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## **Finding Common Ground**

*By Barbara Kohm*

Teachers and child development experts worry that many of today's parents are too eager to solve their children's problems and too quick to blame schools when they think something is wrong. In the press and in private conversations they call them "helicopter parents" because they always seem to be "hovering" around their children.

The parents, however, see things differently. They want their children to be confident and successful and they're willing to do whatever it takes to achieve these goals. Sometimes they see teachers as partners and sometimes they see them as obstacles to overcome.

These different viewpoints can force parents and teachers into adversarial positions or they can be used to forge a productive partnership. Such a partnership requires respect for different perspectives and the willingness to focus on common goals.

Teachers and parents bring different expertise to discussions of a child's education. Parents know their individual child better than teachers. They've been carefully observing his/her development from the moment of birth, sometimes before. Teachers, on the other hand, have more experience with a particular developmental level of students. They know a lot about six, twelve, or sixteen year-olds, how students at this age respond to the challenges of school, and how best to help them become strong, independent learners.

It's at the intersection of these two areas of expertise that the best decisions are made. This may not be easy. Both parents and teachers care deeply about the children in their care, and it's easy to become emotional and self-righteous about one's own perspective.

However, they can usually reach agreement on ultimate goals for a child's education. Both want students to become strong, independent learners with the skills and knowledge they need to make productive decisions for their lives and become positive, contributing community members.

It's important to first establish common goals. Then to use both parent and teacher information to find solutions to problems that move children towards these goals. One way to do this is to ask, "What will the student learn if we choose one option or another?"

For example, if parents and teachers agree on a long term goal of helping a student develop confidence in his ability to find solutions to problems when he "gets stuck," they can evaluate the various options available to them on the basis of what he is likely to learn if 1) parents and/or teachers solve the problem for him, 2) if parents and/or teachers leave him on his own with no extra help, or 3) if parents and/or teachers help him generate and evaluate various options and choose the one he thinks is most likely to help him. If the first option doesn't work, parents and teachers can help him build resilience by encouraging him to try another option.

Of course, the best option for any particular child will depend on her age, experience and history. Any of these options might be the best choice at a particular time in particular circumstances. The better a parent knows her child and the better a teacher understands a student learning at a particular developmental level, the better the options will be.

Parents should ask themselves:

- What are my long-term goals for my child?
- What do I know about how my child has acted in similar situations?
- What is the teacher telling me about her experience with 6, 10, or 15 year-old students in similar circumstances?

Teachers should ask themselves:

- What are my long-term goals for this student?
- What do I know about how 6, 10, or 15 year olds act in similar situations?
- What is the parent telling me about his experience with his child in similar circumstances?

They should then ask, "What is a student likely to learn if we select one option or another?"

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