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To my children, Nathaniel, Benjamin, and Eleanor, thank you for allowing me the privilege to be your mother. I delight in each of you and in the love we share as a family. I now understand what my mom meant when she used to say, "I love you so much my belly hurts."

Thank you to my rescue dog, Addy, for literally staying by my side. You say more without words than most people do with words, and your spirit and love for life inspire me every day.

Finally, thank you to my husband, Jonathan. Your belief in me kept me going. I cherish the life we have created and crafted together and love you more with each passing year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Weinzapfel is the executive director of community schools and family engagement for the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC) in Evansville, Indiana. She has worked in the educational field of family engagement for almost a decade. Currently, Patricia directs the family engagement work in the EVSC and in the district's 39 schools. She also helps oversee the EVSC's community partnerships. Patricia has presented her work, and the work of the district, at a number of community school forums and family engagement conferences.

Patricia holds two degrees from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University: a Bachelor of Science (1988) in Journalism/Social Psychology and a Master of Science (1989) in Broadcast Journalism with a concentration in Economic/Business reporting. Prior to becoming a part of the world of education, Patricia was a field producer, off-air reporter, show producer, and special projects producer for WTHR-TV in Indianapolis. She spent four years as a reporter at WFIE-TV in Evansville, where she covered education stories in nearly every school in the EVSC. She got her start as a writer and producer for WSBT-TV in South Bend. Patricia has also taught broadcast journalism and writing at the University of Southern Indiana (USI).

Patricia is a strong believer in public service, community engagement, and collaboration. For eight years, Patricia served as First Lady of Evansville, alongside her husband, former Evansville Mayor Jonathan Weinzapfel. She partnered with several organizations on city initiatives and was a founding member of the Evansville Regional Autism Coalition. Patricia currently serves on the boards of the Koch Family Children's Museum of Evansville, the YMCA of Southwestern Indiana and the Committee to Promote Respect in Schools (CYPRESS), and is active in many other community collaborations and organizations, including the Area Council PTA, the Junior League of Evansville, and the WFIE-TV Advisory Board.

Over the years, Patricia has honed her multitasking skills as a mother to three children. Nathaniel and twins, Benjamin and Eleanor, were born less than two years apart. Patricia credits her rescue dog, Addy, with saving her during those early years.

PREFACE

This isn't a book about research. It isn't a book designed to use survey results or data to convince you that reaching out to families is important. Chances are, if you're reading this book, you already know that.

And, it isn't a book to teach you how to organize a family literacy night. There are plenty of books that do that.

This book is designed with one purpose in mind: to help you improve your ability to communicate and build relationships with families. It's designed to help you use words and language to provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to become true partners in their children's education.

While some people are naturals at communicating and others are not, all of us can learn to write and speak more effectively. These are skills that can be taught; you only have to recognize the need and be open to learning.

Developing your communication skills will help you not only reach out to families but also to the community and to community partners working with students and families in your school. Many times they don't understand the world of education either.

A quick note: In this book, I use the word "parents" in order to keep things short and simple. But here the word "parents" is also meant to encompass caregivers, grandparents, foster parents, and other adults who love and take care of children.

And many of the examples included in this book were pulled from school, and school district websites.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I am not an educator. I'm a broadcast journalist. A couple of years ago, I found myself working in the world of education. As part of my job in administration at my school district, I started attending Community School and Family Engagement conferences and forums.

Time and time again, I found myself sitting through break out sessions where someone would lament the fact that educators talk in acronyms and use complicated language. I'm not kidding; it usually happened at least once in every session.

I listened and kept listening, and finally at one of the sessions, I looked around the room and thought to myself, *I don't know as much about education as these folks, but I do know about communication and I can help with this. I can help coach people in how to communicate better.*

And I started writing that night, in a hotel room while still at one of the conferences.

This book took six years to complete. I stuck with it, in between raising three children, caring for my parents, and working full time because, honestly, I felt compelled to write this. It is my small contribution to the world of education. I hope you like it. More importantly, I hope it helps you as you undertake the most powerful and important work in the world, educating children.

*Be a craftsman in speech that thou mayest be strong,
for the strength of one is the tongue, and speech
mightier than all fighting.*

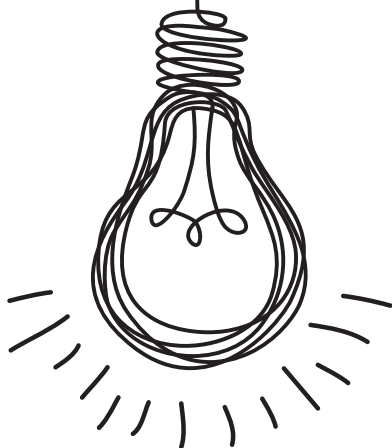
—Ptahhotep, 3400 BC

*Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most
inexhaustible source of magic.*

—J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly
Hallows*

*Don't use a five-dollar word when a fifty-cent word
will do.*

—Mark Twain, *Author*



CHAPTER I

WHY COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Read this:

As a requirement of our CAP, EERC and PBIS, Indiana staff will be visiting our district to attend a DLT meeting in the coming months. The agenda for the DLT meeting will at minimum include a review of CAP, root cause analysis and any relevant data, as well as the needed resources and support from the EERC and PBIS Indiana.

Did you really read it? Or did the first sentence just make you think, “No way”?

A few years ago, I actually received this email. I’d been working for a local school district for about nine months. When I opened the email, I took one look at it and thought, *Ah . . . not right now*. After I got myself focused with a cup of coffee, I actually read it. And then read it again. Finally, I called the person who sent it and said, “I’m happy to help in any way I can, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

You see, I did not have a background in education. Before I started working for the school district in administration, I was a broadcast news reporter. My role was to take complicated, confusing issues like combined sewer overflow and present them in language that people could understand and in ways that made people *want* to understand.

As you can imagine, I spent the first few months of my job in education Googling acronyms under the table during meetings. I made lists of complicated words I didn’t understand, and sometimes after

meetings, I went into my boss' office and asked her, "What the heck just happened in there?"

Let's face it, educators like to talk really "smart." They like to use big words like "formative" and "differentiation." And they throw acronyms around like they're one-liners.

Of course, lots of fields and businesses have their own little language. In news, producers call live interviews between an anchor in a studio and someone in a different location a "jack in the box." In retail, advertised specials designed to entice you into the store are sometimes called "loss leaders." Turning background information into dialogue in a sitcom is called "laying pipe." This language is actually helpful. It streamlines the work communication because everyone knows what everyone is talking about.

The difference is that those businesses don't use those terms when they work with their sources or their customers (imagine telling the president of the United States that he or she is a "jack in the box!"). In education, we do. We often use our jargon and our smart, "fancy" way of talking when we communicate with our families. That creates a barrier that doesn't allow us to reach out and engage our families in true partnerships built on respect and centered on student success.

Here's a great example of what I'm talking about: In 2012 the Indiana Department of Education composed a letter for school districts to mail out to parents about the standardized reading test that all third graders took and still take in Indiana. Here's the letter's text:

In March, our school administered the Indiana Reading and Evaluation Determination (IREAD-3). Based on the Indiana Academic Standards, IREAD-3 is a summative assessment that was developed in accordance with Public Law 109, which requires the evaluation of foundational reading skills for students in grade three to ensure that all students can read proficiently before moving on to grade four. The result of your child's test is included.


Heck of a second sentence, huh? The letter goes on:

Your child's IREAD-3 score is:

Pass

Did not Pass

Undetermined (Contact School for more information)



The first step
in building any
partnership or
relationship is
communication.

Questions may include identifying beginning, middle and ending sounds, identifying synonyms, antonyms, homographs, suffixes and using context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words in a text.

Here's how the letter ends:

If your child did not pass IREAD-3, our school will offer remediation services prior to the summer administration of IREAD-3. Details regarding the summer administration will be forthcoming. Should you need further explanation of the enclosed test results, please contact your child's teacher.

Okay, let's start by asking, which parts of this letter will most parents understand?

The answer is easy. Not really any of it. "Summative assessment," "foundational reading skills," and "homographs" are not words our parents use in everyday life.

Next question, what do parents need to understand?

They need to understand all of it if they are going to partner with us to help their children become strong readers.

Now, what part of this letter empowers parents to work with the school? What part of this letter is reassuring or friendly?

See, it isn't just the disconnect in the language or words. The tone and delivery make this letter rather cold. It's sterile. It also has an authoritarian feel that can be very intimidating for some parents.

The first step in building any partnership or relationship is communication. In other words, before we can begin to have respectful, meaningful conversations with families, they need to understand what we're talking about. We've got to be able to explain the complicated world of education without using complicated language. And that's harder to do than it sounds.

Sure, for some it's just natural. And you know these people. They make it look easy. They could, as they say, "talk to a doorknob." But by and large, educators aren't great communicators, or they would be hosting the nightly news.

Well, that's not entirely true. Most educators are gifted at communicating—with children and with teaching children. That's a good base to start with, so let's look at it this way: it's time to expand your communication portfolio.

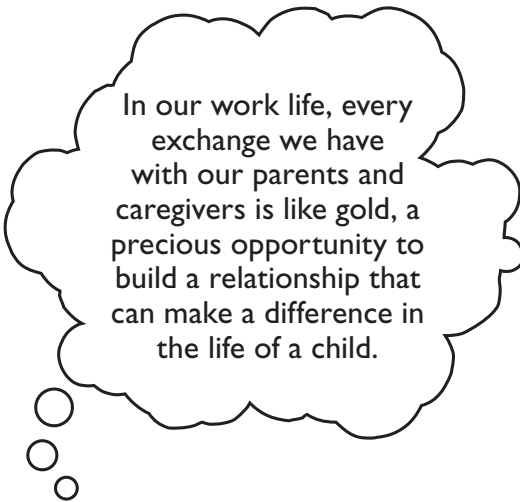
Here's the thing. You're already doing the work. You're already sending home the standardized test results, and you're already presenting to parents at your open house. It's time to do the work better, because when you send the test results home, there's a good chance many parents don't understand them. And maybe those blank looks you get during your open house presentation aren't just because Mom and Dad are tired. Maybe it's because their overtaxed brains are working hard trying to decode what you're saying. In either case, parents don't necessarily end up with the information they need to help their children succeed.

So many other things can make communicating with parents uncomfortable . . . things like cultural differences, emotions, past experiences, age. If you can increase your ability in at least this one area—that is, choosing the right words, the right tone, the right message—you and your parents will have one less thing to worry about and you can be free to build relationships.

Choosing the right words, the right tone and the right message seems so simple. It's really just talking, right? Something we do every single day, all day long. Most of the time, words come out of our mouths, and we don't even think about them. They're just in the brain and out the lips, almost instantaneously. Really, we usually stop to think about conversations we've had only when we think we've said something offensive, when we've had a particularly emotional exchange, or when we think we said something really clever or handled something well—or just the opposite, when we think of something clever we *could* have said.

The same is true about emails and other written communications. We don't have much time, so we usually don't take much time to finesse our Facebook posts or read over our emails to make sure they make sense, convey the right tone, and are grammatically correct.

That's okay in our everyday lives. No one wants to spend all their time replaying conversations or rereading emails. But in our work life,



In our work life, every exchange we have with our parents and caregivers is like gold, a precious opportunity to build a relationship that can make a difference in the life of a child.

every exchange we have with our parents and caregivers is like gold, a precious opportunity to build a relationship that can make a difference in the life of a child.

Okay, that's very touchy-feely, and let's face it, in the field of education, many educators can be a little bit pragmatic or "data driven." So let's look at more of the black and white around why it's so important to communicate in an understandable way.

PARENTS HAVE INFORMATION WE NEED

When students walk into our classrooms, they don't come in as blank slates, ready to be filled up with knowledge. They have histories. They have strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and attitudes and personalities, all of which can factor into how successful students will be in our classrooms. And who better to tell us about those things than parents? Parents are truly the keepers of the knowledge that can help their children be successful.

In many ways, we need to become the student and learn from them.

Parents Are the Experts When It Comes to Their Children

When I give presentations, I often say, "I'm not an expert in algebra, but I am an expert in Benjamin Weinzapfel." All of our parents are experts, but we don't always look at them that way. Talking with them and, more importantly, listening to them can help us understand the children we're trying to teach. In Benjamin's case, I've known that kid since before he was born, and I can tell you, when it comes to motivating him, "free dress" isn't going to cut it. But an extra trip to the library will. That's the kind of information that you, as an educator, need about a child. It's information that will make your job easier and make you more successful at keeping Benjamin motivated.

Sometimes the information is simple. Teachers are always surprised when I share that Benjamin is a twin, and that he and his sister, Eleanor, are a full year younger than most of their classmates. You can literally see the "that explains it" look on the teachers' faces.

Other times, the information is a little more complex and sensitive. I spoke with a parent once who called to tell me her daughter had not passed the statewide reading assessment. The parent told me she didn't know how to tell her daughter that she didn't pass. You see her daughter always appeared to be self-confident in class, but in reality, the little girl struggled with self-esteem issues.