

# Pointers for Directors ...

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## Effective Tools to Manage and Utilize Parents

What about the parents? Well, as the saying goes, “You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them”. Actually, the roles parents play in today’s world of education is vital. There are numerous horror stories about parents who try to control what teachers do and complain at the drop of a hat to the principal and other top administrators. When planning a trip with the team, the standing joke is “Can I just take the students and leave the parents at home” or “I can deal with the kids just fine, it is the parents that drive me crazy”. For all the bother, however, parents are still your biggest asset and should be your biggest ally.

The answer lies in the education process that the parents undergo. Remember, this is a new role for them and proper guidance and structure will allow them to be helpful and successful. What follows are many suggestions of how to conduct parent orientation meeting, get them involved, organize and operate a good booster program, and discussions about the most frequent sources of conflict between the parents and the director. Where did we get our information? In addition to independent research, M. A. Dance and Marching Auxiliaries recently sent a survey to several directors around the nation. What better way to examine the aspect of dealing with parents than going right to the source, **YOU, THE DIRECTORS!**

What follows is a “Reader’s Digest” version of the responses we received. First of all, it was a unanimous feeling that *communicating early and often with your team parents will pay big dividends*. Without exception, absolutely every director reiterated the importance of providing parents with written copies of all team rules, regulations, yearly calendars, tryout information, uniform information, contest information, trips, travel forms, and the list is endless. *Probably the best advice is to start off on the right foot* by ensuring that your new team parents are quickly integrated into the program and are given the necessary tools and information to be successful. Always welcome parental involvement and support. It is important to have the parents as committed as the team members. Also, it was strongly advised in numerous responses that you should keep your principal informed, even of “just possible” problems.

In our “Meet the Parents: Do’s and Don’ts Survey,” we asked directors to look back over the years and comment about the specific things they did right and the decisions they regret. This roundtable discussion should serve to enlighten all directors for future encounters with parents. Again, thanks to the many directors who participated in this survey. Your insight and thoughts were invaluable and will be extremely beneficial to new directors and even to those “seasoned” ones still not completely satisfied or comfortable with all of the procedures they have in place. The following “phrases” were posed for comment and here are the best responses in a collected summary form:

### *1. The scheduled parent conference*

#### ☺ **Do’s:**

Always go in prepared with as much information and documentation as possible. Research the issues first. Clear your response/consequences with your principal to avoid administrators caught off guard. If possible, even have an administrator present during the meeting. Be friendly and available. Go into the meeting with the attitude that it is going to be a positive experience. Always be respectful. Remember to ask what the parent(s) would like to see come out of the meeting. Take notes and have a copy of your constitution and bylaws with you. Try to listen more than talk. Thank the parents for caring enough to schedule a conference and reassure them that you have their child’s best interest at heart. Be aware of the conference setting. Make sure it is located in a setting that is free from distractions and eavesdropping. You, the director, should determine your seating position so that you can easily read body language to see if it matches what they are saying. Always offer an appeal process in the event that a parent is displeased with the outcome of the conference. Afterwards, make a detailed report of the conference and turn it in to your principal.

#### ☹ **Don’ts:**

Go into the scheduled conference unprepared. If not prepared, table the questions and get back to parents quickly. Two days is absolutely the maximum time. Try not to be too formal to improve the chances of making a comfortable situation for everyone. Never raise YOUR voice. These are words of wisdom from a very experienced principal—the louder someone gets, the quieter you should get. If they still will not listen, get out a piece of paper and pencil and begin writing and totally stop talking. When you start writing down what someone is saying, they start thinking about the commitment of the pen and the paper! Refuse to discuss children with parents other than their own.



## 2. The unscheduled parent confrontation

### ☺ Do's:

Be cool and calm even though the parent may be furious with you! Try to put the parent off by asking him/her to schedule an appointment so you may become prepared and inform an administrator, if necessary. You might use the line, "I feel that it would be better to schedule a meeting to discuss this at a later time when there is less emotion involved." *\*\*If a parent is yelling or being confrontational, simply raise your hand to about chest level and ever so slightly close the palm as if to give a "stop sign." This helps to calm the other party. Psychiatrists recognize that simple hand gesture as the international sign for stop, and a person who is yelling will often settle down when that hand gesture is accompanied by a calm voice and a smile.* In your FIRST orientation meeting, stress that is your policy not to meet without a scheduled appointment.

### ⊗ Don'ts:

Never say to the parent that you agree or think he or she is right. Instead, say that you understand that they are upset and you will talk to an administrator to correct the situation in the fairest way. Never become defensive. Do not let a parent "ruffle your feathers" especially in front of your team. Never find yourself alone with a parent that you feel might become out of control.

## 3. Team tryouts

### ☺ Do's:

Have an administrator present at all times. Explain the entire process at a mandatory parent meeting BEFORE students audition. Hand out a copy of your team's constitution and rules and have students and parents sign an agreement to abide by these rules and regulations before allowing them to tryout. Make sure to include a complete listing of the financial obligations by becoming a member of the team such as camp fees, contest fees, contest costumes, field uniforms, etc. Attach a sample score sheet to the information distributed to the candidates auditioning and their parents. Always have the parents complete a medical release form for their son or daughter containing basic health information and allergies. Hold team tryouts when there is a long weekend or break following to help minimize the pain and aftermath resulting from students who do pass the audition. Make sure that your judges write plenty of comments so that, in case of a challenge, you can justify the results. Be sure to have your judges sign their score sheets and initial any erasures.

### ⊗ Don'ts:

Never promise the number of team members that will be selected to avoid getting into a situation that could have been avoided. Avoid allowing parents to be present at any time during tryouts or in the physical building. This makes the tryout process more enjoyable for the director and minimizes hassles and possible confrontations. Do not make the tryout routine so easy that you cannot differentiate between the skill levels of the candidates. Do not give the candidates too much time to work on the audition routine so that neither you nor your judges can make distinctions between the candidates' performance. Never allow graduating team members, managers, or other students to sit near the judges during the tryout and NEVER allow them to participate in any phase of the scoring calculations.

## 4. Officer tryouts

### ☺ Do's:

As with the team tryouts, make sure to hold a mandatory meeting with parents and candidates distributing all information, expenses, the officer selection process, and sample score sheets. Make sure that the team vote is very important part of the selection process. Do require the girls to choreograph and perform their own solo. Have an interview with the judges a major part of the selection. Make sure to devise score sheets that will produce the types of officers needed by your team. Make sure that your judges write plenty of comments in case their decisions are challenged. List the major credentials of your judges on the audition forms for officers to discourage challenges.

### ⊗ Don'ts:

Do not promise the number of officers that will be selected. Give a range to allow for flexibility in numbers from year to year. Never conduct an officer audition without the presence of an administrator. Never allow your graduating officers to remain in the room while the judges, director, and administrator are conducting a discussion.



## **5. Parent performance routines**

### **☺ Do's:**

This is a wonderful opportunity to get the parents involved, especially in the Spring Show. Always plan these performances well in advance with scheduled performance dates and times. Try to be as flexible with practices as possible but stress the necessity of rehearsing for a good performance. Provide morning coffee and donuts for the men. Give the steps of the routine fun names so they can remember them. Have all information printed for them. Be sure to "make over" them during the rehearsals and you will have no problem in the future when they become the hit of the show.

### **☹ Don'ts:**

Do not force parents to participate in performances; sometimes, they just love to watch. If you elect to have a parent performance, NEVER change the routine; they cannot handle the changes like your team members.

## **6. Chaperoning trips...summer camps, away games, competitions...**

### **☺ Do's:**

Document the duties and expectations of a chaperone before accepting volunteers. Always meet with assigned chaperones prior to the trip and to review the itinerary and importance of adhering to the time schedule. Emphasize to parents that you, the director, are the agent of the school and ultimately responsible for the group. Give chaperones the task of keeping the permission slips and medical release forms for all of the students. As a minimum, consider a 1:8 ratio of chaperones to students. If possible, utilize your boosters to research potential restaurants and hotels for the trip and have them submit their suggestion to you for final approval. Have the chaperones sign an agreement explaining the rules, regulations and expectations of the administration and the director.

### **☹ Don'ts:**

Never accept parents whose agenda is to vacation rather than chaperone. Never allow chaperones the authority to excuse team members from following the itinerary of the trip without expressed approval from the director. If possible, do not always use the same parents as chaperones even though they are easier to work with than others.

## **7. Booster Clubs**

### **☺ Do's:**

Have a constitution and set of bylaws for the Booster Club that are approved by the administration and school board. Be prepared. Always bring as much information and documentation to your meetings as possible (calendars, account information, handouts given to the girls, constitution and bylaws) so parents feel included. Distribute a personal resume at the first booster club meeting to dissuade any challenges of your credentials and decisions. Ensure that boosters understand and are constantly reminded that their role is a support system to help the director and team. Keep some parents busy with tasks you do not need to have control over (bringing snacks to the team during camp, buying drinks, sewing costumes/accessories, decorations for spring show). Encourage current and future parent participation with positive feedback and recognition. Awards, such as "Parent of the Year", "Head Prop Dad", and "Head Cheerleader", are popular examples of merit that are a successful way of acknowledging parent involvement. (Sample certificate included)

### **☹ Don'ts:**

Never let booster club meetings become a gripe session by having a specific agenda and handouts reinforcing pertinent information. Do not allow parents to usurp your role as the primary decision maker for the team. Never miss a booster meeting and never allow a meeting to be held unless you are there.

## **8. Behavior and academic problems occurring outside of your organization**

### **☺ Do's:**

Always communicate with the parents regarding problems outside of your organization in an expeditious and positive manner. You might approach the parent by saying, "I need your assistance and wonder if you can give me some advice about..." If possible, consult with the student's guidance counselor and teachers to get an accurate picture of the problem and a plan of action to resolve it. Try to create an open line of communication with the faculty. E-mail them the first week of school with a list of your team and encourage them to keep you updated should any concerns arise. Consider adopting an "honor code" for your team that allows you to address academic and behavioral violations with consistency.



⊗ **Don'ts:**

Never ignore problems with behavior or academics outside of your team. Do not find yourself without a uniform procedure in place that addresses such problems. Never ignore warning signs of problems; your intuition is usually correct.

**9. Behavior and academic problems occurring within the organization**

☺ **Do's:**

Decide on some equitable form of handling these problems—demerit system, 3 strikes and you're out system, etc. The 3 strikes are: first time - *warning*, second time- *parent conference*, and third time- *dismissal*. Devise a special form for documenting problems with student name, date of offense, type of offense, how offense was handled. Schedule both student and parent conferences in a timely manner to handle any offenses. Always be fair and consistent with enforcing the rules of your organization. Above all, always handle situations immediately and make sure that each team member has a written copy of the policies and understands the consequences of breaking the rules. Form an executive council made up of director, officers, and an elected representative from each class. Disciplinary offenders should go before the council for discipline. Governing themselves makes the team value following the rules even more.

⊗ **Don'ts:**

Never be inconsistent and make exceptions, black and white is best. Do not put off handling the problem with the student and parents, if necessary. Avoidance is not the solution.

**10. Keeping parents informed of events**

☺ **Do's:**

Form an E-mail group of parent and student e-mail addresses for instant communication. Categorize your e-mail addresses in a team folder, parent folder, officer folder, squad leader folder and booster club officer folder. Distribute a weekly or monthly calendar to the students and e-mail copies of calendars to parents. Create an "overview annual calendar" showing practices, performance appearances, fundraisers, meetings, contest dates, camp dates, etc. Make sure everyone realizes this is a tentative calendar subject to necessary changes. Always explain the "chain of command" procedure for contacting people with questions (i.e. line members contact officers or captain, then officers contact director, if necessary). Keep a folder of all communications mailed, e-mailed or personally distributed to team members and parents.

⊗ **Don'ts:**

Do not keep the parents in the dark; you want them to be aware of as much as possible to avoid scheduling conflicts. Do not depend upon your team members to verbally communicate important information. Do not hastily put together a calendar of events and then be confronted with multiple changes.

**11. Fundraising**

An entire section with a proposed new fundraiser has been included in the director book. All information regarding parents and fundraisers will be presented in that section.

*\*DanceAssistant.com was suggested as a source to contact for workshops on directors working with parents.*

