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Parents Are From Mars, Teachers Are From Venus

By Bill Ferriter



I had a great idea the other day. I figure that if someone can make millions by writing a book attempting to explain the complex inner workings of the relationship between men and women, I can make a mint trying to explain the equally complex relationship between parents and teachers. Right?

So I wandered over to the Self-Help section of the local bookstore and spent a few minutes browsing through the classic *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* looking for ideas. The first thing I noticed was the book's subtitle:

A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships.

How perfect is that?! Teachers and parents across America will flock to the shelves if I can somehow help them to "get what they want" out of one another, right? And isn't communication the hardest part of the school-child relationship that we share?

I've never met a teacher who hasn't been mystified by the actions of a parent at least once a year, and I'm pretty sure that parents can say the same about teachers. Let's face it: We're two of the most complicated groups of people to understand—and for \$29.95, I'm willing to be your guide!

*As part of a new partnership, teachermagazine.org publishes this regular column by members of the **Teacher Leaders Network**, a professional community of accomplished educators dedicated to sharing ideas and expanding the influence of teachers.*

After browsing witty chapter titles like "Men Are Like Rubberbands," and "Women are Like Waves," I found what is going to be the title of the first chapter in my book: "Scoring Points With the Opposite Group."

My publisher—i.e., the guy down the hall with the only working printer in his room—tells me I should share some of my ideas here to "prime the marketplace." He seems to believe that my book will spread like wildfire through a word-of-mouth, grassroots buying campaign after y'all get a taste of what I've got to offer. So here's an early draft of the key ideas in my first chapter.

Scoring Points with Parents (Target Audience: Teachers)

Parents rarely intend to be the red-eyed, flame-breathing creatures that you see in your nightmares. There are several things you can do as a teacher if you are hoping to have a positive working relationship with the parents of your students. Begin by:

- *Recognizing that parents are valuable partners.* Do you realize how much collective knowledge parents have about their children? They have spent years nurturing and supporting the students that you've sometimes just met! Yet teachers often overlook parents during the course of the school year. Make an attempt to involve parents in meaningful ways in the education of their children. Ask for their thoughts and advice. Empower them to help make important decisions. Recognize them as experts and treat them as respected equals. Not only will you score points, you'll learn valuable information that will help you to do your job better.
- *Communicating early and often.* All parents are passionate about their children. They want to know what their strengths and weaknesses are. They want to know what is being learned in class and what assignments need to be completed. They want to know how to extend and enrich learning at home, yet often the only source of information is a cryptic conversation with a distracted twelve-year-old—or worse yet, picking through the pile of papers in the bottom of a backpack. (It's grungy down there!) Work diligently to communicate with the parents of your students in meaningful ways. Send e-mails, create Web sites, and host parent nights. Make phone calls—to express concerns and celebrate successes—and you'll surely score points with parents.
- *Admitting your mistakes.* Teachers make thousands of split-second decisions every single day. Who was pushing in the lunch line? Was a child being honest? Did students have enough time to complete their tests? Were the directions for assignments clear? Was I too harsh? There will be times when you make the wrong decision—after all, you're human and this job is hard! There is nothing more damaging to your relationship with parents than to deny this reality. When you make a mistake, apologize and move on. You'll retain the trust of your parents and your own integrity at the same time.

Scoring Points with Teachers (Target Audience: Parents)

Teachers are rarely the incompetent, bumbling scatterbrains that you see in your nightmares. There are several things that you can do as a parent if you are hoping to have a positive working experience with the teachers of your children. Begin by:

- *Recognizing that teachers are professionals.* The old adage, "Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach," is not only insulting—it is inaccurate. Teachers are generally highly trained professionals with a deep understanding of the content they teach and the instructional methods to make that content approachable for students of different ability levels. While you may not always

understand the decisions made by teachers, in the vast majority of cases you can trust their training and experience. You'll score points with your child's teacher by providing him or her the professional respect that you expect to be given in your workplace.

- *Giving your child's teacher the benefit of the doubt.* There are going to be times each year that your child comes home distraught over the actions of a teacher. In any setting where human beings are together for six hours a day, there are bound to be disagreements. When this happens, begin by giving your child's teacher the benefit of the doubt! Make an appointment to hear what happened from the teacher's perspective. You'll sometimes find that your child's version of events was not a "complete disclosure" of the situation, and together you can work out a set of next steps to keep future misunderstandings from happening.

- *Saying thank you.* Teaching is demanding. Imagine spending hour after hour alone in a room with 20 to 30 children who all have different academic, social, and emotional needs. And then imagine working in those conditions year after year with little recognition or praise. Like any profession, the critics of education are often louder than the supporters—and teachers take these criticisms to heart. It can be terribly discouraging to work long hours with little pay in difficult conditions and then to hear only about failures. Take a few minutes each month to thank your child's teacher for something that he or she has done. Your kindness will remind teachers that their efforts are appreciated—and score you serious points!

So, what do you think? Does my book have potential? Should I quit now and make a bid for a late afternoon talk show on national television? Watch out, Oprah, here I come!

Even if I don't make it big, I hope some of my ideas make sense to parents and to teachers. Anything that I can do to improve the parent/teacher relationship is worthwhile, I figure. After all, we're counting on each other, aren't we?

Actually, I'm wrong—it's the children in our schools who are counting on us!