



How to respond to parent communication in a virtual world

We live in a 24/7 world as far as electronics are involved, said Kim Croyle, a school attorney for Bowles Rice LLP in Morgantown, W.Va. It's rarely ever the case anymore that you drop a letter in the mail and it winds up on someone's desk two days later after it's been opened and sorted, she said.

Follow these guidelines for how to respond to parent communication in this virtual, electronic environment.

- **Stay focused.** It's really easy when communicating by email to be a multitasker, Croyle said. You can have multiple documents open on your desktop, have one or two emails open, and be talking on the phone at the same time. But you want to make that communication with that parent as focused as you would if they were sitting right across from you, she said. If you are meeting with the parent via Zoom, don't send text messages, respond to email, or look at documents at the same time. You wouldn't do that if you were meeting with the parent in person, so don't do it virtually, Croyle said.

- **Fight the urge to respond immediately.** Because we receive so much communication by email, text, and other electronic outlets, it makes us feel that we have to instantaneously respond to it all, Croyle said.

"Obviously, we have to meet timelines guaranteed by local policy, state laws, and federal laws and regulations, but that doesn't mean we have to respond the second our phone dings to let us know there's an email there, unless we're right up against a deadline," she said.

While you may feel an impulse to email right back, very rarely is an immediate response required, she said. The best practice is to do what you would when talking to someone in person, Croyle said. If you didn't know the answer, you wouldn't respond with the first thing off the top of your head, for example. Instead, you might do research and talk to colleagues before responding.

- **Establish a system for responding.** On the flip side, because so much of our communication is electronic and we're getting so many more emails, it's really easy to let things get lost, Croyle said. Have a good system for responding to the communication you receive so nothing falls through the cracks.

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"Even though you don't have to respond right away, you still have to respond," she said. "You can't let it linger." The person who sent you the message is expecting a fast response. It's human nature to think, "I sent that email 10 minutes ago. How come they haven't responded?" Croyle said. Make sure you get back to the person, even if it's with, "Thank you for your email. I'm looking into it, and I'll get back to you."

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