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TM Tips: How To Involve Team Parents

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With every Destination Imagination (DI) team you manage comes a group of eager, enthusiastic students full of out-of-the-box, innovative ideas. When managing your students, however, you can often feel overwhelmed with how to efficiently and successfully work with your team parents as well. *Should the parents be involved? If so, how much or to what extent should they be? If not, how will that work?*

Ultimately, every Team Manager, new or experienced, has to make the call on deciding how to manage the parent/student dynamic on their specific team. The one hallmark of every successful DI team is a framework of cooperation, trust, understanding and communication between the Team Manager, the parents and the students. How do you make this happen, though?

1. **Establish a line of communication with parents and students early and often.** I schedule a team-building activity during the summer for my DI students, but it's also team-building for the parents. I provide preliminary information about the upcoming DI season and my contact

information. I also encourage the parents to exchange their information with each other. Creating a DI team website and/or sending frequent email updates regarding team happenings is a great way to keep parents in the loop throughout the season. With new technological tools such as Google Hangouts or Skype, I've been able to hold virtual Q&A sessions for my parents throughout the season to discuss logistical details (e.g., bringing snacks to meetings, team projects, volunteer duties, etc.) while also affording parents a forum to be heard.

2. **Create opportunities for parents to contribute.** While DI is an entirely student-led opportunity, parents want to feel like they're a part of the experience. Allowing parents to attend team meetings and see what the kids are working on is the easiest way to bring them into the fold. I also encourage my team parents to create social opportunities for the team throughout the season—a movie night, bowling, a cookout with board games, etc. Simply put, ask your parents for help and remind them that they are needed for your team's overall success.
3. **Interference. Discuss it and establish a firm understanding of boundaries between parents and your DI team.** Interference can be a very tricky subject with any DI parent because while parents want their children to be successful, sometimes they are hesitant to allow them to fail. Have a candid discussion regarding the rules of Interference, the spirit of Destination Imagination, and the idea that every child deserves the opportunity to fail in order to experience the joy of learning. Also, remind parents that DI is not about victories and advancing to Global Finals, but instead, about students learning lifelong skills necessary for every aspect of their futures.
4. **Overcoming obstacles with parents.** We all know that in any activity, whether it's DI, sports or any other aspect of life, we can find ourselves stuck in difficult situations from time to time. How we respond in these difficult situations can ultimately make or break a DI team. A defensive, even slightly hostile response can send things downward quickly, which then takes your time and attention (as well as the parent's) away from what's most important: the kids. As I mentioned in #1, having frequent communication with parents can help squelch some of those misunderstandings that come about from not feeling informed. Be sure to share successes and positive milestones with parents. It's also important to acknowledge the "oops" and thank parents for keeping you on your feet. At the end of the day, keeping parents informed and conveying your positive intentions will go a long way in creating a profoundly enriching experience for both parents and students.

The communication, the contribution opportunities, having the tough but necessary conversations, and navigating difficult situations with ease are only fractional pieces of “the DI puzzle,” but mastering those will go a long way in helping you to make this year’s DI experience a memorable one. Always remember that Destination Imagination should be an incredibly powerful, fun, uplifting learning experience that helps us remember our role in making it just that for our students as well as their parents. Best wishes to all!

***About the Author:** Zachary Sparks is a Team Manager from Austin, Texas. He is a Special Education Resource/Inclusion teacher at Laurel Mountain Elementary and also serve as a co-district coordinator for Round Rock ISD. Sparks is an alum of the University of Florida, and when he’s not teaching or cheering on every Florida Gators sports team, he enjoys cooking and maintaining his blog “Zach The Movie Nerd” for all things movie-related.*