



## **Parent-Teacher Conferences: Working as a Team**

### **Introduction**

Parent-teacher conferences are an opportunity to establish better communication between parents and teachers. Since children are different at home and in school, both the parent and the teacher gain in understanding the child and can, therefore, be more effective in helping him or her. The teacher may be very surprised to learn that what she thought was a humorous way of dealing with the child was actually making the child feel belittled. The parent may learn that the teacher feels the child is not giving school his best effort. The teacher may learn that the child is distracted because the family is going through a difficult time. Of course, many parents are pleasantly surprised to hear how much better behaved the child is in school than at home.

### **Before the conference**

Preparing for the conference can make the experience more rewarding. Ask your child if he has concerns or anything that he would like you to communicate to the teacher. Depending on the child's age, discuss whether or not family problems should be mentioned. If you are concerned about your child's work, keep copies of material that illustrate your concerns. If only one parent of a two-parent household can attend the conference, it is helpful to take notes or bring a tape recorder to share the findings with the absent partner. In order to gain information about your child's behavior and progress, you might prepare some questions. Here are some possible examples:

#### **Middle School**

- Should I help him/her with homework or do you prefer that it be totally her work?
- Is it better for her to leave blank what she doesn't understand or should I try to explain it?
- Should I correct her homework?
- Do you have a means of communicating with parents if she isn't doing her homework?
- Does she follow directions?
- Is there a time that you meet with children who need some extra help?

- Are there any indications of academic problems?
- Is she sensitive to the needs of others?
- Does her choice of friends interfere with her ability to focus on academic work?
- Do you see any social or emotional warning signs?

Most parents feel some degree of anxiety as they wait outside the classroom for their turn to hear how their child is doing in school. The degree of anxiety depends on several variables. If the child has an easy temperament and has previously been a successful student, the parent feels relatively confident. If the child has a more difficult temperament and has had some rocky school experiences, the parent is bound to feel more nervous. Parents can't help but feel that they are being judged as parents by the teacher. It is hard for parents not to measure their own success by their child's success. These feelings may be further complicated by the parent's own school experience. If the parent was not a good student, approaching a teacher will stir up past experiences and feelings of inadequacy and arouse even more anxiety. Some years the teacher-student match is better than others. Obviously, it is easier if the match is a good one. However, parents must remember that life will not be tailor-made for their child and it is helpful for the child to learn to deal with different personalities.

Parents who have easy children who are good students do not generally seek advice on parent-teacher conferences, so this article is geared to those with more challenging children, although there is one piece of advice for parents of good students: *Never tell a teacher that your child is bored.* This makes the teacher feel that you do not think he or she is a good teacher. There are many reasons why a child might say he's bored. It often means that something is hard or tedious for him which he doesn't want to put the effort into mastering. If the work is truly at a lower level than the child is capable of achieving, it would be wiser to talk to an administrator about placement. If there are no other placement options, talk to the teacher about possible enrichment activities without in any way attacking the teacher. These problems are generally not as troublesome as having a child who struggles.

### **During the conference**

The fact is that some children are harder to parent than others and some require much greater skill than others to support as a student. Parents should not feel responsible or defensive if their child is struggling. Recognizing that their child is challenging, they should approach the teacher in a collaborative manner and seek to work together to support the child.

*Parents must never attack or blame the teacher, just as they hope the teacher will not blame them.*

Parents may feel that the teacher is not as effective with the child as he or she could be, but they should never approach the teacher in a critical way. Some examples follow on more and less effective ways to present concerns.

**Less effective:** "You are giving John too much work to master for one test and it isn't well organized. It isn't clear what he needs to know. He doesn't have a chance of succeeding."

**Result:** Teacher feels attacked and defensive. Negative feelings for the parent could transfer to the child if the teacher does not have a solid ego.

**More effective:** "John has trouble with organization. When presented with a large quantity of material, he doesn't know where to start. Do you have any suggestions on how I can help him?"

**Result:** Teacher offers to help John in organizing material and offers to give him or you sufficient advanced notice of what will be covered on the next test (depending on the child's age and level of difficulty).

**Less effective:** "It's clear that you don't like Mary. She says that you are always picking on her. She says another child can do something and you don't say anything. If she does the same thing, she gets in trouble. She has never had this problem before and doesn't like school this year because of it."

**Result:** Teacher feels attacked and defensive.

**More effective:** "Mary has this idea that you don't like her. I know that can mean that you are simply correcting her. Is she causing problems? Is there anything I can do to help?"

**Result:** Teacher doesn't feel threatened and this opens things up for a discussion. You have the opportunity to help the teacher to understand your child better. The teacher may think about trying to make more efforts to show Mary that she likes her.

**Less effective:** "Paul came home with a big scratch on his face. He says that Alex is always picking on him. My child isn't safe in school. Why aren't you supervising the class?"

**Result:** Teacher will explain why it isn't possible to see everything and will feel defensive and less willing to help.

**More effective:** "Paul came home with a big scratch on his face. He says that Alex is always picking on him. I know it isn't possible for a teacher to see and hear all interactions between children, but would you mind keeping an eye on them and trying to get to the bottom of what's going on?"

**Result:** Communication is open for the teacher to tell you what she has noticed. Perhaps Paul is contributing to the problem. You want to know this as a parent so you can help him to deal differently with the situation. The teacher will most likely agree to keep an eye on things.

These examples underline the importance of trying to keep open communication with the teacher and showing him or her that you want to work collaboratively and that you respect the teacher's ability. It is never to your child's advantage to attack a teacher. Keeping open communication gives the parent the opportunity to receive the most information about the child in school and the best shot at having the teacher meet the child's needs. By the same token, if there is something going on at home that may affect your child's behavior in school, it is important to share this with the teacher. If you are having marital or other personal problems, you may feel this is private information, but your child may be feeling the stress and may have social/emotional difficulties in school. Sharing your situation will usually help the teacher to be more understanding with your child.

If you are totally surprised and taken aback when the teacher tells you that your child is having behavioral or academic difficulties, try not to panic or respond emotionally. Take a problem-solving approach and show the teacher that you want to work with him or her to improve the situation. Ask the teacher for specific examples of the behavior, the time of day, and the circumstances and offer any insights you may have.

**Develop a plan.** Determine the teacher's expectations and work together with the teacher to develop a plan that you both think will work. It is a good idea to focus on one problem at a time so the child will not be overwhelmed and will have a better chance of success. It is also important to determine if the child has control over what he is doing or not. For example, a teacher may complain that the child doesn't follow directions. The child could have a language problem rather than being willful. An evaluation and language therapy might be the answer. If the problem is a behavioral one without a physiological base, a behavior modification program might be the answer.

It is always a good idea to praise interesting projects or activities the teacher has undertaken and to thank him or her for working to help your child. If your child requires extra attention

from the teacher, show appreciation for that. Teachers work hard and appreciate recognition from parents.

### **After the Conference**

Discuss the conference with your child. Pass on the positive information first. Be specific about the areas where your child is doing well. If there is a problem, put it in the context of all the positive aspects of your child's functioning in school. Tell the child that you and the teacher have worked out a plan to help the child improve and seek your child's input.

After a plan has been developed, it is important for the parent and teacher to confer again after a reasonable amount of time to measure progress. Parents must keep in mind that changes do not occur overnight and must not expect feedback too soon or too frequently. This can put too much pressure on the child and make the situation worse. If you still feel progress is not being made after a reasonable amount of time, consider discussing the issue with the teacher's supervisor. Parents should make it clear to the child that doing well in school is a family value and that the teacher and parents are working together to help the child succeed.

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