



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 8: Effective School Communication

Guest: Maria Christiansen

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Every parent who sends a child to school deals with appropriate ways to communicate effectively with the school. We talk about parent conferences, how to respond when things aren't going well, and other tips for getting started on the right foot.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to The Growing Brain podcast. Our guest today is Maria Christiansen. Maria is the director of early childhood education at Momentous Institute, and she works with our teachers and our youngest students at Momentous School. I'm so excited Maria's here today because we're talking about a very important topic, which is parent school communication. So that's... any parent who sends their child to school is going to have to navigate this world of how to communicate appropriately with the school. So that's what we're going to talk about today. So thank you, Maria, for being here.*

Maria Thank you.

Maureen *Let's start by just talking globally about expectations for parents around school communication. What do you think is reasonable for a parent to expect that their child's school communicate?*

Maria I think reasonably a school is going to, uh, make sure that a parent understands what their expectations are for students. Not only in the classroom, but, uh, in the school itself. And I believe the school will be able to communicate any updates to the classroom, that might be through teacher communication or from the school itself through newsletters. Um, many times information is given to parents at the beginning of the year for through a family handbook. So global expectations like that.

Maureen *And, and the reason I started with that question is because I want to get out what are some things that maybe would be an unreasonable expectation, just to avoid disappointment.*

- Maria Okay. So, um, perhaps like if something happens in during a certain part of the day, um, an unreasonable expectation would be for you to know when someone needed to have an experience outside the classroom or maybe if something changed in the lunch schedule or, uh, they missed out on a certain event that day or any reason, those are things that would be handled at the school and not necessarily communicated to families.
- Maureen *Great. Yeah, that makes sense. So let's, let's talk about this through the lens of a school year. So let's say we're going into the start of a school year. What advice would you give parents to sort of get started on the right foot with their child's teacher and with the school in general?*
- Maria Sure. So I think getting, uh, off on the right foot is critical. Uh, I think showing up for any events that are planned at the beginning of the school year, that allow time for a child to get acclimated to the school and the classroom are important, really participating in anything that's being offered by the school, uh, particularly at the beginning is, is, is crucial.
- Um, that communication can begin right there with a classroom teacher with the school itself, also accessing the resources that the school provides, whether that's, um, through any kind of text messaging system that they have for communication with families. Again, whether it's referencing a student or family handbook, accessing the, the committee means that are, that are laid out for the family within the systems that are there.
- Maureen *So I'm assuming there are some things that parents do that are, I guess, less effective ways of communicating with the school than others. So can you tell us about some examples of things you've seen or heard about that you don't recommend parents do?*
- Maria So I think maybe just trying to get that information to the school or the teacher through other means that that aren't direct. Um, so you've got, um, someone else's child is reporting to a classroom teacher that someone is going to be out that day and they need information, um, that's happening in the classroom...
- Maureen *You mean using another child as a messenger... is that what you're saying?*
- Maria Yeah, that's probably not... and we have seen that. Um, I would say also just making sure that you know, which person to contact in the school personnel around certain, um, issues. So if you're wondering about a schedule change, you're not going to check with the person that's working, um, in the cafeteria regarding that. So knowing who to contact.
- Maureen *Yeah. That makes total sense. Let's talk about times when a child really needs their parent to advocate for them at school. Let's just, for example, let's say a child is struggling academically with a particular subject. Um, how would you recommend that a parent handle that?*

Maria So if you're realizing yourself as a child is struggling, I think in your wondering about those struggles, I think the first thing is to check in with the teacher. I think that direct communication with teachers about your concerns is the place to start because you may have a misconception around that, um, based on the work that you're seeing, that your child is bringing home, or perhaps some homework that they're working on, they're really, I think, trying to confirm for yourself is that truly a struggle or not. And then from there finding out what are some systems that are in place within the school that might be there to support your child. So that's something that a teacher should be able to answer.

Maureen *And let's give another example, um, because I think it might have a different answer, which is, let's say your child is having a conflict with another student. And so maybe this is a bullying situation or just a relationship, peer conflict of any kind. How would you recommend parents approach those kinds of situations?*

Maria Sure. So I think this is a great place for partnership. This is the place where parents are going to, of course, listen to their child's concern. They're going to let them know that they're there for them and they're ready to, uh, support them. And then that next step is talking to the teacher. So getting some information to clarify the situation from the teacher and then finding how they can work together for a solution. Um, I'm thinking about an incident when maybe a child has bit another child right in the classroom. And so how can we work through that together to come up with a plan to support the child? Not only the one who has been the victim then also at the biter. Um, and of course that changes as children get older, you're not going to be rushing up to the school to, um, intervene at the school level. And perhaps, um, as your children get older, but you're helping them at home learn some skills that they can advocate for themselves at school.

Maureen *Right. Yeah. That makes sense. Let's talk about teachers for, for a minute. I'm sure there are parents listening who've had their child in a class with a teacher who they just, frankly, don't like for some reason, maybe that teacher is not the right fit for their child's personality, or they just don't think that teacher is strong academically, you know, pushing their kids academically or whatever reason, there can be lots of reasons why parents may be don't love the classroom teacher that their child's been placed with. What are some things parents should consider in this type of situation?*

Maria And so I think first and foremost, you want to ask yourself if the child is safe, right? So are they safe emotionally? Are they safe physically? And if you can answer yes to those questions, then the next step is, you know, how, how far do you want to push, um, in, in your pushback, uh, regarding the, the student's placement. I see this though, even just from a personal perspective, of course, of having two children that have gone through, um, public school and um, we've definitely ran into this along the way, uh, is that, you know, it, uh, it also is a place for learning and to lean into the learning aspect of it with you and your family. Um, I think that it's really important not to sabotage the relationship that your family has with the school and, and with education in general.

If you keep the stance, that school is there for the purpose of learning and growing, um, and you are going to support your child in that process as well. I think that's a different

way to look at it rather than thinking that you are there to advocate for your child to be placed in a different classroom or make demands upon the school that later on, could in fact have other consequences, uh, towards your, your child.

Maureen *So what does that learning look like? How do you kind of use an experience with a teacher you don't like to kind of grow that into a learning experience?*

Maria So a lot of talk at home afterwards, processing certain situations. Asking lots of questions, things like, you know, why do you think that might've happened? What do you think might be going on? Um, using that opportunity to grow. I think out some of what the child's experiencing at a bigger level, so that their perspective taking is something that is initiated at home, but also when they're back at school. So. I think that it's an opportunity to offer them skills as well, to deal with that. Uh, and perhaps even the, the opportunity to set up a way for them, not only in the moment to deal with some things, but also when they're with you, you know, when they're away from you and then when they're with you. So something like a journal where they're able to write down an experience that's, you know, that perhaps wasn't ideal for them in the classroom, and then you all can talk about it later.

Maureen *I like what you're saying, because I think it's tempting for us as parents to just sort of swoop in and fix the things that are challenges for kids. You know, it's so easy for me to say, Ooh, don't like the teacher, I'mma request that my kid gets a different teacher, you know? Um, but what you're saying is so important and we have to remember that so much of their experiences as children is that learning and growing through challenges.*

Maria Sure. And you don't want to deny, you know, the child that experience either to grow. Um, when things are, you know, don't feel perfect all the time.

Maureen *I heard a term the other day and you may be familiar with it. It's called lawnmower parenting. It's this idea of plowing through all the obstacles in front of your child so that they have a smooth path and that's what you're talking about here.*

Maria Exactly, exactly. Yeah. So it's that idea, um, that they are not going to struggle. You're not going to offer them that opportunity to struggle at all. And you're there at every turn to take away the barriers. Um, And, you know, in a lower elementary example might be that a child forgets their backpack, uh, and in the car and they don't have the things that they need for that day. And there are consequences that will happen perhaps in classrooms or around that. And so you rush to school to take the backpack, you know, after you've reminded the child several times, you know, to take, remember their backpack. So that's one example of that, or perhaps they've misplaced their gym bag and they don't have it for the next day and you reminded them and then they don't have it, but you again, provide that for them in the moment.

Maureen *Right. So going back to that first question, I just want to clarify that if your answer is about safety, emotional or physical safety, if the answer to that is no, your child is not safe, then of course you have a different answer.*

- Maria Absolutely. And I think that's the time when you are advocating at the school level and you know, for your child. And, and again, I think with caution that you want to continue the relationship with the school, as one, as a partnership. And that your child see that as the way you are approaching the school, you're looking for a solution. You're not demanding your way be the only way to resolve the problem.
- Maureen *Yeah, that's great. And I think where that can really come up is in parent teacher conferences, which is really the primary time that one parent gets to sit down with the teacher in just the two of them or, you know, two parents and one teacher, um, in, in a small conversation, that's just about their child. There's not a lot of opportunities like that during the year. So parent teacher conferences kind of become that moment. And so what advice do you have going into those conferences?*
- Maria Yeah, so I think one of the pieces that I would add is just that posture again, of partnership. When you show up at the parent teacher conference, your assumption is, is that you're there to provide that teacher with information about your child, but they too are there to provide you with information about your child's learning and how you all can partner together for the success and the learning goals for your child.
- Maureen *We talked about lawnmower parents. There's another one that we've all heard of, which is helicopter parenting. We all know about that. And it's tricky because I think it's hard to find the line between being engaged in your children and being in supportive and helping them, and then hovering over them and kind of being overly involved. So we don't want to be absent, right. We don't want to say like, oh my kids got it and we want to be advocates, but we don't, but they need to learn how to do some of that themselves too, especially as they grow older. So what considerations do you have for parents who are kind of trying to find that line?*
- Maria Yeah, so I just think, again, it's back to that. Don't rob them of the experience that they can have and learn and grow in the moment, if, especially if a child is taking any kind of initiative around it. So it can be as simple initiative around - I can take the things out of my backpack and put them in my cubby. You don't need to stand here with me and watch me do it, or encourage me to do it or tell me to do it. I can do it.
- Maureen *One thing this is making me think of is any two adults are not going to act the exact same way with a child. And just as a sort of silly example, um, when my kids were babies, I would know, I liked my babies to wear these certain clothes in this certain way. And my husband would put the baby in clothes that didn't match, right. And who cares? Because it's not hurting the baby. But he and I would just parent slightly differently on things that were really inconsequential. And sometimes when it comes to teachers, you say that is not how I would do it. And instead of saying, but that's okay, because the way they're doing it is it's still safe. It's still fine. It's just different from me. We get into this sort of us versus them place where we say, but this is how we do things in my and you're doing it differently. And instead of kind of having that, that grace of saying, we, we both are adults who interact differently with children and they're both fine options, we kind of get into this us versus them place.*

- Maria Yeah. And I think that's kind of the theme of what we've, we've been talking about in terms of communication, right, with the school and, and even with our children, is that we want it to feel like a partnership and we don't want to put ourselves or our children in situations where the outcome becomes it's us as a family against the school, against the teacher, against what their policy is. We want to accept the fact that there may be differences in our understandings of what is best, but we can live with what is there in, in, in the classroom or what the teacher is advocating for, what the teacher requires. And we're going to meet that expectation because we want to be part of this school. And we, we, we value the education here. It might not be exactly the way we, the policy might not be what we exactly want, but we can do this.
- Maureen And, and, and just to pull us out of some of this sort of dark places we've gone, um, there's so many positive things with that reframing too. There's so many things that my kids' teachers have done that are so cool and fun and creative and things I never would have. Of, and even in the same example, there's things my husband does with the kids that I'm like, oh, I don't do that, and that's awesome. You know, so there's, so there's so much benefit if we, if we can accept that we're all partnering together around our kids and it's going to look different, in some ways it might feel not great and in some ways it's so cool that you bring in new perspectives.
- Maria Right. And just being open to those opportunities, I think is part of it because we are an example then as adults for our children, so that as they grow, they become more open to other opportunities.
- Maureen Well, this has been such an interesting conversation. I'm so grateful to you because I know this is one that a lot of parents just have so many questions about and it can be hard as parents to trust our children in the hands of other people. So I think that's why a lot of questions come up here.
- Maria Absolutely. Yeah, it is. It is hard to trust sometimes, but I think when, you know, your child is growing and learning and you have confidence in their abilities, that comes through in your approach, uh, to, towards the school.
- Maureen And one thing I've been working on just in all areas of my life is this idea of assuming positive intent. So just assuming that everyone is acting with the best interest, unless I've have some reason to believe otherwise, and going into any setting with that mindset has totally shifted the way I show up in places where I might accidentally be judging before I...
- Maria Absolutely. Yeah. And I think it, that's a great posture to take as a parent when you're ready to communicate with the school or whether it's the teacher is, you know, maybe you're there just to gain clarification, but that there is that positive presupposition.
- Maureen Exactly. So thank you so much, Maria, for this conversation. I really enjoyed it.
- Maria I did, too. Thank you.

Thank you for joining us for The Growing Brain podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this discussion. Please be sure to subscribe for future episodes and to learn more about us and access additional resources and content, please visit us online at momentousinstitute.org.