

## SUMMARY

### **Restructuring Routine Family-School Conferences**

When parents are engaged as active members of the school community, significant benefits accrue to children, educators, and the parents themselves (see Christenson, 1996). Such benefits include improved grades and test scores, greater job satisfaction among teachers, and increased parental involvement with learning activities at home. However, it can be difficult for teachers to engage in parent involvement activities, especially when these activities result in another responsibility added to their already heavy load. Furthermore, some of the existing avenues for family-school collaboration, such as traditional parent-teacher conferences, may actually impede the development of greater parent involvement by inadvertently increasing guilt and frustration on both sides of the desk (see Swap, 1993). These traditional methods frequently exclude children, even though children are at the center of the family-school relationship.

This paper session will describe a research project designed to assist teachers in conducting family-school conferences (FSCs) that include children and encourage improved communication between families and teachers. It was predicted that family-school conferences would result in greater participant satisfaction, increased perceived effectiveness in working together, and increased bi-directional communication between families and teachers.

**Overview of Family-School Conferences:** FSCs are designed to be collaborative conversations among all individuals concerned with the student's success, including the student, teacher, and primary caregiver(s). The teacher training sequence involves helping teachers 1) *think differently* about families, schools, and problems by learning systems theory principles and collaborative methods; 2) *talk differently* to families in ways that encourage collaboration through using effective communication skills and solution-focused intervention strategies; and 3)

*behave differently* in the ways that they structure and conduct conferences. The paper provides details on the training sequence and FSC structure.

**Project Design:** Ten teachers from a suburban elementary school (K-3) participated. Teachers first conducted a traditional, pre-training parent-teacher conference with the families of two students in their classroom (total of 16 “target” families). They then participated in training (two 3-hour sessions) and practiced FSCs with the remaining students in their classrooms. An additional 3-hour training session followed in which teachers received feedback on their practice conferences. Finally, teachers conducted a post-training family-school conference with the target families. Conferences with target families were videotaped and all participants were interviewed both before and after training. These data were analyzed using quantitative (e.g., partial interval recording of each participant’s speaking time) and qualitative (e.g., content analysis of participants’ questions, constant comparison analysis of transcribed interviews; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) methods. Parents who participated in the practice conferences (N=84) completed a number of Likert scale items asking them to rate their experiences in the conference they just attended (traditional or FSC). Because these surveys were considered exploratory, formal statistical analyses were not used. Responses were summarized as the percentage of parents endorsing each response stem.

**Results:** First, parents and teachers who participated in the FSCs overwhelmingly endorsed them as positive experiences for both themselves and the children. Whereas pre-training data indicated that both parents and teachers found conferences to be somewhat stressful and often antagonistic experiences, post-training data indicated that both parents and teachers felt more comfortable and collaborative in their interactions with each other during the conferences. Second, teachers reported feeling less stressed and more confident in their ability to

communicate with families, suggesting increased feelings of effectiveness. ). Additionally, we found that students successfully participated in creating plans for their continued academic and behavioral success, and that FSCs were conducted in approximately the same amount of time as traditional parent-teacher conferences. We are still analyzing the communication data, but anticipate evidence of increased bi-directional communication (e.g., fewer intervals in which the teacher is the only speaker; increased intervals with parents and students speaking).

### **References**

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- Swap, S. M. (1993). *Developing home-school partnerships: From concepts to practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.