



Family–School Conferences: A Guide for Parents and Teachers

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Research suggests that when parents and teachers work together collaboratively, there are substantial benefits to students, parents, and teachers. Routine family–school conferences, those meetings held periodically throughout the school year to discuss children’s progress, provide opportunities for positive relationships to develop among students, teachers, and parents that support children’s academic success.

Unfortunately, many parents and teachers find conferences to be stressful. Parents worry that they will hear bad news about their children. Teachers worry that they may not be able to help parents understand what is going on with their children at school. Both parents and teachers fear that they will be blamed for any problems that exist. It is easy to see how miscommunication and misunderstandings can happen.

Keep in mind that parents and teachers share one main goal: Both want the child to be successful in school and in life. Remembering that you have this in common can be helpful in smoothing over rough spots in your conversations.

PREPARING FOR A FAMILY–SCHOOL CONFERENCE

Taking the time to carefully prepare your thoughts and materials will go a long way toward ensuring an efficient and successful conference.

Remember the Purpose of the Conference

Don’t try to do too much in a routine conference. If you have only the typically allotted 15–20 minutes, that time should be spent primarily celebrating children’s accomplishments and discussing ways to promote their continued success. You cannot solve big problems in such a short time. If you need to discuss serious academic or behavioral concerns, schedule a longer conference for another time.

A rule of thumb for teachers: If you would not want to learn serious or negative news about your child without sufficient time to discuss it, don’t use a routine conference to share this type of information with parents. A suggestion for parents: If you are surprised by something you hear in a brief, routine conference, ask for a follow-up meeting.

If the student has been evaluated for special education or is already receiving special education services, do not use routine conferences to review the assessment or IEP. Schedule separate conferences in compliance with special education regulations and district procedures.

Consider Who Should Attend

Sometimes the only participants in the conference are the teacher and one or both parents. However, often there are others who may have important contributions to make. For example, a cousin may help with homework, or a minister might be very influential in persuading the child to stay in school. Teachers can encourage parents to invite these influential people to the conference. Or parents can let the teacher know that they would like to bring additional people to the conference.

If a family has limited English skills, an interpreter should be provided. The child should never serve as the interpreter.

Student participants. Frequently, students participate in conferences. This can be an excellent way for students to see the important adults in their lives working together on their behalf. If parents are uncertain whether students are included, they should ask the teacher. If a student does participate, he or she should have the opportunity to prepare and participate actively, not just sit there listening to others talk.

Child care and home visits. Sometimes parents don't come to conferences because they don't have someone to watch their other children. It is better for parents to come to the conference with other children than to stay away. Teachers and parents might work together through the parent-teacher organization or other services to provide child care on conference days. If this is unavailable, toys, books, or other activities could be provided to occupy the children during the conference.

Sometimes conferences can be scheduled as home visits if there is no other way to connect with the parent in person. The school social worker or psychologist can be helpful in determining if this is an appropriate alternative and facilitating the arrangement.

Gather Information Before the Conference

Everyone who will participate in the conference should prepare for it. Ahead of time, each participant should consider these three questions: 1) What does this child do especially well? 2) What things does the child need to learn next? 3) What questions do I need answered to help this child be successful?

Teachers should ask parents to prepare for the conference as part of the invitation. A brief written form with questions similar to those above can be helpful, especially if it is translated into the languages represented in the school. Work samples can be very helpful in demonstrating what the child is expected to do. Parents can bring homework or other papers the child has brought home. Teachers can bring classwork and test scores to share. If the child is to participate, he or she should be asked to think about or write down areas of strength and needed improvements.

It is a good idea for both parents and teachers to think of a few compliments to share. These must be from the heart and can be pivotal in developing a good working relationship.

PARTICIPATING IN A ROUTINE CONFERENCE

A successful conference is well organized, with clear communication between families and school personnel.

Getting Started

Teachers typically take the lead in conducting the conference. This keeps the conversation on track within the allotted time. Teachers should encourage parents from the beginning to be active participants and to ask questions and offer their perspectives. A brief reminder to all participants about how much time is available and the purpose of the conference can get things off to a positive start.

Introductions. Be sure everyone is introduced and knows what name to use for each person present. If the

teacher is to be called by his or her last name, it is generally most respectful to use last names for all adults participating. No one except the child should call anyone "mom" or "dad." It sends a positive message if participants thank one another for being part of the meeting.

Note-taking. At least one person should take notes to be shared. Often, both teachers and parents prefer to take their own notes. Note-taking should be discussed at the beginning so that everyone feels comfortable.

Listening Carefully and Communicating Clearly

Regardless of who leads the conference, it is essential that each participant has an opportunity to present his or her perspective and concerns.

Round robin. Some teachers find it helpful to use a round robin approach to conducting the conference. Rather than presenting all of his or her information first and then asking for questions, the teacher can ask parents to comment on one of the child's strengths (from their preparation notes). Then the other participants in the conference are asked to give their perspectives on this strength, with the teacher speaking last. The parents are then invited to discuss other strengths, with conversation following each one. Once the parents have given several strengths, others participating in the conference are invited to share additional strengths and these are discussed. Finally, the teacher brings up any additional strengths not previously mentioned.

This process is then repeated for a few areas of concern or needed improvement. Again, parents and others are invited to share first, with the teacher commenting last. Usually, this means that the important areas for improvement are mentioned first by participants other than the teacher. The group then discusses the best ways to continue supporting the student's success.

Listen and present clearly. Whether the teacher uses a round robin or another format, it is important for everyone to listen carefully and to present their information clearly. When listening, ask yourself, "What is the main thing this person wants me to understand?" When the person has finished speaking, check to see that you have understood his or her meaning by repeating what you have heard and asking if you are correct.

When speaking, use a warm tone and be specific and brief. Avoid presenting a long list of concerns. Instead, think about the one or two most important messages you want to convey in the meeting and concentrate on those. Ask others to tell you whether

they see things the same as you do or differently. Teachers especially must be careful to speak plainly without using professional jargon that may be misunderstood. If someone in the meeting uses a term you don't know, be sure to ask what it means.

Ending the Meeting

Toward the end of the meeting, it is very helpful if one of the participants summarizes what has happened. If the meeting has generated a plan to improve student performance or behavior, the group should discuss how to communicate about the effectiveness of the plan. If unexpected academic problems or behavioral concerns were touched on during the meeting, a follow-up meeting should be scheduled. Means of contacting each other should be established in case questions arise later. Be sure to thank the other participants before leaving.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

- Austin, T. (1994). *Changing the view: Student-led parent conferences*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York: Random House.
- Minke, K. M., & Anderson, K. J. (2008). Best practices in facilitating family-school meetings. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 969-981). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Online

Education World, *Parent-teacher conferences*: http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/strategy/strategy046.shtml

Provides links for parents and teachers to resources that will lead to more successful conversations.

Great Schools, *Make the most of your teacher conference*. Available: <http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/191/>

Suggestions to make the family-school conference successful.

Great Schools, *Parent-teacher conference prep*: <http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/737>

Specific ideas to help parents prepare for school conferences.

National Education Association (1987). *How to make parent-teacher conferences work for your child*. Available: <http://www.nea.org/parents/ptconf.html>

Gives tips to parents for successful conferences. Provides educators with strategies for classroom discipline, lesson planning, and communication with parents.

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