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Engaging Parents as Partners in Their Children's Education

Suggestions for Preparing, Conducting and Reflecting on Parent Teacher Conferences

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Parent Teacher Conferences: The Cornerstone of School-Home Relations

The parent-teacher conferences may be the most critical, but at times awkward, ritual in the school year. It is recognized as a key measure of parental involvement.

“Yet, in practice, these conferences can be ill-defined encounters whose very high-pressure design – bringing together a child’s two most powerful daily influences for sometimes super-brief meetings about academic and social progress – make them a volatile element in home-school relations. For schools, parent-teacher conferences can be a nightmare to organize and may leave teachers spinning after hours or quick encounters. For parents, sessions can feel more like speed-dating than team-building and may encourage snap judgments.

Surveys of K-8 parent involvement conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics indicate that a majority of parents attended parent-teacher conferences in 2003. Yet, many are still absent. Those parents who might most need to show often don’t or can’t. The most involved can now, in a growing number of districts, access their child’s homework, grades, and attendance online.

Given the weight that parents and teachers place on these once- or twice-a-year get-togethers, what can schools do to ensure that parent-teacher conferences are effective and productive – and meet the needs of all families?”

Laura Pappano, Harvard Education Letter, Vol. 23, No. 4

Face-to-face communications are much more effective than written communications, newsletters and e-mails. The process included in this document provides specific methods to develop a collaborative conferencing process with parents to discuss strengths and growth areas about their children’s education.

The content and processes used in this document have proven to be highly effective for K-12 teachers and for parents. Data was collected from 52 teachers who field-tested all of the elements from notification/preparation through goal-setting and action planning by the parent and the teacher. Overwhelmingly the ratings were at a 4 and 5 level (on a 5-point scale), and in one high school the average rating was 4.81 or 96.3% satisfaction. This process is effective and productive.

Beliefs/Parent Role Construction

Core Beliefs

In most districts and schools throughout the country, educators will readily agree that families must be involved in their children's education and that home-school partnerships are vitally important. With such overwhelming agreement, why can't we find real partnerships in every school? The reality is that educators and parents have many beliefs, attitudes, and fears about each other that hinder their coming together to promote children's education.

From our conversations with district leaders, principals, teachers, and other school staff, we have identified four core beliefs that serve as the foundation for the work of engaging families.

Core Belief 1

All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.

Core Belief 2

All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.

Core Belief 3

Parents and school staff should be equal partners in children's learning.

Core Belief 4

The responsibility for building partnerships between schools and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.

Excerpted from Beyond the Bake Sale – The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships (2006) (pp 26-39)

Parent Role Construction

It is important for parents to be responsible for improving collaborative relationships with schools. There are six areas for parents to self-assess their role. The areas include:

- Parent Beliefs
- Parent Behaviors
- School Beliefs
- School Behaviors
- Partnership Beliefs
- Partnership Behaviors

Consider reviewing these scales with parents as it provides an opportunity to clearly see the partnership needed to focus on student learning.

Kathleen Hoover-Demsey, Vanderbilt University has developed efficient and effective surveys for parents. The survey is available on [iowaparents.org](http://www.iowaparents.org) Toolkit 2.3 pages 50 and 51, and at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/peabody/family-school/scaledDescriptions.html>

Parent Teacher Conference Dos and Don'ts

Survival Guide: What Every New Member Should Know

1. Do always greet parents warmly at the door. Plan and create an inviting environment. Accompany parents to a place where you can sit together and converse comfortably. Some teachers opt to group chairs in a semi-circle near a table or other surface where they can share student work. (And make sure the chairs are big enough.)
2. Do start the meeting by showing that you care and know something positive about their child. Summarize the student's strengths before raising problems. Three hints to help you get to know each child better before an early fall conference. (1) Keep an index card on each child and jot down observation that you can later share. For example: Alex told us in class the other day about his winning home run. (2) Take photos of your students to use on a seating chart or to jog your memory before the conference. (3) As a getting to know you assignment, ask students to write about their interests, both academically and outside of school.
3. Do dress in a way that reflects the meeting's importance and your respect for the parents and their child.
4. Do rehearse what you want to say. Practice warm-up introductions, prepare an outline, and prepare a checklist of areas to cover. Plan how you will keep track of time.
5. Do use materials from the student's work folder. It is much easier to demonstrate progress and show parents concretely what a student needs to do to improve if you utilize these materials.
1. Don't summon parents into the classroom and direct them to sit in front of your desk. Parents may be anxious or fearful about meeting with you, a key authority in their child's life. If you distance yourself, put them in a subservient position, or appear to condescend, you're undercutting the chances of a successful meeting.
2. Don't begin by focusing on the student's problems. A teacher as a parent recalled her conference for her second grade daughter. *The teacher started with, "Well, she's very messy" and went on to detail her messy desk, her writing, and even her messy hair. There was nothing about my daughter's wonderful sense of humor or her creativity. I wondered if she even liked my daughter.* The students in your class are all somebody's beloved child, and parents come in hopes that you can see their child's best.
3. Don't dress too casually for the occasion. So people think casual attire will make the parent feel more comfortable, but experts say that backfires. You are a professional, and professional attire communicates that message.
4. Don't try to wing it. Your lack of preparedness will undoubtedly be obvious.
5. Don't rely on verbal descriptions of the student's work and progress. Avoid subjective statements such as "His conduct is bad." Instead cite specifics such as, "She interrupts others", or "He has trouble staying in his seat."

6. Do use positive, nonverbal behavior. Listen reflectively. Maintain good eye contact. Lean in when you speak. In your suggestion, acknowledge the stresses of parenting: "I know it can be difficult to find time to read with your child every night. Perhaps you could have your child read aloud to you while you're preparing dinner."
7. Do engage parents in planning best ways to help their child. Seek their suggestions first.
8. Do give parents something to take home with them. They can review material more completely at home and refer back to it during the year. This can also save time at the conference. If you offer a handout on curriculum, for example, you won't need to go over it verbally in exhaustive detail.
9. Do use clear and descriptive terms. Adjust to the parents' needs and levels of understanding. If you must use a buzzword, get in the habit of using parenthetical definitions: "This year we will use math manipulatives which are objects, like this set of marbles, that let kids touch and experience what is meant by mathematical symbols."
10. Do end positively, with a proactive message of hope. Set goals. Review how parents can help. Mention plans for follow through. Let parents know their support is needed and appreciated. If appropriate, send a follow-up letter.
6. Don't point a finger at parents or place blame.
7. Don't dominate a meeting so that parents can't ask questions or make suggestions. There's so much you want to tell them, but think hard about how much information parents need. Parents are most interested in specifics related to their child and will almost always have concerns or questions of their own. Allow for occasional silences, which give the parents an opportunity to ask a question or voice a concern.
8. Don't send parents home empty-handed. If you are concerned parents will not read or otherwise use the material you choose to send home with them, think of some way to have their child interact with it before it is given to them so both the student and the parent are aware of its relevance.
9. Don't use education jargon or acronyms. This can have a chilling effect on parent communication. Some common buzzwords that you know but parents might not include whole language, math manipulative, SAT, ACT, IEP, ITBS, paradigm, inclusion, cooperative learning.
10. Don't end the meeting on a negative note by recounting the student's problems. You may wish to repeat the plan you have agreed upon and set a length of time after which you will check-back to discuss progress.

http://www.nysut.org/newmember/survival_conferences.html

The Joining Process and Parent-Teacher Conferencing

Although the concept of “The Joining Process” involves building a trusting, respectful relationship over time, there are elements of welcoming, honoring and connecting that can be specifically addressed at parent-teacher conferences.

Welcome: Families are made to feel at home, comfortable, and a part of the school community.

- Adequate signage outside and inside the building that lets parents know where to go.
- Signage that indicates enthusiasm about having parents in the building for this event.
- Consider having greeters (older students) welcome families as they enter the building.
- A waiting area with adult chairs, display of student work, textbooks and/or snacks.
- Create an atmosphere in the conferencing area that is comfortable and private.
- Greet parents warmly. Communicate with words and body language that you are glad they are here.
- Provide childcare so parents can give their attention to understanding and communicating with school staff.

Honor: Family members are respected, validated, and affirmed for any type of involvement or contribution they make.

- Provide flexible schedule options for parents.
- Provide translators, if needed, but don't assume ESL families need a translator.
- Be prompt and be prepared.
- Assume positive intent during your conversations and remain calm if provoked.
- Begin the conference by communicating something positive about the student.
- Invite parents to express their views, opinions and questions.
- Maintain a balance of “teacher talk” and “parent talk”.
- Use nonjudgmental and supportive language.
- Maintain eye contact, listen intently, and attend with energy.
- Make sure information you share is meaningful and understandable.

Connect: District staff and families put children at the center and connect on education issues of common interest designed to improve educational opportunities for the children.

- Communicate clearly the purpose of the conference.
- Share authentic examples of students' work.
- Use appropriate and easily understood language, avoiding jargon and technical terms.
- Identify child strengths as well as challenges.
- If learning concerns emerge, articulate clearly what you (or others in the school) will be doing to address those concerns.
- Provide a few specific appropriate suggestions for parents to support learning at home. If appropriate, provide supportive materials for use at home.
- Have a variety of family support materials ready to send with parents: information about the public library, free tutoring sessions, parent support group information, grade level benchmarks, and other content specific information that would support student learning.
- Communicate how parents can contact you in the future.

Adapted from: Dr. Karen Mapp, Harvard University

Overview: Preparing for and Conducting the Parent-Teacher Conference

Guidelines for Pre-Conference

- A. Determine Goals
- B. Inform parents and get input regarding best time for conference - - see parent letters.
- C. Select questions to focus parent preparation and participation.
- D. Confirm conference information with parents.
- E. Select conference content that will enable you to meet your goals.
- F. Plan for each individual and unique student.
- G. Determine how you will "Welcome, Honor, Connect" with parents.

Conducting the Conference

- A. Overview conferencing process-information sharing and interacting with parents.
- B. Discuss child's strengths, challenges.
- C. Share work and behavior examples.
- D. Ask for parent feedback and input.
- E. Design a plan of action to reinforce strengths and deal with challenges.
- F. Determine resources, timeline, and expectations for teacher, parent, student.
- G. Reinforce parents' positive involvement and thank them.

Conference Follow-Up

- A. Reflect on the conference as soon as possible, ideally immediately following.
- B. Make notes regarding follow-up responsibilities.
- C. Send a note of thanks to the parent, including a reminder of plans.
- D. Follow-up according to the time frame established.
- E. Evaluate progress of plan, implementation and results.
- F. Provide feedback to the parents and ask for their input.
- G. Determine future action steps; monitor and adjust the new action steps.

A Special Invitation Letter to Our Conference

Date of your conference _____

With _____

About _____ class

Dear Parent:

You and I are going to talk together with someone very special next week – your child. When we meet at the conference, we'll be talking about these things:

- Questions or comments you may have about your child's progress.
- What we've done and what we plan to do in our class.
- Your child's strengths and examples of those strengths, as well as areas for growth and examples.
- How we all can work together as partners to provide the best possible education for your child.

You probably have some things that you'd like to talk about, too – things like homework, how you can help at home, and perhaps, school policies. It helps if you write down the things you want to discuss before you come to the conference. That's why I left some space here.

Write down any questions and comments you have.

Please bring this note with you to our meeting.

After our conference, we may talk about some things we can do to better serve your child. We'll write those things here during our meeting.

Our action plan to help your child:

Thanks for helping me teach your child.

Sincerely,

A Special Invitation Letter to Your Child's Conference

Date of your conference _____

With _____

About _____ class

Dear _____ : (Fill in parent/guardian's name)

I want to welcome you to a conference about someone special – your child. I look forward to seeing you. When you come to our meeting, it will be helpful for me in teaching your child if you have any comments or questions. Please consider:

- What are your child's strengths?

- What things at school make your child happiest? Most upset about?

- What homework habits does your child have that makes you proud?

- In what ways is your child working up to your expectations? What concerns you?

Please bring this note with you to our meeting.

After our conference, we may talk about some things we can do to better serve your child. We'll write those things here during our meeting.

Our action plan to help your child:

Thanks for helping me teach your child.

Sincerely,

Preparing for the Conference - Checklist -

A. ____ How will you create an invitation for all parents to attend the conference?

The teacher will:

- Extend a welcoming invitation
- Invite parents to send in or bring in questions/comments - - Use Sample Letter A or B
- Provide a schedule that will work for parents
- Confirm the conference time and date
- Prepare students for student-led conferences.

B. ____ How will you create an environment that welcomes and honors parents?

- Comfortable, pleasant setting with adult chairs
- Consider sitting at a table side-by-side
- Plan your pleasant greeting tone - - the words you will use

C. ____ What are your goals for the conference?

The teacher will:

- Be clear on the goals of the conference including strength and growth areas
- Select clear examples
- Be specific and positive
- Share growth targets

The parent will:

- Be able to re-state the strengths you explained about their child
- Be able to explain growth area(s)
- Share information from his/her perspective
- Agree on a plan of action to maintain and/or develop strengths
- Raise questions and make comments

D. ____ What information will you share about each unique student?

- Determine student strengths and have specific examples and artifacts that support your selected strengths
- Determine a growth area and have specific examples and artifacts to support your selection(s)
- Determine your in-school plan for improvement
- Provide examples for parents
- How will you request parent collaboration?

Preparing the Student for Student Led Conferences

NOTE: Preparing the student to lead in the areas below avoids a 'showcase type' conference as it is specific on strength and growth areas.

The preparation process for the student is an important shared responsibility for the success of the conference. It follows the same process as outlined in this document.

- Identify strengths with artifacts of evidence.
- Identify growth area(s) and suggest methods for improvement (as appropriate)

A discussion between student and teacher needs to be scheduled so that both have a similar 'picture' of strength and growth area(s).

Inform the students that they will also fill out a conference reflection form.

Conducting the Conference

- A. Friendly greeting, addressing parent by name, psychological at-ease.
- B. Overview the conferencing process
- I will share information from my perspective
 - I will ask you how you view things
 - We will discuss questions you sent me and questions you have now
 - Let's start with your questions/concerns or other information you wish to share. (Listen intently and link to items below.)
- C. Reinforcing with the parent the student's effort, knowledge, skills, behavior, disposition. Examples:
- Classroom content selection(s)/artifacts
 - Dispositions, e.g., attitudes, self-directed, social competence, caring
 - Other strengths, interests you may want to communicate
- D. Refining/Strengthening the student's skill, disposition, knowledge, behavior, effort.
- Describe area of refinement (be specific and provide meaningful examples)
 - Describe what you (and others, as appropriate) are doing to refine or strengthen the area you selected
 - Ask the parent if they also have a similar concern – or – if you have explained it in a way they can also understand the concern. (This is a check for understanding.)
[Note: If it is a behavioral concern, stick to one common statement: Your child is not learning as much as she/he is capable of. This is the reason the behavior needs to change.]
 - Ask the parent what could be done at home to strengthen the skill, disposition, knowledge, behavior and/or effort. (Provide suggestions, as appropriate)
- E. Closure for the conference
- Re-explanation of the area(s) to strengthen
Teacher explains plan to carry out in school
Parent explains plan to carry out at home
 - Agree on a method to communicate progress or lack thereof. Parent and teacher responsibility. (Use NCR plan form)
 - Teacher re-explains the student strength(s) and optimism to help maintain and advance the skill, disposition, knowledge, behavior and/or effort
 - Friendly smile, handshake - - expression of appreciation

Reflection on the Conference: (Use reflection questions form A or B)

Adapted from Sue Wells Welsh, ITC

Reflection on the Conference (Example A)

To be completed as close to the time of the conference as possible. Note: Many teachers take 1 or 2 minutes to jot down notes immediately after the conference and then take more time later to complete the reflection.

NOTE: Experience is not the best teacher; it is reflecting on the application of effective practices that makes for greater learning and enhancing of the skills.

STEP 1

Date: Student's Name: Parent's Name(s):

1. What are some things I did to make this conference effective?

Provide examples: e.g., clear goals; my preparation; I welcomed and honored the parent; I provided specific examples of student strengths and grow areas; a collaborative plan was established; the parent shared ideas and agreed on the plan; did I have clear goals

2. What went less well than I wanted?

Provide examples: e.g., my overview was not complete; my examples were not specific; I did not provide suggestions to the parent; I did not ask their concerns or their views of their child

3. What would I do differently to help the conference go even better?

Go through each element of the conferencing process A through F to select your area(s) to improve.

4. Things I need to do to follow-up with student and parent. Thank you note.

5. Record any information that you might include in your classroom newsletter: e.g., curriculum concerns, schedule issues - - include in newsletter if there are common concerns/strengths stressed by parents.

Reflection on the Conference (Example B)

Note: Many teachers use this form on a sample of every fifth conference based on 25 students – they then can be efficient but also see patterns of strengths.

Indicate with +, +/-, -, ? how I did on each segment of the conferencing process and put the rating next to the letter.

- + means done well
- +/- means some parts were done well, others inconsistent or lacking
- means not done well
- ? means unable to validate at this time

_____ A. Friendly greeting and opening of the conference.

_____ B. Overview at the conference
Did I ask and get information from the parents?

_____ C. Reinforcing the student's strengths

_____ D. Refining a skill/improvement planning

_____ 1. Teacher responsibility is clear

_____ 2. Parent responsibility is clear

_____ E. Did the conference end with the teacher explaining what he/she will be doing to address areas of weakness?

Was the parent in agreement on methods and resources to help their child outside of school?

_____ F. Expression of Appreciation

Parent Feedback: Was the Conference Worth It?

All things considered, how would you rate our conference?

- Excellent
- Good
- Average
- Poor

Was it helpful to have your student lead the conference?

What part of the conference was most helpful to you?

How could the conference be improved?

Did the conference help you to better understand your child's progress?

Do you feel you had an adequate opportunity to help the teacher understand your child?

Are there any general comments that you would like to make?

Parent Feedback: Was the Conference Worth It?

All things considered, how would you rate our conference?

- Excellent
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What part of the conference was most helpful to you?

How could the conference be improved?

Did the conference help you to better understand your child's progress?

Do you feel you had an adequate opportunity to help the teacher understand your child?

Are there any general comments that you would like to make?

Por favor, ayudenos a mejorar las reuniones de padres

Recibio usted la información necesaria sobre el progreso de su hijo/a?

- Si, recibí la información necesaria.
- No estoy segura/o. Creo que tengo mas preguntas.
- No, quiero mas información sobre mi hijo/a.

Tuvo usted la oportunidad de compartir su punto de vista con la maestra?

- Si, tuve muchas oportunidades de compartir lo que pienso.
- No estoy segura/o de la información que usted queria de mi.
- No, quisiera tener mas tiempo para compartir mas información.

Por favor escriba alguna sugerencia para mejorar las reuniones de padres.

Nombre (opcional) _____

Gracias, Las maestras de Kinder

Por favor, ayudenos a mejorar las reuniones de padres

Recibio usted la información necesaria sobre el progreso de su hijo/a?

- Si, recibí la información necesaria.
- No estoy segura/o. Creo que tengo mas preguntas.
- No, quiero mas información sobre mi hijo/a.

Tuvo usted la oportunidad de compartir su punto de vista con la maestra?

- Si, tuve muchas oportunidades de compartir lo que pienso.
- No estoy segura/o de la información que usted queria de mi.
- No, quisiera tener mas tiempo para compartir mas información.

Por favor escriba alguna sugerencia para mejorar las reuniones de padres.

Nombre (opcional) _____

Gracias, Las maestras de Kinder

Student Reflection on the Conference

Student's Name _____

– Student Report –

1. How would you rate our recent student-led conference with your parent?

1	2	3	4
Excellent	Good	Average	Poor

2. Were you prepared to share with your parent things you are doing well and things you are working to improve?

_____ Yes _____ No

What are some things you did well in the conference?

What are some things you would do differently to make your conference go even better?

3. Did you and your parent discuss your goal or what you want to improve when you returned home?

_____ Yes _____ No

How are you and your parent working on your goal or area of improvement?