

## Shmanners 276: Parent-Teacher Conferences

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**Travis:** [serious tone] I need to talk to you about your child.

**Teresa:** What is it?

**Travis:** It's... *Shmanners*.

[theme music plays]

**Travis:** Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

**Teresa:** And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

**Travis:** And you're listening to *Shmanners*.

**Teresa:** It's extraordinary etiquette...

**Travis:** For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

**Teresa:** Hello, dear.

**Travis:** How are you?

**Teresa:** [inhales] Uhhh, good. Uh, allergies.

**Travis:** That was a loaded "Uh." A loaded "Uh." "Uhhh... good."

**Teresa:** Well, this is the time of year where, uh, the weather pretends to be fall, but it's not really fall yet.

**Travis:** Ah, yes. The seasons change. A young man's fancy turns to sinus drainage.

**Teresa:** [laughs] But it's not— it's not really fall yet, so don't—

**Travis:** Uhhhh... I disagree, madam!

**Teresa:** No. It's not really fall yet.

**Travis:** Perhaps you did not see upon the calendar, but it is September, which— let me check— yep! Is a fall month.

**Teresa:** Yeah, the end of September.

**Travis:** But you would not say December is a fall month, would you?

**Teresa:** Uh... I would say the end of December is winter.

**Travis:** Ohh, no, no, no. See, that— I saw that hesitation in which you said, "I'm not gonna say the first thing that comes to mind, which is 'No, of course not. December's a winter month.'" Come on.

**Teresa:** It doesn't start as a winter month!

**Travis:** Listen. Do you always follow what the calendar says, or do you ever follow your heart? What's your heart say?

**Teresa:** My heart says this is just a pretend s—

**Travis:** Your heart is wrong.

**Teresa:** —a pretend season.

**Travis:** Your heart is wrong, madam. We went and bought fake pumpkins yesterday for fake fall.

**Teresa:** But we live in Ohio! And so we will go—

**Travis:** Uh-huh?

**Teresa:** —back and forth and back and forth between summer and fall for the next month!

**Travis:** All I know is that it is currently 10 AM here, and it is still under 70 degrees. It is fall. It is fall, and you can pry that away from my sweater-wearing, pumpkin spice latte-sipping face.

**Teresa:** [laughs] Alright. You know what else happens—

**Travis:** It's just that summer's— summer's bad, and it's hot and gross.

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** And fall is great, and it's comfy and cozy. Okay. But you know what else happens in fall? Yes.

**Teresa:** Yes. Back to school! [chants] Back to school. Back to school. To prove to Dad I'm not a fool.

**Travis:** Now, do you think that that spans generational divides, that reference?

**Teresa:** I don't know. I don't know.

**Travis:** Or do you think that there is a ten-year period of people who are like, "I get that."

**Teresa:** [laughs] Probably that one.

**Travis:** Yes. A concept that we were all on board with. Oh yeah, a grown man. [laughs] Wait, he's probably 19 in the movie? I don't know what age he's supposed to be.

**Teresa:** Oh, he can drink, so he's 21.

**Travis:** Just hanging out in a kindergarten class. Um, so we were talking about parent-teacher conferences. Let's say... uh, we'll probably say "parent" a lot. But when we say "parent," we're going to include— just 'cause they're called parent-teacher conferences. Maybe they're called something different now.

**Teresa:** Maybe.

**Travis:** 'Cause, like, guardians would be included in this.

**Teresa:** Mm-hmm.

**Travis:** Um, you know, people who care for the kids, right?

**Teresa:** Right.

**Travis:** It's about caregiver-teacher, but that's too many syllables, you see.

**Teresa:** Yeah. It doesn't roll off the tongue the same way.

**Travis:** Yes.

**Teresa:** Okay.

**Travis:** We are at a point now where Bebe has teachers, and we have conferenced with them.

**Teresa:** Uh, twice in her schooling, I think. We haven't had one yet for this year.

**Travis:** No.

**Teresa:** No.

**Travis:** We've conferenced with people.

**Teresa:** Yes we have.

**Travis:** Uh, to talk about our daughter. I thought it would go way worse!

**Teresa:** [laughs] Oh, boy. Okay. Uh—

**Travis:** Well, 'cause I— no! I wanna talk about this for a second.

**Teresa:** You wanna talk about this.

**Travis:** 'Cause it was like, you know, when— I don't know how many people listening have kids. But when you have kids, everything— at least for me, everything Bebe does that is a little bit weird or a little bit frustrating or a little bit anything, I think "She's the only one that does this."

**Teresa:** Oh, no.

**Travis:** "No other child has ever behaved like this before. No other child has ever done this before." So then when I talk to the teachers and I'm like, "So, does she have an issue with this?"

Expecting them to be like, "Yes! Thank you! I didn't know how to bring it up, but yes."

And they're like, "N— no?"

**Teresa:** "No?"

**Travis:** "That's perfectly normal."

And I'm like, "[incredulously] It is?! Your job must be very difficult!" Okay.

**Teresa:** [laughs] Um, and—

**Travis:** Of course the teacher's job is difficult.

**Teresa:** Of course, yes. It... is. But here's the thing that I always try and remember. Children behave so much worse for their parents than they do for anybody else.

**Travis:** Well, this is because— you and I have talked about this recently. They know what works on their parents, right?

**Teresa:** Also, they feel comfortable with us.

**Travis:** Okay, that's a nicer way of saying they know what tactics work to get 'em what they want. But yes, in— but when they see a teacher they're like, "Hmm. I haven't solved you yet."

That's why by the end of the year the teacher's like, "You have to get out. Please."

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** "I have to move you up to second grade." Okay.

**Teresa:** Um, first, I would like to thank Rhiannon for submitting this topic.

**Travis:** Thank you, Rhiannon.

**Teresa:** Um, so... the first parent-teacher conference... was not recorded, so we don't know when it happened. [laughs]

**Travis:** Wait. Then how— wait. But then how do we know?

**Teresa:** We know that it happens because it entered the, like, the common vernacular, the lexicon of education.

**Travis:** Okay.

**Teresa:** In the 1930's. But we're gonna start before that.

**Travis:** That actually makes a lot of sense to me that that was when it started, 'cause that also feels— and listen, I'm not a historian. That feels around the time where school became, like, very compulsory.

**Teresa:** Sure.

**Travis:** And, like, it— the idea of, like, child labor was, like, becoming more and more outlawed, and becoming, you know, not so common. And so then it was like, "What are we gonna do with all these kids?"

**Teresa:** So, you're absolutely right. And before—

**Travis:** [incredulously] I am?!

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** Yeah!

**Teresa:** Before—

**Travis:** [imitates fanfare] Yeah! Go on.

**Teresa:** Before the 20th century, nobody really had time. They didn't have time. They were too busy making enough money to live.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** And so parents were not very active in kids' education, and kids' education was not a lot, right? Um, so there was usually, like, just one small school in town, right? Um, especially if your area was underserved, right? Or rural.

**Travis:** So pretty much, at least in America, every area.

**Teresa:** Every area was rural for a long time—

**Travis:** No, I mean even now, underserved. We don't pay teachers enough, and don't treat 'em well enough to draw anyone into that workforce. Especially, ooh, growing up in West Virginia.

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** Oh. Ooh.

**Teresa:** Rough.

**Travis:** I— mm— it's just— mmm. Okay. Here's the problem, West Virginia. West Virginia, the system there, at least when I was in school, rewarded seniority over, like, any kind of credentials or qualifications. So, like, if there was a job, especially in Huntington, schools kept consolidating down. So, like, I remember when I was, like, a little kid, and there was, like, five or six, maybe seven high schools in town. And by the time I went to high school, there was one. Like, one big one.

So as these schools kept consolidating down, you had more and more teachers with seniority, and so the new teachers would come up and be like, "I would like to work." And it's like, "Too bad, dude! We don't have a lot of jobs, and we have this person who's been doing it for 40 years and doesn't care anymore, but they have seniority, so they get the job."

And so what you ended up with was a lot of burned out people, and... yeah. It was not great.

**Teresa:** Oh boy.

**Travis:** That was a tangent, but... West Virginia doesn't do well in education, so... [sighs]

**Teresa:** I think that's the— that's the story of a lot of towns in America at the moment. Um, so— but because there was really only one teacher, right? They also lived in the community, and so if you needed to have a, quote, "conference," it probably happened at the general store.

**Travis:** Or you ran into 'em, like, at the tavern or something.

**Teresa:** Or church or whatever, you know?

**Travis:** This is 1930. There probably weren't taverns. But I understand—

**Teresa:** Well, this is the 20th century, so pre-1930.

**Travis:** Okay. Earlier, got it. Okay.

**Teresa:** Earlier.

**Travis:** Yeah, there was a whole 30 years before 1930, wasn't there? That's a long time. That's almost as old as I am. Okay, go on.

**Teresa:** Um, but like I mentioned, people also didn't go to school for very long. Um, so the average child at this point in the US—

**Travis:** Can I guess?

**Teresa:** Okay.

**Travis:** 12?

**Teresa:** No.

**Travis:** Lower?

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** 9? [pause] 8?!

**Teresa:** Probably more like 8. So what we're talking about is the very basics of math, reading, and grammar.

**Travis:** Okay.

**Teresa:** Um, and in the early 1900's, more than two thirds of the schools in the US were located in rural areas, and there was simply just one room with probably not any formally trained teaching staff, and more often than not your, quote, "teacher" was just the smartest adult or *teen* in the town, right?

**Travis:** I feel like we've talked about that before, but yeah. It was just like, "Okay, you— you're pretty good at this. You take over."

And because it was the one room, right? You would have six-year-olds up to, like, if a kid did stay in until, like, high school, right?

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** Or that age, right? They're all just in the same room. And at that point, you're handing them more complicated books, right? It's not like you can take time to be like, "Hey, let's really work on this lesson and get this across."

**Teresa:** Right. And kids had been educated like this for decades, right? But this was the time in the industrial kind of— the move towards the Industrial Revolution, uh, that, you know—

**Travis:** The Industrial Evolution, if you will.

**Teresa:** [laughs] High end mechanization starts coming, and so people really need to know a lot more than they did before. Um, and so people were able to kind of look around and be like, "Hmm. We are not preparing our young people for what is coming." Right?

**Travis:** You know, it's— it's almost like if you don't learn from history it's doomed to repeat it. Because we're seeing that happen now, too. With people being like, "We need to educate people on computer jobs." Like, more about IT, because everything has gone from, like, the Industrial Revolution where it was like everything is becoming mechanized, and now everything is becoming computerized, right? And so these people who worked with machines now need to learn how to work with computers to use those machines.

**Teresa:** Right.

**Travis:** Doomed to repeat it.

**Teresa:** Because, you know, at this point, large corporations were replacing agricultural and small manufacturing, and they also— children at this age needed to learn to develop a skill instead of just hard labor, right?

**Travis:** Right.

**Teresa:** Um, and... rural people were starting to move to city centers. This is the beginning of that kind of thing. But also, millions of immigrants were arriving on the shore, so there was now, as you start to move to a



more densely populated area, there becomes more competition, so education is more important to survival.

**Travis:** Right, and also imagine at that point you also, because you had not only more children to serve, but also there was more adults? Like, there was more educated people, so you could say, like, it wasn't just one person, because everyone else was busy.

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** It was like, "Hey, I'll do this too, if you'll pay me." Like, "Oh, okay. Yeah, great!"

**Teresa:** Um, so let's talk about, then, report cards. Right?

**Travis:** Okay. And permanent records. [whispering] There's no such thing!

**Teresa:** [whispering] No such thing! [normal volume] I mean, not...

**Travis:** There might be.

**Teresa:** Wi— within the criminal justice system there might be.

**Travis:** Sure, sure, sure, sure, sure.

**Teresa:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Travis:** And there might be permanent records in school, but they mean nothing. Like, they—

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** I will say, I'm 37 now. I have never, like, applied for a loan and had them be like, "Now, wait. Hold on. I see here you skipped class when you were nine."

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** Like, that has never been a thing.

**Teresa:** Um, they weren't— they weren't getting the job done, because so much more of, um, what the world was moving towards wasn't academically based. Um, because there was a whole new kind of, like, social hierarchy. There was, you know, new skills that required ingenuity, that required, you know, innovative thinking, and it wasn't just, "Can you do math? Can you read? Great."

**Travis:** I will— I— I also just want to take a second here, because when we talk about education— and I will say, uh, that I can speak on it in the US. I have not been educated in other countries, so I can't speak to that. But here in the US, this is a, uh, very complex topic, right? We're talking about the evolution into parent-teacher conferences, right? But you could dissect the idea of standardized education and the pros and cons of that, and, like, saying, "Okay, great. You wanna study this thing, but what you need to know is this and this and this, so that's what we're gonna focus on."

Like, it's such a complicated issue that we will not be getting into the pros— pros and cons of, uh, standardized education. Continue.

**Teresa:** And so at this point, um, you had the report card, right? Which was the way that the teacher communicated with the parents.

**Travis:** Reading, writing, arithmetic. Got it.

**Teresa:** Exactly. Um, and you really only heard— as a teacher, you really only heard from the parents if something was wrong. If, like, your— they did not agree with the grades you sent home, or something like that, right?

And that's a really tough way [laughs quietly] to take a meeting, right?

**Travis:** Yeah, if something's wrong. I mean, and that's the thing, right? Like, I think about this a lot, of how now— and I'm jumping to present, but the way that expectations of parent and teacher have changed in the last 80, what, 90 years, right? Of it just being like, "Okay, they can read. Great."

And now we have conversations like, "Do they get along well with other students? Do they seem happy? You know, are they enjoying themselves? Are they engaged with things?"

And the teacher's, you know, asking the same questions. But I have to imagine that at this point, as education was becoming more compulsory and standardized, that there were parents who had not gone through that education system who were like, "I don't know. Is this good? Are you doin' a good j— you got a B? Nice, I guess? I don't know!"

**Teresa:** [laughs] So this is when things started to develop a little more in depth, like, statistically speaking. That's what I want to say. Um, because frequently schools at this time period would make a graph, uh— [laughs]

**Travis:** I love a graph.

**Teresa:** —that would track, like—

**Travis:** What's your favorite kind of graph? You like a line graph? You like a bar graph? You like a pie chart?

**Teresa:** It depends on what I'm measuring.

**Travis:** My favorite is a line graph. Oh, I love to see those dots, and the zigzags. Ugh, it's great.

**Teresa:** [holding back laughter] Okay. Uh—

**Travis:** I'm just saying, I like graphs.

**Teresa:** They would, uh, track things like attitude, habits, social engagement, um, and, you know, obviously parents were like, "Hey. Give us those— those good, good grades too."

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** Um— but, so, like... it's beginning to change into, like, the whole person, and not just ticking off a list.

**Travis:** Right. A complete education, yes.

**Teresa:** Exactly, exactly. Um, and—

**Travis:** Especially, I imagine, as there was a shift towards a focus in business?

**Teresa:** Sure.

**Travis:** Where it's just like, "Listen. If you wanna get in business, it's great to, like, know numbers and everything, but you have to be hireable. Like, people have to like you." And at this point they were probably trying to, like, you know, match people, like, what? Uh, Carnegie and, uh, Pierpont, and Morgan, and—

**Teresa:** Sure.

**Travis:** —like, these business people, and be like, "We gotta teach you to succee— how to succeed in business with— with *really* trying."

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** "With trying very hard."

**Teresa:** And so with more information to share, it became imperative that teachers were able to explain this sort of thing to the parents, right? It's a lot easier to send home a grade card, and you can—

**Travis:** And hope you don't hear anything back.

**Teresa:** [through laughter] And hope you don't hear anything. But when you start thinking about, like, putting, um, kind of... qualitative measurements on things instead of quantitative? It requires a little more face time, right?

**Travis:** Yeah, and we should talk more about that. But first... how about a thank you note for our sponsors?

**Teresa:** Woo!

[theme music plays]

**Travis:** Hey, folks. Let me tell you something. This is one of those, like, "I'm not just a spokesperson. I'm also a client."

**Teresa:** Ooh!

**Travis:** Just ordered some new sheets, ordered some new towels. I went through Brooklinen.

**Teresa:** We did!

**Travis:** And no one made me do it. That's important. I'm an adult!

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** I make my own choices! Nobody said, "You have to go through Brookli—" I *wanted* to go through Brooklinen, [through gritted teeth] and I don't regret it! I love it!

We get a sheet set, we got a duvet cover. Yeah, I got a duvet. I'm an adult! It's not just a pound puppy... [holding back laughter] blanket anymore. I'm an adult!

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** Let me tell you about Brooklinen. You can invest in your comfort and save, because they have a Labor Day sale happening now. Brooklinen makes beautiful, high-quality bedding, and everything you need to make a house a home. And listen, that's absolutely true. Right out of the packaging, right? These blankets and sheets are comfortable. The towels are comfortable. This isn't one of those, like, "Ooh, once I wash this 20 or

30 times it's really gonna break in nice." These are comfortable right out the gate.

And, they make bedding for every kind of sleeper. Whether you sleep hot, cold, or whatever, they've got you covered.

**Teresa:** Which is great for us, because I sleep hot, and Travis sleeps cold. [laughs quietly]

**Travis:** And I sleep upside down. Yeah.

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** Absolutely. So, freshen up your fall with Brooklinen: the one-stop shop for comfort. Shop the Labor Day savings event now, for savings on all things comfort. And... if you can't decide right now, then how about you invest in your comfort with promo code "shmanners" any time.

**Teresa:** Wow!

**Travis:** So you have the Labor Day savings sale now.

**Teresa:** Uh-huh.

**Travis:** And then promo code "shmanners" any time. That's brooklinen.com, promo code "shmanners."

**Hal:** If you're sick of constantly arguing with the people closest to you about topics that really aren't going to change the world, we're here to take that stress off of your shoulders. We take care of it for you on *We Got This with Mark and Hal*.

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**Travis:** Okay. So, where are we at on the line graph of education?

**Teresa:** We've made it. We're at the top.

**Travis:** What? We're educated?

**Teresa:** [amused] We're educated.

**Travis:** Boom! We've matriculated.

**Teresa:** Uhh, as far as parent-teacher conferences go.

**Travis:** Okay.

**Teresa:** So we're into the 1930's. We are increasingly unionized.

**Travis:** Good.

**Teresa:** As adult workers.

**Travis:** Nice.

**Teresa:** And so the time that we have to dedicate to children's education has risen, right?

**Travis:** Parents are probably a lot more available to, like, spend time with their kids to, like, help with homework, and to talk to teachers.

**Teresa:** Instead of just throwing them a book. And say, "Read this!"

**Travis:** Right.

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** "I have to work 16 hours today, and then 27 hours tomorrow, and I can't help you."

**Teresa:** Right. And they also— uh, parents also have, like, actual time to schedule a meeting.

**Travis:** Right.

**Teresa:** With the teachers. Um, also, schools are starting to make, you know, policies and procedures regarding standardizing things, right?

**Travis:** Yes. Which, as we said, complicated. Complicated feelings.

**Teresa:** Very complicated. But in the least, this helps create, like, measurements for, like, what is the difference between an A and a B, right? Some of those things are so highly subjective, right? One teacher might say, "This was grade A effort." And then the next teacher might be like, "Uh, this is just average, from the stuff that I've seen, so... "

**Travis:** That's why I always liked math...

**Teresa:** Mmm.

**Travis:** ... classes. Because it's like, "Okay, I know if I miss, there's 100 questions on this test. I can miss 30 or less and still pass this test."

**Teresa:** Right.

**Travis:** And that kind of knowledge was very comforting to me.

**Teresa:** So be— you know, different schools had different, like, teachers, and policies, and procedures, and they were working on— because it wasn't just the one person teaching everybody, right? And you knew what to expect. You had grade divisions, and classroom divisions, and all that kind of stuff.

**Travis:** And multiple schools in the same city, right?

**Teresa:** Yep.

**Travis:** So, like, if you moved with your kid, you wouldn't want them to start a new school and them be like, "You don't know this and this and this?" Right? Like, you wanted to be able to say, like, "Well, you're in second grade, so you know this, 'cause we've standardized this thing."

**Teresa:** Exactly. Um, so let's talk a little bit about the meeting.

**Travis:** Uh-huh.

**Teresa:** The meeting of the minds.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** The teacher's mind... and the parent's mind.

**Travis:** Oh, I see.

**Teresa:** Um, as far as having students present, there's a mixed bag of that. Um, so, like... it will depend on the school, obviously, if they require students to be along. Um, and I will say—

**Travis:** Also, I would say, if you need childcare, you know, maybe you don't have a choice.

**Teresa:** Maybe you don't have a choice. Um, and... it does... change the language that you can use, how honest you can— you can really communicate. You might have to be a little gentler in the way that you speak about your child. [laughs quietly]

**Travis:** I mean, I imagine that's probably true to some degree no matter what. I— I can't say "I imagine." I know. Right?

**Teresa:** Yeah. [laughs]

**Travis:** Like, no teacher is going to be like, "Oh, your kid? A brat." Right?

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** They might say, like "Well, we really need—"

**Teresa:** Gosh. Goodness, I hope not."

**Travis:** No. "We need to work on taking no for an answer, and sometimes they get frustrated when things—" right? Instead of saying, like, "Oh my God. Your kid? Hoo, hoo, hoo. What a piece of work!"

**Teresa:** So we're gonna— I would like to start with kind of, like, some, um, generalized teacher do's and don'ts to set teachers up for success first.

Um, make sure as a teacher that you know what your specific school's protocols are.

**Travis:** Mm-hmm.

**Teresa:** Um, if there is a form you have to fill out before the parents get there, make sure you've got that covered, right? Um, and the thing about parent-teacher conferences are although parent comes first in that sentence, the teacher is the leader of this meeting.

**Travis:** Right. The teacher is the one who's actually there? So I assume that they are the one providing information, and the parents are ones who are receiving information. And I guess the parents could provide information based on what they see at home, and what the child has said their experience is. But it seems more about— anyway, you get what I'm saying.

**Teresa:** So you're almost, as a teacher, it feels kind of like you're making a book report on this kid. [laughs]

**Travis:** Yeah, right?

**Teresa:** Right? So if you have any standardized test results you want to discuss, if your school in particular is more focused on academic or social skills, make sure you have, like, the kind of measurements to back that



up and explain that sort of thing. Um, and then, you know, it feels good when you're leading a meeting to have all your ducks in a row.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** Um, and along with that comes, like, the materials. So it's always— it's a little easier to explain your professional opinion to someone who doesn't know what's happening with a visual aid, right?

**Travis:** Right. So if you could say, like, "Hey. We've noticed that over and over again during art time, your kid seems to draw pictures of Jessica Fletcher from *Murder, She Wrote*. Are you watching a lot of *Murder, She Wrote* at home?"

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** And then your dad, Clint McElroy, is like, "I don't— when is Travis watching *Murder, She Wrote*?" And no one's quite sure when Travis is wa— 'cause mom doesn't watch it, and dad doesn't watch it, so why is Travis drawing 30 to 40 pictures, very accurate, lifelike drawings of Jessica Fletcher? No one knows for sure.

So, something like that, you mean?

**Teresa:** Exactly.

**Travis:** Okay.

**Teresa:** Stuff like that. Um, just some documents to prove your— prove your points, really.

**Travis:** Right, okay.

**Teresa:** Is—is what you need. [quietly] Did you— did you really draw 30—

**Travis:** [scoffs] Oh, hypothe— oh, complete— of course, of course, hypo— completely—

**Teresa:** Of course, of course.

**Travis:** Completely [through a heavy exhale] hypothetical.

**Teresa:** [clears throat] Um, and— so there are also a few things that you can do to, as a teacher, to make the classroom comfortable for parents. Make sure you have a—

**Travis:** Mmm, big chairs.

**Teresa:** —adult sized furniture, exactly. Um—

**Travis:** Unless you want it to be funny. And then...

**Teresa:** [wheeze-laughs] Well, if you want it to be funny you have to lead them to the kid desks, and then be like, "Ah, just kidding! I got these chairs —" [wheeze-laughs]

**Travis:** Don't indicate the kid desks. Just walk over there and stand there and let them start to sit at the kid desks and be like, "What are you doing? That's for children!"

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** Then [unintelligible]— it's the little things.

**Teresa:** Um, you can also, you know, make your— a lot of teachers do this anyway, but display the kids' work, right? Not just the one you're talking about, but overall, the class work, because it is important for, um, for the parents to see how their kid compares, right? And that's not what this teacher conference is for, but it does give some context, right?

**Travis:** Context is what you want, right? Like, I— when— when you have a... child at home— even— we have two kids, right? But it still can feel like a vacuum. Where you're like, "I don't know. Is this normal? Is this the thing? Is my kid doing well? Are they exceeding? I don't know."

And that feels to me, like, as far as I'm concerned, what I'm looking for as far as context in the thing. I want them to say, "Your child is the greatest student I've ever taught."

**Teresa:** [laughs] Um, and this will probably give a teacher some bonus points, and we all know that teachers are achievers.

**Travis:** Mm-hmm.

**Teresa:** Um, you didn't see it. My... describing for the audience—

**Travis:** I think they could hear it, yeah.

**Teresa:** —the— the—

**Travis:** They could feel that you put—

**Teresa:** —fist in the air.

**Travis:** —that you, like, raised your fist in triumph.

**Teresa:** Fist pump!

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** Um, have some materials out for younger siblings to occupy themselves with, because the distraction that a parent feels while they're trying to speak to another adult, but they are also trying to mitigate the other younger children, is bad. It's just a bad feeling all the way around. It is not for a good meeting, and I know this because I have tried to do it. So—[sighs]

**Travis:** With Dot. Oh, and Dot does not care about Bebe's education currently.

**Teresa:** No, not at all. Not at all. So things like puzzles, and games, and coloring books, and things like that. If you can set up an area of your classroom where the parent can still see the younger child, but they can see that they are occupied, and you can provide things to occupy them.

**Travis:** Mm-hmm.

**Teresa:** That's an A plus.

**Travis:** Yep!

**Teresa:** Um, also— okay. So... open with a positive, right?

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** My— my teachers in school used to say, "Roses before thorns."

**Travis:** Oh. See, I know feedback sandwich.

**Teresa:** Okay, okay!

**Travis:** Positive, negative, positive. Start with a positive, you do the negative in the middle, you end with a positive.

**Teresa:** It just starts the ball rolling in a nice way.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** Right?

**Travis:** "So far your kid has not set fire to anything."

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** "He's tried. That's the negative, right? We've been able to stop him."

**Teresa:** [laughs] And we always want to frame our children in the—the— you know, the chart of growing, right? So if there is something that they excel at or that they need to continue to develop, I think that's really, as a parent, what I want to hear. I wanna hear, "This is growing. We're moving in the right direction."

**Travis:** I mean, actionable feedback is always the best way to go, right?

**Teresa:** Yeah!

**Travis:** Instead of saying, like, "They have a problem with this." Instead, say, like, "Well, I think we can work on this, and this, and this. And also, like, *you* need to work on it. Like, we need to work on this."

I would say that this is, uh, a lot like communication in a relationship, right? Of, like, "I" statements and "we" statements, instead of "you" statements.

**Teresa:** Right, yeah. We have definitely talked about that. Um, as a teacher, you should probably explain the things that you take for granted every day. Like, if there are acronyms you use or certain, like, mottoes in your— your teaching style, or things like that. Um, I mean, remember that the parents— they haven't been in this classroom. They don't know what you do every day. So, uh, if you are to say something like, you know, some tests have different, like, acronyms.

**Travis:** Right.

**Teresa:** All I can think of is OSHA, but that's not a test. [laughs]

**Travis:** That's not it. Unless you're worried about the kid doing some heavy construction. I think one of the things I'm concerned about—

**Teresa:** A— ACT? ACT. [laughs]

**Travis:** "Your child isn't rated for a forklift, and I think we really need to work on that."

**Teresa:** [laughs] Um, and it always helps to have a plan, especially if something needs improvement, right? So if you know, as a teacher, going on, this is a problem thing, if you just give that to the parents and say, "Hey. This is bad." [pause] And then nothing, that is not a good, like, meeting tactic, just in general. So if you have something that needs improvement, offer a plan. Offer a starting point. Even if it's just a little

bit thing. Like, maybe— maybe we need to... uh, discuss homework habits. Maybe we need a planner. Maybe we need— like, all that kind of stuff, right?

**Travis:** Um, now, we have a question here from Victoria, who is a teacher.

**Teresa:** Okay.

**Travis:** "How do you ask a caretaker to leave once they've gone over their time slot without looking rude, uninterested, inconsiderate?" Yeah. Okay.

**Teresa:** Yeah. Let's— let's start with the physical things. If you're sitting at a desk, stand up.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** Okay? That is a good signal to the other adult that your time is up. Um, also, you can exchange email address or whatever.

**Travis:** Yeah, I think that's a good one.

**Teresa:** So that if—

**Travis:** "I— I totally understand that you want to continue this conversation. Feel free to contact me, and we can email about it, or even schedule a phone call."

**Teresa:** Exactly.

**Travis:** "Uh, but I do need to get to the next—" you know. I think that that is perfectly reasonable.

**Teresa:** Yeah. Um, I think that the last thing that you should do is have a— a clock available. Like, I'm not saying, like a—

**Travis:** Not, like, a timer—

**Teresa:** —like a timer.

**Travis:** —that you, like, spin around. "[sighs heavily]"

**Teresa:** No. But, like, a very visible digital clock that's easy to read and easy to point to to say, "I'm so sorry, our time for this session is up. Here's my email. Let's do—" buh-duh-duh-duh-duh.

**Travis:** I mean, you can even— you *could* set, like, a timer.

**Teresa:** I suppose you could, but that's a little...

**Travis:** Hmm? I would.

**Teresa:** You would.

**Travis:** Yeah, I would.

**Teresa:** Uh, and so you can have— like I said, you can have something to back you up and be like, "My next appointment is waiting outside, so let's continue this later, if you have more questions or concerns."

**Travis:** Um, Liv asks, "How should I as a teacher talk to a parent who is very confrontational? Typically I thank them for the feedback, but parents are sometimes unrealistic, unreasonable about what one teacher could do."

**Teresa:** I think that you are absolutely right. There are a lot of just...

**Travis:** Some people are jerks.

**Teresa:** And expectations of one person for, like— who's responsible for, let's say, up to 30 children at a time? Like, if they really need something that you can't give, like, a tutor is what they need. Or whatever, right? Um, don't let anybody abuse you, of course. Like, you— you do not have to stand for this, and there are protocols and people to get involved up the chain of administration if you feel abused.

**Travis:** Yeah. And to say, like, "Hey, I understand that this is a concern for you, but if you would like to talk to the Vice Principal or the Principal or whatever about it."

**Teresa:** Right, right. Um—

**Travis:** This is a good rule for parents.

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** Because here's the thing, parents. I love Bebe and Dot so much. And the thing is, as a parent, no matter how great a teacher is, and no matter how much that teacher loves those students, a teacher will never be as invested in your individual child as you are. That's just not how it works.

And the thing is, you are worried about your one child's experience, and a teacher is worried about the entire class's experience. So to think that the teacher would be able to prioritize your child's experience because that is

your priority is completely unreasonable, right? And so it's something to keep in mind.

And this is true not just of, like, teachers and children, but, like, if you're at a restaurant, if you're on an airplane, if you're anywhere, remember that your individual experience is, of course, your priority. But the person taking care of the group has to worry about everyone at the same time.

**Teresa:** Exactly. Um, and lastly, I'd say for teachers that... we parents. Gosh, sometimes we are spread very thin with rehearsals, and with, like, sports, or, you know, like, even just work that we are doing. So if you can... reach out, emails, if you want to— if someone doesn't sign up for a conference, maybe suggest a, if it's available, like, Zoom, or whatever you can do to do it virtually. Or, um, if maybe they need a translator, right? Lots of schools have resources, and if your school doesn't have a resource, I'm so sorry. Uh, but hopefully you can work it out with maybe a digital translator. Um, Google I'm sure has something, right? They got an app for that.

**Travis:** I will also just say, just as far as, like... at a certain point, it's not your job to deal with someone who is being abusive and confrontational, right? But a good de-escalation tactic is sometimes— 'cause I get frustrated, right? When I'm— especially, like, being super invested in my kid, and I'm worried about my kid. And so a good, uh, verbal tactic to use is, "I understand that you are very concerned about this thing, and I will do everything in my power. I understand, I understand, I understand." Right? Because sometimes— and this is not fair to teachers. This is not fair to people in service professions in general. But sometimes, having someone whose job it is to listen to your concerns leads to venting.

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** Right? And especially parents who carry a lot of concerns and frustration and, at times, guilt and, like, negative emotions regarding the job that they are doing. 'Cause sometimes the parent might be worried that, like, the reason the kid isn't doing a good job is because it's their fault, but they don't want to acknowledge that, 'cause they feel bad about it, so they want to project it. All these things, right? And it's not your job to be their therapist. Um, but if you wanna say, like, "Oh, yeah. I understand." Like, it's a good way to take the wind out of sails.

**Teresa:** Um, and parents, moving to the other side of the table, um, remember that you and the teacher are on the same team, right? So there's no winning here, because we are not— we're— we're not... uh, fighting? No, that's not it. We're not, like, playing against another team? What do I want to say, here? Anyway, you're on the same team. You are moving towards the same goal. Um, and that can go a long way, the right mindset. I mean, I feel like this is something that they teach as kind of

like in a manager or supervisor role, like, it's important that you don't feel like the team you have is beneath you.

**Travis:** Yeah.

**Teresa:** Um, it's more important that you express that we are working towards the same goal. "I have your back. We're doing this together." Right?

**Travis:** It's an "us" mentality.

**Teresa:** That's right. Um, next I would say, it's hard, parents, to hear poor things, maybe, about your kid?

**Travis:** Yeah. You take it very personally. I mean, you want your kid to succeed, one. And two—

**Teresa:** Obviously.

**Travis:** —you know that, like, the thing— like, huge influence in your kid's life is you?

**Teresa:** Mm-hmm.

**Travis:** So when someone's like— I mean, I don't know if all parents feel this way, but I imagine a huge majority do. Of, like, every decision you make as a parent, thinking, "Is this wrong?"

**Teresa:** Yeah. [laughs quietly]

**Travis:** "Am I wrong? I don't know! Am I wrong?" And so then when someone's like, "Hey, there is this issue." You're like, "I knew it!" [laughs]

**Teresa:** But the teacher is there with them all day, and they see things that you are— you don't see, right? It's another pair of eyes, in the way of, like, hopefully more trained eye looking out for specific things. But like, they see things that you won't see. So... the teacher doesn't gain anything by lying or exaggerating to you. [laughs quietly]

**Travis:** Right.

**Teresa:** It only makes the teacher's life worse if they lie or exaggerate about something. So, like, try and stay calm, remember you're on the same team, and take their— take the advice that's being given.

**Travis:** And if it's hard to hear, it's okay to say, like, "I will think about that, thank you." And let it process, and then have the conversation with



them later when you're feeling a little bit— you've had time to, like, process and think about it, and— and see it from their perspective.

**Teresa:** And, um, feel free, as a parent, to discuss maybe outside influences that may— that may, um, you know... change a child's behavior. Are you moving? Are you getting divorced? Has someone recently passed in your family? Like, all of that stuff can influence how a child behaves at school, and if there's something that the teacher is like, "Hey, Johnny is doing blah-blah-blah-blah-blah." And you're like, "Mmm. You know, that sounds— that sounds like something that I was worried about. His dad and I are getting a divorce, and this—" you know, all that kind of stuff.

Be as open as you feel comfortable, right? But it— family situations do impact children in the rest of their lives, obviously.

**Travis:** I— I also think, and this is, uh, a tricky statement I'm about to make, but here we go. Not all teachers are great. [laughs quietly] You know? Growing up I had teachers that, uhh, were kind of jerks at times, you know what I mean? And so I would say two things with that. If you, as a parent, have heard things from your kid that have given you concerns, I think it's okay for you to bring concerns too and be like, "I have heard from my child that this has been their experience during class. Can you tell me, you know, your perspective on that, or, like, your experience with that and, like, what is happening?"

Not saying, like, "My kid says you're a jerk. Are you a jerk?"

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** But more like, "My kid says that, you know, they oftentimes don't get time to finish projects that they're working on, and they find that very frustrating. Have you noticed that is an issue?" Or whatever, and see how the teacher responds to it.

**Teresa:** Right. There— and there are times, parents, you need to advocate for your children.

**Travis:** Absolutely.

**Teresa:** Right? If nobody— if— if you don't do it, nobody's really going to. And with a teacher who... yeah, bad teacher, you may need to— to also get the higher ups involved, right? Um, Vice Principals, counselors, things like that. You may need to move your child's classroom. You may need to move schools. Do what is best for your child. Um—

**Travis:** Right. That is the good side of the investment, right?

**Teresa:** Yes. Yes.

**Travis:** Is that when it comes down to it, that teacher can't be invested as you are in the kid, good or bad. And so their experience, then, let that investment become a positive influence. Where you're like, "You know what?" This is not, like, "Hey, kid. Like it or lump it, you've gotta deal with it. School is tough. I know, man." Right? This is more like, "Hey, tell me— I want you to be able to tell me," because this is the time where you establish that trust of, like, "I want you to be able to tell me if you're having a problem."

**Teresa:** Right.

**Travis:** Right? You can't expect to ignore your kid at four and hope that at fourteen they'll trust you, like, to tell you issues that they're having.

**Teresa:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Um, and I think that a really great thing to do at a parent-teacher conference is ask for opportunities to be there in the classroom. Is there a classroom helper? Is there a craft mom? Is there, uh, a library assistant? Is the, like—

**Travis:** Do you want me to come tell the kids about my weird podcast job, you know?

**Teresa:** [laughs] It's a great way to be involved. Um, lastly, I wanna talk a little bit about, um, just general meeting etiquette. It's important to be on time.

**Travis:** Yep.

**Teresa:** If you cannot be on time, you need to contact the person you're meeting and rearrange, reschedule, let them know what's happening. Are you gonna be five minutes late? Are you gonna be 15 minutes late? Because a lot of these are scheduled very tightly.

**Travis:** Oh yeah.

**Teresa:** There's a lot of people to go through. And so if— it's a disservice to both you and the teacher, as a parent, if you can't make it, but you try and make it, and you waste people's time. So, uh, be punctual, but if you can't be punctual, try and work it out. Um, like I said, you guys are on the same team. The teacher doesn't want to— to—[laughs]

**Travis:** To win.

**Teresa:** To lock you out of the classroom when it's not your t— your turn.

**Travis:** They might want to.

**Teresa:** Maybe. [laughs]

**Travis:** It depends on how long a day it's been.

**Teresa:** Um, and then also, remember what the meeting is for. It is for you and the teacher to talk about your child. Um, unless there is something very untowards, like maybe a bullying situation, really shouldn't bring up other kids, right? It's not their—

**Travis:** "So tell me, what's the deal with Johnny? Ughhh, right? Is he— is he as bad as they say?"

**Teresa:** Right.

**Travis:** I have two quick questions for you—

**Teresa:** Oh, sure, sure, sure.

**Travis:** —from listeners that I want to get to before we run out of time. How do you feel about the idea of, like, bringing a gift for the teacher?

**Teresa:** Oh, I think that's a great idea.

**Travis:** Yeah?

**Teresa:** Um, I think that you should stick to gift cards, uh, nothing too personal.

**Travis:** No, like, homemade food, or any food, really. You don't know allergies—

**Teresa:** Right, exactly.

**Travis:** —you don't know dietary restrictions.

**Teresa:** Exactly. I don't think that you could ever go wrong with a Target gift card.

**Travis:** Target gift card. Everybody loves Target.

**Teresa:** Everybody loves Target. I think that even— even if you don't bring a gift, a handwritten note is always so nice. Be like, "I was thinking of you, and thanks for doing this for me."

**Travis:** Um, the other one is, how do you address with a teacher when your kid has some kind of, like, special requirements? For example, Kelly

asked about, like, uh, their kid needs to be able to drink water throughout the day, but the teacher has restrictions about, like, bringing the water bottle to the table.

**Teresa:** Mm-hmm.

**Travis:** How do you, like, politely— how do you ask the teacher?

**Teresa:** Well, again, I think it's important to have your— you know, your visual aids, right? Is this water thing something dictated by a doctor? Bring a doctor's note. Um, is this water thing more like, uh, they're constantly dehydrated, they're not going to the bathroom during school, all this kind of stuff, uh, and so it affects their performance? Perhaps that's a way that you can talk to the teacher and be like, "Listen. I know that—[laughs quietly] Johnny— I know that Johnny really—"

**Travis:** It's a good go-to name, yeah.

**Teresa:** —[laughs quietly] "really wants to—"

**Travis:** Suzie and Johnny is just what's in my head all the time. [pause] Okay.

**Teresa:** "... really wants to participate, but is so tired because they're dehydrated, and we need to work together to find a way that they can have more water breaks, bring a water bottle, something like that."

**Travis:** I also think it helps to explain the issue, and then say, "What we do at home is allow them access to water whenever they need it, and I know that that conflicts with this thing, so is there any way we could— what— is there something we could figure out? Do you have any ideas?" Right?

**Teresa:** Right.

**Travis:** Instead of it being, "You—" you don't want the teacher to feel like you're dictating to them what they need to do in their classroom, but I think providing that, saying what you would do, and then giving the teacher the opportunity to solve that problem, will make it feel collaborative.

**Teresa:** Absolutely.

**Travis:** And that's gonna do it for us. Uh, thank you so much for joining us. If you haven't, go check out over at [mcelroymerch.com](http://mcelroymerch.com). We got a bunch of new merch over there, uh, including a new pin of the month, which, it's— you know what? I'm just gonna say it. It's a bit of a weird one.

**Teresa:** [laughs] Aren't they all?

**Travis:** Umm... yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, over there we've got, um, the, uh... [sighs] okay. So, in *The Adventure Zone*—

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** —*Ethersea*, Griffin created a character in the spur of the moment that he called Dr. Shaq that was, like, part man, part pufferfish, and it's a whole thing. Uh, and as he was leaving the elevator we were in, his [laughs quietly] neck inflated and he'd go, "Ope! There I go." Okay.

**Teresa:** [laughs] "Whoop! There I go."

**Travis:** So that is pin is over at [mcelroymerch.com](http://mcelroymerch.com), and it benefits the World Central Kitchen, which uses the power of food to nourish communities and strengthen economies through times of crisis and beyond. We also have a Phantom Sea Coast Co pin over there, from the *The Adventure Zone: Ethersea*, as well as a set of *Adventure Zone* temporary tattoo flashes. Like a flash sheet. You know, a bunch of—

**Teresa:** Yeah.

**Travis:** —over there. Uh, designed by Lynn Doyle, and that that benefits the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, which provides direct support to Asia and Pacific Islander prisoners and raises awareness about the growing number of APIs being imprisoned, detained, and deported.

Also, thank you to Maximum Fun, our podcast home. Check out all the other great shows there. Check out all the McElroy projects at [mcelroy.family](http://mcelroy.family). What else?

**Teresa:** Thank you, Alex.

**Travis:** Oh, thank you, Alex.

**Teresa:** Um, thank—

**Travis:** Alex, you're like a teacher to me.

**Teresa:** [laughs]

**Travis:** What would I do without you?

**Teresa:** Thank you for suggesting this, Rhiannon. Um, and if you would like to suggest a topic, you can do so. Uh, you can send us an email,

shmatterscast@gmail.com. Alex reads every email. Please, send us those emails.

Um, also send us idioms! We'd love to do another idiom episode. People really love it. I really love it. Travis, do you love it?

**Travis:** I love it.

**Teresa:** Um—

**Travis:** I love it!

**Teresa:** [laughs] Uh, and we got all of our questions for this episode on Twitter, @shmatterscast. Um, and that's where we— that's where we get 'em. Look for us!

**Travis:** That's where we get it. That's where we get it.

**Teresa:** Follow us on Twitter.

**Travis:** Don't act like we don't.

**Teresa:** So thank you to, um, Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art, one more time, @shmatterscast. Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the fa— the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, *Shmatters Fanners*. Um, if you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, you should join that group today.

**Travis:** And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

**Teresa:** No RSVP required!

**Travis:** You've been listening to *Shmatters*...

**Teresa:** Manners... shmatters. Get it.

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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