaback's Letter to Parents

SUZY KABACK

Dear «parent's name»,

I hope this letter finds you and your family healthy and enjoying the summer. I clearly remember last summer's rain and cold temperatures, so I'm thankful that we're having such a wonderful season this year.

You may be surprised to be receiving a letter from "the fifth-grade teacher," so let me explain my purpose. In a few weeks, «student's name» will find a letter of his/her own in the mailbox, but this note is just for adults. I have some news and some requests that I'd like to pass along to you.

To begin, I'm writing to let you know my plans for the fall. As many of you know, my husband Steve and I are expecting our first child at the end of October. We're thrilled, of course, but we've had to make some plans about maternity leave. For the time being, I plan to teach as long as possible. Then, when the baby is born, I'll take a few weeks off. Mr. Russell and I will be working on hiring a substitute in the early fall and I can assure you that I will look for a qualified, dedicated replacement. Please feel free to share concerns, questions, or advice(!) with me.

Thinking about becoming a mom has certainly made me more aware of the impact parents have on the lives of their children, particularly as they enter school and are turned over to the care of another person for eight hours a day. I have, however, always been a supporter of home-school communication. So, within a few weeks, you'll start receiving weekly updates about our classroom and your child's progress. It is my hope that these notes will be the basis of a year's worth of dialogue between us. We'll discuss «student's name», what's happening in class, ways you can support his/her learning at home, and ways I can extend what you do at home in school.

My hope for this kind of ongoing dialogue leads me to my first request: Would you take a few minutes to jot down some thoughts about «student's name»? I'd like your message to be positive. What shouldn't I wait to find out about him/her? What are his/her greatest strengths, proudest achievements, favorite years in school? What will I notice about «student's name»? What are the things you like or admire most about

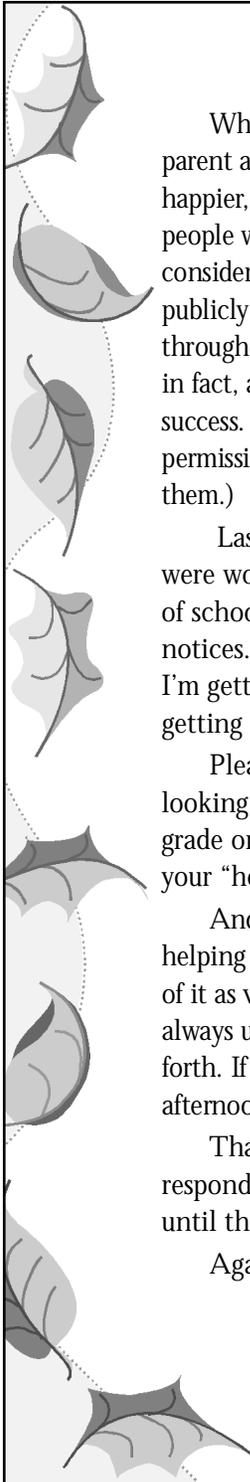
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from "The Back to School Book" by Suzanne Kaback, Constance Perry, and Brenda Power



<http://teacher.scholastic.com>



Why am I asking you to do this? Well, I answer with another question: When a parent and a teacher communicate regularly about a child, does the child have a happier, more successful school year? On the surface it's a simple question that many people would answer with a quick "yes," but I think it deserves more deliberate consideration. A good teacher knows, however, that to make such a statement publicly takes some data. Therefore, I'd like to use any talking and writing we do throughout the year as the basis for a classroom research project that asks if there is, in fact, a connection between home-school communication and a child's school success. (Of course, all communication will be confidential, and I will request your permission for using any of our communications if opportunities arise to publish them.)

Last year I asked families to write these kinds of letters, and the results were wonderful! The only problem was that I made my request on the first day of school, and I think the letter got buried among the avalanche of other notices. Therefore, I didn't get the number of letters I'd hoped for. So, this year, I'm getting a head start on a home-school relationship, which is why you're getting this letter early!

Please write as much or as little as you'd like in the "Kid Notes." I'm just looking for that kernel of knowledge you can share with me to help start fifth grade on a confident note. I hope the self-addressed stamped envelope makes your "homework" a little easier!

And the final request: Might your soon-to-be fifth grader like to spend time helping to set up our classroom? Some would call it slave labor, but I like to think of it as volunteerism! I'll be in our room during the week prior to school and can always use help re-shelving books, hanging posters, creating bulletin boards, and so forth. If «student's name» is interested in coming to school for an hour or so one afternoon, let me know. It's a great bonding experience!

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter, and thanks in advance for responding to it. There's no rush to turn in the writing. If you don't get to it until the beginning of the school year, no problem.

Again, I wish you well and look forward to meeting you this fall.

Suzzy Kaback