Tool: Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals are ongoing written conversations between two or more people. They usually are fairly open-ended where writers communicate about topics that interest them. Entries can be any length, ranging from a few words to several paragraphs, and the length may vary from entry to entry, depending on the topic.

Dialogue journals are a tool that many teachers use in the classroom to foster teacher-student and/or student-student communication. Now some teachers are also using dialogue journals outside the classroom to foster parent-teacher communication as well!

The following sample illustrates an exchange between a parent and teacher who agreed to write at least twice during the semester:

Sample Dialogue Journal Entries

September 15
Dear Mrs. Mendez, I look forward to “talking” with you about Maria’s progress this semester in our 10th grade English class. I thought I’d begin by commenting on how impressed I am with Maria’s creative writing. She seems to have a knack for writing rich description and is putting that talent to work in writing a short story. I encourage you to ask her to see a draft of the story. It’s really interesting!
Sincerely, Mr. Marks

September 30
Dear Mr. Marks, Thanks for writing. I took you up on your suggestion and asked Maria if I could read her story. It took some convincing because she said she was embarrassed to let others read it. I’m glad I talked her into it, because her story is amazing. I never had a chance to write like that when I was in school. One question came up for me as I read. When will Maria work on fixing the errors in her story? Is this something I should work on with her?
Sincerely, Mrs. M.

October 17
Dear Mrs. Mendez, I’m glad Maria was willing to share her work with you. After she did that, she was also willing to share her draft with her writing group. I think having the “practice” with you helped build her confidence. I’m glad you asked the question about working on spelling and grammar. I encourage students to get their ideas down on paper first without worrying about errors. This lets them concentrate more fully on the ideas they want to express. Then when they are happy with their revisions, they “edit” their work for “publication.” It’s at this stage that Maria could use your help on fixing her errors. She also can get assistance from her writing group.
Sincerely, Mr. Marks

October 22
Dear Mr. Marks, It was really interesting to watch the progress of Maria’s story. I was so pleased to see that her published copy was free of errors and something she could be proud of. Our family is also proud of her. She shared it at our family get-together last weekend! Sincerely, Mrs. M.
How do I get started with dialogue journals? You will need to assess your own situation in terms of number of students and time required. Having a good plan in place for time management is likely to affect the success of your efforts. Here are some ideas to consider:

Invite a certain number of parents per week or month to exchange entries with you. That way you will not need to devote time to writing to all parents at one particular time. At the secondary level, you might want to try doing this with one class at a time and rotate which classes are involved.

Consider using e-mail for your exchanges to facilitate ease of communication, and to have an easy way to type your responses. But keep in mind that not all parents will have access to e-mail.

Include your students in the exchanges so you are not the only one responding to parents.

Be clear with parents about what they can expect in terms of frequency of response.
How do I help parents understand the purpose and format? Below is a sample letter that you can adapt to your situation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Making Connections: An Invitation to Dialogue Journals!</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dear Parents,</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I'm writing to invite you to participate in an exciting opportunity to exchange our thoughts and ideas about your student’s progress. For many years, teachers have been using &quot;dialogue journals&quot; to promote written communication between teacher-student or student-student. I would like to adapt this idea to parent-teacher communication. Here's how it would work:</td>
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<td>I would like to have at least [number] written exchanges with you [this month/semester/year].</td>
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<tr>
<td>I will begin the journal by sending home with your student a “dialogue journal” (spiral notebook) that will have my first entry to you in it. You will read the entry and make comments back to me. Your comments can be as short or long as you wish. Please think of this as “informal” writing where you do not need to spend a lot of time worrying about handwriting, spelling, punctuation, etc. The purpose is for us to communicate, not to take up extra time!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will respond to you within [time period]. By the end of [month/semester/year] I hope we will have at least [x] number of exchanges.</td>
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If you are interested in participating, please return the slip below. Thanks for your interest!

**Sincerely,**

[your name]  

Parent R.S.V.P.

Your name: ___________________  Student’s name: _________________