

Parent Conferences

Communicating with parents

It's one of the most important things we do as teachers. When we work together with a child's parents toward common goals, we vastly improve the atmosphere for learning.

Most successful teacher-parent "teams" begin with a conference — usually one conducted before there's a real need to meet.

Tips for a productive and successful parent conference:

- *Make contact early.* Get your relationship off to a good start by contacting them early in the year with a memo or newsletter. Outline the year's course work and let them know you'll be happy to meet with them during the year.
- *Invite both parents and caregivers.* Encourage the involved adults to attend when possible. Misunderstandings are less common if both parents hear what you have to say, and you can gauge the kind of support the child has. *Remember:* Each parent/caregiver may not be available. Be careful not to unwittingly hurt a child's feelings by assuming it's easy to schedule.
- *Get the name and relationship right.* Assume nothing. Check your records ahead of time to make sure you have the names right. Don't assume that the gray-haired man is a grandfather, either. Ask.
- *Allow enough time.* Twenty to 30 minutes is usually adequate. If you're scheduling back-to-back conferences, allow 10 minutes or so between each.
- *Plan ahead.* Have in mind a general — but flexible — outline of what you're going to say.
- *Greet guests near the entrance they'll use.* You'll alleviate anxiety and frustration and visitors will feel more welcome.
- *Use body language.* Nonverbal cues set the mood of the conference. Smile, nod, make eye contact and lean forward slightly. You'll appear interested and approving.
- *Forget the jargon.* Education jargon like "criterion-referenced testing," "perceptual skills," and "least restrictive environment" is a turn-off; put it in plain English.
- *Turn the other cheek.* If you run into a parent/caregiver who is abusive and hostile, try not to be rude. Try to listen without getting defensive.
- *Ask for opinions.* Let it be known that you're interested, eager to answer questions, and that you'll work with them throughout the year.
- *Focus on strengths.* It's very easy for parents to feel defensive because many of them see their own faults in their children. You can help by reviewing the child's strengths and areas of need, rather than by dwelling on criticism or by stressing weaknesses.
- *Be ready for questions.* Be prepared to answer specific questions such as: What is my child's ability level? Is my child working up to his/her ability level? How is my child doing in specific subjects? Does my child cause any trouble? Does my child have any specific skills or abilities in schoolwork?

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- *Get your papers organized in advance.* Assemble your grade book, test papers, and samples of the student's work, attendance records, and other pertinent data ahead of time.
- *Avoid physical barriers.* Arrange comfortable conference-style seating so that you'll all feel equal.
- *Open on a positive note.* Begin conferences on a warm, positive note to relax everyone. Start with a positive statement about the student's abilities, schoolwork, or interests.
- *Structure the session.* As soon as the parents arrive, review the structure of the conference.
- *Stress collaboration.* Let the parents know you want to work together in the best interests of the student.
- *Listen to what parents say.* You'll get more out of a parent conference if you listen carefully to what parents are saying to you.
- *Ask about the student.* You don't want to pry, but remember to ask if they think you should know anything special about the student, which may affect schoolwork.
- *Focus on solutions.* Many conferences are held because there's a problem somewhere. Focus on solutions rather than problems. Plan a course of action.
- *Don't judge.* A child's caregivers or parents may lead a very different lifestyle than your own — communicating your judgment of their attitudes or behaviors won't be productive.
- *Be specific in your comments.* Instead of saying, "She doesn't accept responsibility," say: "She had a week to finish her book report, but she wrote only two paragraphs."
- *Offer a suggested course of action.* Give some specific direction. If Jane is immature, it might be helpful to suggest a list of weekly chores or allow her to take care of a pet.
- *Keep a brief record of the conference.* You may have reason later to refer to the record and see what suggestions for improvement were made. Make notes as soon as possible after the conference while details are fresh.
- *Summarize.* Before the conference ends, review the discussion and the action plan.
- *Wind up on a positive note.* Save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement for the end of the conference.
- *Meet again if you need to.* If you feel you need more time, arrange another meeting.