

MAINTAINING PARENT MOBILE PHONE NUMBERS

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Maintaining up to date parent and guardian contact details is not a new issue for most schools. Parents who are transient have always been difficult to contact. The high cost of landline phones has also meant that schools have not been able to communicate rapidly, and sometimes not at all when parents change postal address. The relatively lower cost of acquiring mobile phones has brought some benefits, as more parents are now contactable by phone regardless of where they live or how often they shift. However, with prepaid credit systems and changing mobile phone plans, the advantages of greater phone contact coverage can be diminished where mobile numbers are changed and parents do not notify the school. For most schools, the number of parents in this category is relatively small and even where this situation does exist, the school normally has greater current parent contact details than in the days before mobile phones.

Regardless of whether schools are sending SMS messages, all schools need to maintain phone contact details for emergency contact. There is also a higher likelihood of the school needing to contact parents of transient students regarding attendance issues. Whilst achieving the greatest benefit from the messageyou™ suite depends on having up to date mobile phone numbers, messageyou™ also can be used to assist the school with keeping these phone numbers up to date.

STRATEGIES

The following strategies are recommended to assist schools in maintaining accurate mobile phone data.

Initial Parent Communication

1. More parents are likely to cooperate in maintaining mobile phone numbers if they understand and accept the benefits of receiving communication from the school. This means that when the school seeks mobile numbers it is necessary to explain;
 - That mobile numbers will be used for emergency contact in addition to attendance or late notification – i.e. it is not just about sending SMS messages.
 - That the school cannot communicate with parents if these mobile phone numbers are not kept up to date, and this could disadvantage both the parent and student (e.g. last minute approval for students to attend functions, advice in regard to medical treatment etc).
 - The potential of using text messages (via mobile phones) to provide other information of importance to parents (e.g. last minute notification of changes in bus time returns from camps and excursions).
 - The benefits to parents of receiving SMS communications instead of voice (e.g. the capacity to read and respond to messages in their own choice of time and location, and the peace of mind that comes with knowing they will be contacted on the same day if their child does not arrive at school as expected).
 - The ease for parents in sending messages to the school prior to an absence, (e.g. no more early morning telephone queues).
 - How to send and receive text messages.
 - The benefits to the school and consequently their children arising out of this more cost efficient method of communication.

All of these areas are covered in the template letters provided to schools in the messageyou™ implementation workbook.

2. Schools need to tailor the method and timing of communicating with parents when setting up the project based on their knowledge of the school culture. For example:
 - Prepaid post reply letters will be more effective in some schools than sending home information within a newsletter.
 - Some schools have found that asking students for mobile phone number updates is an effective method of quickly obtaining this information – particularly if the focus is upon emergency contact rather than for the purpose of sending absence messages.
 - If the implementation is at the beginning or end of year, the school should consider updating contact details in conjunction with collection of fees, books, or course materials.
 - Parent information events may also be occasions to collect updated data (e.g. parent/teacher evenings, induction days, year level information briefings).
 - Where schools have significant numbers of ethnic or indigenous students, consideration can be given to using interpreters, home liaison officers or other community support personnel. The personal approach with specific individual parents or cultural groups is often better than trying to translate information into multiple languages, as it allows parents to ask questions and the school to build trust and cooperation.
 - Involving parent groups in communicating with other parents may assist – where the school has set up “communication trees” or parent contact persons for other purposes.
 - Phoning or emailing parents to seek a mobile phone number – generally after all other strategies have failed.
 - Sending a broadcast message at the start of a messageyou™ implementation, asking parents for a response, will give some indication of the level of parent response and the possible need for other strategies to encourage more parents to cooperate with the school.

Ongoing Communication

It is critical that schools have an ongoing strategy to maintain mobile phone numbers. It is not good enough to do this once a year. The following strategies are recommended:

3. Using messageyou™Schools and messageyou™WatchLists
 - The parent reply rate by SMS (or phone and note) will be an indication of whether the parent is receiving messages. Schools need to check receipt of parent replies (eg using WatchLists) and where the number of unexplained absences is not diminishing or where there have been no replies from the parent take follow up action (e.g. – send the follow-up letter included in the implementation workbook or try to phone the parent).
 - The greater the number of parents replying by SMS, the easier this task becomes, as both messageyou™Schools messageyou™WatchLists provide a print out of all SMS parent replies.
4. Integrating phone number updates within existing school practices
 - It is essential that every student and parent who is new to the school (i.e. an enrolment during the year) is given information about the use of text messaging in the school and the importance of keeping mobile phone numbers up to date.
 - New Parent Days/Nights, Year Level Information Sessions, Meet the Care Group Teacher sessions, book distribution and fee collection days all provide opportunities to update parent contact details.
 - Staff enrolling students must use relevant enrolment forms to ensure the mobile phone of the parent wishing to receive messages is included in the database in the correct field.
 - All staff should be encouraged and assisted to include a question “do we have your current mobile phone number?” in every contact with parents – particularly at student re-entry from suspension meetings, parent information meetings and student progress discussions.

- The school website should be updated to provide opportunity for parents to find out about the school's policy on text messaging, but also as a means of sending an email to update their contact details.
- School publicity materials (brochures, handbooks and newsletters) can all carry reminders about the school's need to keep up-to-date phone and other contact details. It may be useful to have a tear-off on each newsletter enabling parents to update contact details.
- Student diaries and school calendars can include information about informing the school of student absences (e.g. using text messages), and also a reminder about updating mobile phone details.