Backing Away Helpfully: Some Roles Teachers Shouldn't Fill

based on an interview with Penny Hauser-Cram

I suspect that if you asked for a definition of a good teacher most families would describe a cross between a chameleon and Wonderwoman — someone who is part developmental scholar, pediatrician, artist, and therapist, with a little bit of toy designer, janitor, and athlete mixed in. But based on my years as a teacher and a director, I have come to believe that there are at least some roles that teachers can't and shouldn't fill. Two roles that I have seen cause tension and hard feelings come immediately to mind: the role of family therapist and the role of parent expert.

Parents need and want other adults in each of these roles. Since teachers and parents share an intimate ongoing relationship centered on children they both care about, it is tempting for all sides to move from educational and developmental issues to personal, and even therapeutic, ones. A big challenge for teachers is to help parents find the help they need, without adopting those helping roles themselves.

Sharing Children's Development

Parents and teachers really do share children. Together they are involved in seeing one, and sometimes several, children through some of the largest developmental events of the early years: the transition from the home to school or a center, the process of making friends, the joys and struggles of learning to talk or even to begin reading. Because of daily involvement with a child, a teacher is often the first outsider to know the in's and out's of a family's workings: whether they ignore or attend to a child's illness; when they have had periods of disorganization; how they handle the stresses of being late, bathroom accidents, or a missing favorite book or toy. A teacher also learns a great deal of very revealing information about individual children: how late or early a baby sits up, walks, says a first word; how shy or aggressive a three year old is; how challenging or cooperative a four year old may be. Unlike friends or neighbors, who may have similar insights, teachers are in a position to evaluate — they can compare a family or a child to many others they know.

A Charged Situation

Since parents are often deeply invested in how their children are developing, their discussions with teachers are often charged with emotion. Some parents resent or distrust teachers, particularly in cases where teachers and family members see the child or the purposes of early education differently.

For example, imagine what happens when a father sees a boy as *active* and a teacher sees that child as *aggressive* or when a mother wants her three year old to practice number facts and a teacher insists blocks and beads provide the *right* kinds of early mathematical experiences.

Other parents react to a teacher's knowledge by thinking: "Here is someone who already knows and cares about us. At last, here is someone I can really talk to."

Then, when a teacher asks a question in a conference related to a child's life at home, the parent may see it as an invitation to go far beyond issues of the child's behavior or schooling.

Suddenly, the teacher is catapulted into the role of a therapist or expert.

Spotting Difficult Situations

Sometimes teachers can anticipate that parents may desire additional advice, especially when a child's behavior has undergone a dramatic change. Discussing that change with parents is an important part of a teacher's responsibility, but such discussions can sometimes lead to areas beyond the scope and expertise of the teacher.

Imagine that during a conference a teacher says: "I have been wondering about Michael. The last two weeks he hasn't been playing with friends. He seems listless and tired. Has he been sleeping well?" The parent comes back with: "You're right. I'm glad you mentioned it. Things have been tough . . . there have been a lot of fights at night. We're thinking of separating, and I'm worried about Michael. What shall I do?" Without meaning to, the teacher touched a nerve. The parent responded with a flood of intimate information and a request for help. Within a few moments, a teacher has become a parent's counselor.

A different type of difficult situation sometimes occurs when a mother and father come to a conference with different points of view. Before the teacher can say much, it is clear that they see their child quite differently. One insists: "Shelley is a cry-baby." The other interrupts: "She is not. She is just more sensitive than other children." Both turn to the teacher for confirmation. Suddenly, the teacher is playing the part of an arbitrator in a family dispute.

It is early Wednesday morning. Lucia, rubbing her eyes, comes into the classroom dragging behind her father. A teacher greets her and then comments to Lucia's father that she looks a bit tired. Sighing, he replies: "She's so difficult at home. We can't get her to eat her dinner or go to sleep at a reasonable hour. And she's always starting fights with her brother. We're exhausted. What can we do?" All at once, the teacher has gone from making an observation to being the dispenser of advice.

Each of these is a delicate situation — parents are genuinely seeking help. But they are also asking their children's teachers to go beyond what teachers can reasonably do. The requests are tempting — they complement teachers' knowledge, and often they seem like only a small extension of teachers' concern for children's development.

Backing Away Helpfully

Far from being trapped, teachers can take steps to help parents understand the difference between the roles of teachers, therapists, and experts — steps that clarify without abandoning or ignoring the distress or confusion that parents may feel.

1. Acknowledge what has been said. When parents open up their private lives, they make themselves vulnerable. If a teacher tries to change the topic or gloss over the issues raised, the parent may be hurt or angry. Teachers must recognize what's been revealed: "That helps me to understand why Michael has been tired. It sounds difficult for all of you."

2. Categorize the kind of problem. Once a parent has talked about a problem, a teacher must decide: Is this a classroom problem, a mild developmental issue, or an acute issue in children's or parents' lives deserving professional help? Deciding is not always easy, but here are some examples which may help:

• ***Classroom problems:*** Learning to concentrate on a task; being able to take turns or share with other children; conflicts between parents and teachers over how early to start toilet training; a child's reluctance to come to school in the morning.

• ***Mild family issues:*** A child being unwilling to play at other children's homes; a child being afraid of monsters and refusing to go to sleep at night; parent-child conflicts over eating habits, thumb sucking, getting dressed in the morning.

• ***Acute problems:*** Marked delay in the child's development; extreme aggression, fears, or apathy in children; marital conflict; family abuse; severe mental or physical illness or death in the family.

It is important to categorize because teachers have the skills and information to work on classroom issues. Venturing into family issues or acute problems saddles teachers with responsibilities and demands too great to handle.

3. Make a plan for classroom issues. It is vital that parents know teachers are willing and able to work on problems of learning, behavior, and development in the classroom. Go right to work: find out what is bothering the parent, describe your view of the issue, work out joint strategies, and arrange a time to talk over progress in the near future.

4. For other kinds of problems, inform parents of other resources. If a parent brings up something other than a classroom issue, she should not be left alone with her problem neglected. Teachers can help responsibly by alerting parents to other, more appropriate resources:

• ***Resources for mild developmental issues:*** I have seen two kinds of center-based parent resources work

very well. At Eliot-Pearson, we have a parents' group led by a social worker (trained in child development), not a teacher. The group meets at the school, with no teachers or director attending.

Since the group mixes parents of children of different ages and from different classrooms, the discussion doesn't turn to teachers or curriculum. Also, because of that mix, parents of younger children can learn from the mothers and fathers of older children. Parents of older children can look back and appreciate all the distance they have come.

At the Brookline Early Education Project, there were specific *call-in hours* each week — just as some pediatricians have. Trained social workers and child development specialists took calls from parents concerned about issues such as sleep difficulties, sibling relationships, or changes in behavior.

• ***Resources for acute issues:*** Always have a list of community resources on hand: When parents announce their needs, they are feeling them acutely. That is not the time to say: "Hmmmm, I once had a friend who used a good family counselor. Let me see if I can find out who that was." Instead, it is the time to offer a well thought out list of resources. The list should include a variety of services in a range of areas: developmental screening clinics, therapists who work with children, family therapists, marriage counselors. The list should contain services in a number of different locations and at varying levels of expense. Every resource listed must have been carefully checked.

5. Agree to collaborate. By limiting their roles, teachers aren't signing off. They can agree to work with families and outside resources to solve issues. They can work closely with parents to help children develop better eating habits or self-control. They can share information about what works in the classroom or offer observations when parents come to pick up children. They can offer to talk to a professional who will be testing the child, make it possible for that person to observe in the classroom, and meet with parents to go over any final reports.

Conclusion

The way in which teachers are pulled into acting as therapists or experts is part of a much larger situation. Families often have nowhere else to turn. Many, maybe even most, parents live apart from their own families of origin. Few pediatricians or nurses are trained to discuss and solve developmental issues. For over a century, parents have been *trained* to turn to outside experts — like Gesell or Spock — for answers. For many people, it is a large, bewildering, and expensive step to start hunting for professional help. Not surprisingly, it is teachers who inherit the flock of questions, concerns, and worries parents have.

The other side of the coin is that teachers are trained to notice and respond to the needs of other human beings. For many of them, saying "No" to a request for help feels wrong, like shutting off some very basic perception. But I am not suggesting that teachers turn a cold shoulder on families' needs. Instead, teachers should think about where they can be most helpful and where being helpful lies in pointing the way to more appropriate resources.

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Penny Hauser-Cram was director of the Eliot-Pearson Children's School of Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, at the time of the interview.