

25 Tips for Successful Parent Conferences

Working for a Common Goal: Academic Success

Communicating with parents is one of the most important things we do as teachers. When we can work together with a child's parents toward common goals, we 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.

Of course, while parent conferences can be one of the most helpful techniques in a teacher's "bag of tricks," we also know that sometimes they can be a discouraging waste of time - or even turn into ugly confrontations.

Here are some tips to help make your parent conferences productive and successful:

1. Invite both parents

Encourage both parents to attend conferences when possible. Misunderstandings are less common if both parents hear what you have to say, and you'll be able to gauge the kind of support both parents give the child. Remember that both mother and father may not be available. Increasing numbers of Kansas children live in single-parent homes. Even with two parents, both parents often work outside the home.

2. Make contact early

You'll get your relationship with parents off to a good start if you contact them early in the year, perhaps with a memo or newsletter sent home to all pupils. Give parents an outline of what their children will be studying, and let them know you'll be happy to meet with

them, and how and when they may contact you for conferences.

3. Allow enough time

Schedule plenty of time for the meeting. Twenty to 30 minutes is usually adequate. If you're scheduling back-to-back conferences, be sure to allow enough time between them (10 minutes or so) so you can make necessary notes on the just-conducted conferences and prepare for the upcoming one.

4. Be ready for questions

Parents may have specific questions. They're likely to ask:

- ▶ 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?

5. Plan — Get your papers organized in advance

Assemble your grade book, test papers, samples of the student's work, attendance records and other pertinent data ahead of time. Have in mind a general but flexible outline of what you're going to say, including a survey of student progress, a review of his or her strengths and needs, and proposed plan of action.

6. Greet parents near the entrance they'll use

You'll alleviate anxiety and frustration and make parents feel more welcome.

7. Get the name right

Don't assume that Jennifer Peabody's mother is Mrs. Peabody. She could well have been married again since Jennifer was born. Check your record ahead of time to make sure you've got the parents' names right.



And don't assume that the wrinkled gray-haired gentleman coming in with Johnny is his grandfather. It could be his father or an uncle. Politely ask. Double check names so you don't talk to the Smiths about their son "Stan" when their son's name is "Steve."

7. Avoid physical barriers

Don't sit behind your desk or force the parents to squeeze into the children's desks on the front row. Arrange conference table seating, if possible, so you'll all be equals together.

8. Open on a positive note

Begin conferences on a warm, positive note to keep everyone relaxed. Start with a positive statement about the child's abilities, work or interests.

9. Structure the session

As soon as the parents arrive, review the structure of the conference — the why, what, how and when - so you'll both have an "agenda." (Remember, of course, that parents often come with their own agendas or questions they want answered, so you'll have to be flexible.)

10. Be specific in your comments

Parents may flounder if you deal only in generalities. Instead of saying "She doesn't accept responsibility," pin down the problem by pointing out "Amanda had a whole week to finish up her book report, but she only wrote two paragraphs."

11. Offer a suggested course of action

Parents appreciate being given some specific direction. If Jane is immature, it might be helpful to suggest that her parents give her a list of weekly chores, allow her to take care of a pet or give her a notebook to write down assignments. (Of course, when you offer advice, let parents know you're only making a suggestion.)

12. Forget the jargon

Education jargon phrases like "criterion referenced testing," "perceptual skills" and "least restrictive environment" may

be just too much double-talk to many parents.

13. Turn the other cheek

It is unusual to run into parents who are abusive and hostile, but it can happen. Try not to be rude, whatever the provocation. Hear out the parents in as pleasant a manner as possible, without getting defensive. If the situation is threatening or you begin to feel uncomfortable, end the conference immediately or call for assistance.

14. Ask for parents' opinions

Let parents know you're interested in their opinions, are eager to answer their questions and want to work with them throughout the year to help make their child's education the best. Confirm that you want to work together in the best interests of the child.

15. Focus on strengths

It's very easy for parents to feel defensive, since many of them see themselves in their children. You'll help if you review the child's strengths, solutions and areas of need, rather than dwelling on criticism or stressing weaknesses.

16. Use body language

Nonverbal cues set the mood of the conference. Smile, nod, make eye contact and lean forward slightly. You'll be using your body's language to let parents know you're interested and approving.

17. Listen to what parents say

Despite the fact we spend nearly a third of our lives listening, most adults are poor listeners. We concentrate on what we're going to say next, or we let our minds drift off to other concerns, or we hear only part of what a speaker is saying. You'll get more out of a parent conference if you really listen to what parents are saying to you.

18. Ask about the child

You don't want to pry, of course, but remember to ask parents if there is anything they think you should know about

(such as study habits, relationships with siblings, any important events in his or her life) which may affect his or her schoolwork.

19. Don't judge

It may not always be possible to react neutrally to what parents say — their values may be very different from yours. Your judgment of parents' attitudes or behaviors can be a roadblock to a productive relationship with them.

20. Summarize

Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what actions you and the parents have decided to take.

21. Wind up on a positive note

When you can, save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement about the student for the end of the conference.

22. Meet again if you need to

If you feel you need more time, arrange another meeting later rather than trying to rush everything before the kids get back from art class.

23. Keep a record of the conference

You may find it helpful later to have a brief record of what was said at the conference, what suggestions for improvement were made and so forth. Make notes as soon as possible after the conference while details are fresh.

24. Keep confidences

Parents will tell you information they would not share with anyone else. Do not share "amusing" stories about the student's family with family or colleagues. Your funny story could cause pain to those you have tried most to encourage.

25. Know Kansas law

If you learn anything from a parent that might cause you to suspect child abuse, know your "duty to report" under Kansas law.