

Music Parents

We Couldn't Do Without Them!

By Marcia Neel

One of the greatest joys of being a music educator is getting to meet so many wonderful parents — many of whom eventually become close friends. They genuinely care about the success of their children and are “at the ready” whenever you call to help them do just that. As a beginning teacher, I was actually afraid of parents, thinking that they would be judgmental and always on the offensive when it came to their children, thus placing me on the defensive side of parent relationships. Over the years, I’ve had a few of those “uncomfortable” experiences, but those situations were so minimal compared to the numbers of wonderful relationships that were eventually developed through our common interest — their children.

I finally turned the corner on the fear factor when my mentor, Dorothy Straub, helped me to understand that parents can really be our greatest allies for that very reason — they care so deeply about the success of their children. Once I grasped her very wise global view, it not only changed how I felt about parents, but how I chose to work with them. They became my partners and team members. Those relationships made everything easier because I felt completely supported. There was a whole new group of people to bounce ideas off of and even share concerns with from time to time and the one thing I could always count on was their honesty. That alone equipped me with a great deal of confidence, which really helped me to grow as a music educator.

The most crucial factor in working with parents, as is the case with all of our constituencies, is communication. When parents know what is expected of their children, there are no surprises — parents HATE surprises (who doesn’t,) so it’s important to set up a communication mechanism. In the old days, we sent letters home with the students and in the case of needing more immediate contact, we had phone trees — remember those? Now, we can rely on all sorts of social media, apps, and texting for getting information out to the families of our students. The key is to set up your communication mechanism and to make it easy for parents to stay informed.

If you don’t have one already, create a website and post on it regularly. At the beginning of the year, provide parents with a hard copy of your handbook then post it on your website. You want to be sure that they understand your expectations. There are a number of handbooks posted online and you could adapt any number of them to your situation. One of the most important elements of the handbook is your grading system. Points

seem to work best. Never take points away from students — it’s much more of a positive approach to add points for daily participation, at-home practice and concert participation.

Other items to post on your website might include completed student projects (with appropriate permission, of course), photos of the students/music parents/administrators/directors, etc., performance videos and various announcements. The point is to make the site THE PLACE to go for information about the program.

Apart from the communication strategies, it’s important to remember that music offers parents a way to become uniquely involved with their children in a positive environment. Many will choose to help because they come to understand that “it takes a village” to create a high-level music program and, in fact, they actually enjoy being a part of something that is considered truly special in the lives of their children. Once this happens, the teacher-parent relationship deepens and lasting friendships are often formed.

These wonderful people can help their children in a variety of ways. All we have to do is guide the way, so I thought it may be helpful to share some ideas that might be worth trying in your particular situation. Keep in mind that a number of these will also result in the retention of your students.

New music parents do not know what “normal” is. Help them to help their beginning music student at home by recommending the following:

- **Set up an appropriate space** and time for daily practice.
- **Purchase a “cool” music stand** and light fixture to be used while practicing.
- **Listen to practice sessions** a couple of times each week and offer positive comments like, “you’re doing so well” or “I’m so happy that you’re learning music” or “I can really hear improvement.”
- **Attend a vocal concert** where the child can see a true professional. Sit right down front so that the student can see the performer up close and personal. Arrange to meet the artist after the concert if at all possible.
- **Encourage the child to video** a short selection/exercise to email to grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles, and other family members.
- **Keep motivation at the top of the list** when it comes to working with the beginning student. It’s easy for students to be-

come frustrated with their rate of advancement and it takes fortitude to stick with it. Parents need to understand that they play a huge role in keeping their children engaged in music.

- **Students will increase their depth of knowledge** by having to teach what they have learned to one of the parents. Perhaps one of the parents could sing an exercise or two in the spring concert to demonstrate how much they have learned from their child. The parents will love the experience and the child will get a real kick out of watching the parent perform on their instrument in the “Parent Choir.”

- **Consider getting private lessons** for the child if the interest is shown and if there is sufficient time in the student’s weekly schedule to add the commitment. Parents should be cautious not to overload the child as this could take away the fun of learning to sing.

- **Hold social events** for the child and his or her group of friends from the chorus. Invite them for pizza and to watch movies. It doesn’t take much — the key is that they establish a “group of friends” from the music program. They will enjoy their social time together no matter what the activity is and encouraging these social bonds will also strengthen the ensemble.

- **Attend all of the performances.** It can be very difficult with busy schedules, but this is KEY! Take photos, go out for ice cream afterward and praise the child for his or her accomplishments!

Parents speaking to other parents provides a candid snapshot of the benefits of participating in the music program, so the high school director might consider asking the parents of the high school students to try some of the following ideas to promote retention.

- **Create partnership opportunities** to come together with middle school parents. In the same way that the high school and middle school directors must work together to ensure seamless transitions for the students in the choral music program, parent leaders must do the same. Have your high school parents offer assistance and expertise to the middle school parents to energize their efforts and help ensure success in their activities. Because high school parents have been involved for a longer period, they have a longitudinal view of the program.



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• **Host an "Informational Parent Night"** for the middle school parents. High school parents have their own, distinctive perspective from that of the director(s). Directors will naturally encourage students to continue to participate in the program, but high school parents can provide unique insights for prospective incoming parents.

• **Mentor eighth-grade parents** individually, so that open lines of communication may be established as early as possible. The job of the mentoring parent is to address all concerns of the eighth-grade parent and ensure continued participation of the student.

• **Extend personal invitations** to the eighth-grade parents to attend and bring their students to high school performances. Those parents who already have a choral student in high school in addition to one in middle school can be especially effective in showing the importance of continuing on to the high school program.

• **Offer to host** some of the middle school parent meetings in the high school facility. The more that middle school parents see themselves in the high school, the more obvious it becomes that choral music is a program that continues beyond the immediate middle school level.

• **Prepare a dinner** or potluck supper for the middle school students and their parents just before a joint concert or create a special awards dinner for both middle school and high school students and parents.

The more that the parents become involved, the better they like it and more we come to realize that they are the backbone of our programs. They are our advocates, our assistants, our friends, our worker bees and our financial planners to name a few of the roles they fill. One director commended his "Pit Parents" for their tenacity and can-do attitude. Referring to them as the "unsung heroes," he credits his dedicated parents with finding a way to turn his vision into reality by planning then building all sorts of contraptions, moving sets, hauling equipment and fund-raising to make it all possible.

Several parents also commented on how much it meant to them to be involved in this way. One parent commented that she found it exciting to help the chorus — the kids — then actually get to sit back and enjoy the results of all of the efforts as the students take the field and perform their show.

Another parent commented that instead of "watching" the kids, he actually gets to participate "with" the kids. After five years of doing just that with his own son, he said that he is really sorry to see it come to an end and that he will truly miss his weekly routine.

In October 2015, an article called, "You Might Be a Band Parent If . . ." by Melinda Wentzel, was posted in the *Huffington Post*. It lists ten finishing statements (and subsequent explanations) to the above sentence stem. Most are intended to be comedic but the tenth comment is worth sharing as it sums up the collective feelings not just of marching band parents, but of all music parents.

You witness something special every single day — namely the warmth and acceptance with which the band welcomes one and all into the fold. You recognize the band director and his associates as gifts from above and you look on with wonder as your child blossoms in an atmosphere of positivity and inspiration, ever so grateful that you heard the words, "Mom, I joined the marching band!"



Marcia Neel is president of Music Education Consultants, Inc., and serves as educational advisor to the Music Achievement Council. In this capacity, she provides sessions at state conferences, district in-service days, as well as dealer workshops to share practical success strategies to help educators with the many and varied elements of the successful music education program. Contact marcia@musiceducationconsultants.net to inquire about sessions in your area and visit www.musicachievementcouncil.org for additional complimentary resources.