



Home-School Conferences: A Guide for Parents

BY ANDREA CANTER

Home and school—everyone shares the goal of helping children learn and feel successful. Research has proven that when parents and teachers work together, everyone benefits: Students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, attend school more regularly, have better behavior, and show more positive attitudes toward themselves and toward school. School programs that include strong parent involvement are more effective. Yet, collaboration between parents and teachers is not always a smooth process.

Establishing an effective home–school partnership requires efforts from both teachers and parents to create a trusting, equitable relationship. Sometimes parents must first deal with their own discomfort with schools and teachers. If parents have experienced difficulty in school, then they may have to overcome negative feelings that carry over from their own childhood. If parents are new to the community, come from another culture, or do not speak fluent English, then they may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of attending a conference with their child’s teacher or participating in a Family Night or school Open House.

Try not to worry or be afraid of a conference with your child’s teacher. Even if you have talked frequently with school personnel about your child’s failing grades or misbehavior, a conference may be an opportunity to start a cooperative partnership with teachers.

PREPARING FOR THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

At least once per year, and frequently each semester (or more often), you will receive a notice of a parent–teacher conference. Perhaps you have requested the conference yourself. There are many steps you can take to assure that the conference is productive and positive.

Assemble relevant materials. Gather appropriate materials to help prepare for the conference. This can include records from previous schools and school years, such as report cards, test scores, immunization and other health records, and past and current correspondence between home and school.

Review these materials. Make sure you have gathered all the material you need. If anything important is missing, such as a report from your family physician, try to locate and add it to your file. As a tip, once you have started a collection of your child’s records, it is easy to add new material each year. At conference time, if you or the teacher has specific concerns, you can then find whatever might be important to share with the teacher.

Talk with your child before the conference. Children should understand why the conference is taking place (is it due to a problem or is it a routine meeting held for all parents) and be assured that parents are seeking ways to help and learn about what their children are doing in school. Find out if your child has any specific concerns about schoolwork or relationships with classmates.

Acquire the handbook for students. If your district, school, or classroom has a handbook for students, be sure to obtain a copy well ahead of the conference and review it. In particular, look for listings of expectations for behavior and attendance so that you might anticipate what questions the teacher may ask of you. Also, try to assemble a list of questions you may want to ask the teacher if you are unsure of material in the handbook.

Be familiar with your child's homework assignments. If your child has homework, be familiar with the assignments and how your child has been performing. Is the work getting done? Does your child seem to understand the assignments? Does the work seem too easy or too difficult?

Prepare a list of questions you want to ask your child's teacher. Is my child meeting expectations for learning and behavior? How has my child performed on daily class assignments, on tests, on homework assignments? How does my child compare to others in basic skills? Does my child follow school rules or does my child exhibit any behavior problems? If my child is struggling in any area, what has been tried to improve performance? Does my child pay attention in class? What else can be done at home or at school? What are my child's strengths? Are there any concerns about my child's health, or adjustment? Are there materials or resources that you would recommend? How does my child get along with other students?

Referral to special education. If you or the teacher have concerns about referral to special education, find out about your rights ahead of time. State and community agencies and advocate organizations can provide this information, and all schools should also have a printed copy of parents' rights under state and federal law.

Be ready to collaborate. Generally, teachers will give parents bad news because they want to help the child do better and not to place blame on the parent or child. But sometimes the message does not come across that way, and parents naturally become defensive and protective, maybe even angry. Assume the teacher has your child's best interests in mind, and respond calmly and tactfully. Indicate that you are most concerned with solving the problem and helping your child succeed. Offer to meet further to discuss the problem and to work out a solution. Remember that teachers are often as afraid to deliver bad news as parents are to hear it.

DURING THE CONFERENCE

Listen carefully. It is perfectly acceptable to take notes. This is particularly helpful if one parent or other involved relative cannot attend. It can also help you remember details so that you can ask questions later.

Offer your perspective. Many times teachers will ask you about your child's activities at home and your views of your child's strengths and areas where help might be needed. Even if the teacher does not ask, speak up and provide your observations and any concerns.

You want to hear good news about your child. If the teacher does not offer any positive comments, ask directly, “What does my child do well?” And remember that teachers often hear only negative comments, too. Be sure to try to offer a compliment, a thank you to let the teacher know you appreciate what they are trying to do to help your child—even when what the teacher is trying to do may not be working.

Do not be afraid to ask questions. If you do not understand something or feel your concerns are not being addressed, then ask the teacher. Teachers and other educators easily slip into jargon and forget that many parents are not familiar with the terms they use every day. Ask what test scores mean and what the results mean for your child. Stop and ask for explanation of unfamiliar terms or programs. Not understanding can quickly lead to misunderstanding

RESOURCES

Clark, L. (2005). *SOS: Help for parents* (3rd ed.). Bowling Green, KY: SOS Programs and Parents Press.

Lansky, V. (n.d.). Preparing for a parent-teacher conference. Available at <http://www.tnpc.com/parentalk/preteens/pretee25.html>

Levine, M. E. (1994). *Educational care: A system for understanding and helping children with learning problems at home and in school* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Educators Publishing Service.

Rimm, S. (1996). *Dr. Sylvia Rimm's smart parenting: How to raise a happy, achieving child*. New York: Crown.

WEBSITES

National Association of School Psychologists—<http://www.nasponline.org/families/index.aspx>

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Education Rights (PACER)—<http://www.pacer.org>

The National Parenting Center—<http://www.tnpc.com>

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