Creating Comfortable and Productive Parent/Teacher Conferences

Ideally, parent/teacher conferences should be models of good communication that benefit children's learning. The reality is that these meetings are often dreaded by parents and teachers alike. Ms. Stevens and Mr. Tollafield provide a list of suggestions to help teachers plan for and participate in an experience that will be much closer to the ideal.

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AFTER A LONG day at work, she rushed across town, wove her way through corridors, located the room, signed in, and waited nervously for 30 minutes. On entering the room alone and approaching the waiting group at the conference table, she felt apprehensive, overwhelmed, and outnumbered. A newcomer in an unfamiliar situation, feeling small and on trial, she sat down at the table for the conference and held her breath.

This was her first parent conference at her son's middle school. A single parent new to the community, she had come to learn about the program and how her son was doing. From across the table an unfamiliar voice called out, "What are you doing here? Your son is doing fine. I wish I had more students like him." Slowly, she exhaled and the conference began.

That conference experience actually happened to the first author. What have your conference experiences as a parent been like? Some parents recall bad experiences they had when they were in school. Some parents are immigrants and cannot read or speak English, much less understand educational jargon. Some have a child who is viewed as a troublemaker rather than as a valued student.

Many parents have jobs that conflict with the hours teachers are available for conferences, or they lack a convenient means of transportation to the school. In such circumstances many parents never venture through the schoolyard door. Research tells us that more than 40% of parents never attend school programs. And even those who do attend, do so less frequently by the time their child reaches high school.

But there are two parties to a conference. What about the perspective of teachers? Many teachers dread parent conferences as much as parents do. For them, conferences are also stressful experiences. They may be overwhelmed by a long line of waiting parents, even as they hope to see a particular parent who does not show up. When the teacher and parent do meet, often the negative information conveyed puts both on the defensive so that no real communication occurs.

Clearly, there is something wrong with the kinds of conference experiences we've just described and the kinds of parent/teacher relationships they reflect. Schools should be warm and welcoming places for parents and their children. They should be open and inviting, providing the opportunity to share information and to engage in planning for the future of children. Parent conferences should be models of good communication, integrally involving parents in their child's education.

Below, we provide a 10-point parent conference checklist with questions, a number of practical ideas, and commonsense tips that can be used to create a positive climate that enhances the conference process for parents and teach-
ers. This checklist may be a helpful gauge to determine whether your school setting has the key ingredients needed for optimal communication.

1. Invitation techniques. How does your school plan for parent/teacher conferences? How are invitations issued so that parents not only receive the message but also are encouraged to attend? Six percent of all U.S. households do not have a phone. Some 21% of parents are unable to read. How can teachers get the attention of these parents?

Teachers can invite parents to school in a number of ways. For routine conferences, public service announcements on radio or local television can be used. Neighborhood information trees and word of mouth involving influential parents, community leaders, and local organizations, agencies, and religious institutions can also help get the word out. Another option is having students create and take home individual invitations. Because these personal invitations are student creations, they have a better chance of reaching home and being seen by parents than announcements in school-produced fliers or newsletters.

Once you have the attention of parents, how are they encouraged to attend? How can parents be persuaded that this conference is a priority in their busy lives? Does your school emphasize the vital importance of parent involvement all year long? Do teachers recognize and convey appreciation for the 18-hour-a-day commitment that parents and other family members make to children? Or is this commitment taken for granted? Is the contribution to a child's life of all family members (extended, blended, and estranged) recognized? Are all parties invited to participate?

Even if teachers capture parents' attention, they often do not invite the student, the most important stakeholder in this process. The student is the person whose involvement is most critical to the successful implementation of any decisions made at a conference. The second author recalls the anxiety of being left at home while his parents attended parent conferences. Some authors have urged — and the federal law that applies to students with disabilities recommends — that, whenever appropriate, the student be present and involved in conferences. The first author still remembers vividly from her childhood a parent/student/teacher conference held in fifth grade. That conference provided the jolt she needed to help her develop a personal awareness of and responsibility for her own education.

Finally, is your school's staff sensitive to the issue of time? The traditional conference model that many schools use is one that dates from a time when most children came from two-parent homes and only one parent worked outside the home. Today, the norm is two working parents or a single parent who sometimes works two jobs. Most of these parents will be unable to come to school during the day. How can conferences be scheduled so that parents do not have to take time off from work? Does the school accommodate the needs of these parents? What provisions are made for child care? Some schools schedule activities like “Donuts with Dad” or “Muffins with Mom” in the morning before work or hold potluck dinners in the evening for parents. Updating program delivery formats to meet changing community and parent needs is especially important today.

2. Pleasant encounters. Does your school try to make the conference experience an enjoyable one for parents? As soon as people enter a school building, they get a sense of how inviting that environment is. Is your school welcoming to parents? Is there a comfortable waiting area for parents outside the principal's office? Is student work displayed on the walls? Or are the first things parents see a list of rules, a metal detector, and a sign that says, “No guns allowed”? Do fathers feel as welcome as mothers, or do they feel alienated because of traditional stereotypes that view fathers as uninvolved in the education of their children?

Once visitors and guests are inside the building, how does your school accommodate them? Do the teachers open their classrooms to visitors? Inviting parents for informal classroom visits can help them feel more comfortable at conference time. At conferences, do teachers barricade themselves behind their desks or sit in their desk chairs, while parents are forced to sit in child-sized chairs or desks? Meeting parents and students around a table can contribute significantly to the quality of communication. Investing in a conference room or an area in the school where parents and teachers can feel like partners and equals is worthwhile. Providing coffee or other refreshments for both parents and teachers can also help create an atmosphere that is conducive to open communication.

3. Pertinent information. When planning a parent meeting or conference, does your school leadership consider what parents want and need? The more you involve parents in planning and decision making, especially parents from culturally different backgrounds, the more likely they are to attend school programs. Schools often continue to rely on their traditional ways of involving parents even if those practices are no longer appropriate. Schools and communities change, and so do their needs and priorities. For example, rural schools become suburban systems, and the focus on high school graduation and vocational planning can change to an increased emphasis on college-preparatory training. Moreover, the composition, background, and values of a community can shift over time.
A survey of community and teacher needs can be used to determine how current programs are being received and if there is a need for a change in focus or format. Some time ago, in a 22-county area of Nebraska, an effort was made to increase the involvement of fathers in the Head Start programs of their children. Fathers were asked what types of services they wanted their local education system to provide. They said they wanted programs that would help them to answer such questions as “What should I expect of my child, and how should I discipline him?” or “What are some inexpensive family activities I can do with my child?”

This survey led to the development of a series of specifically designed programs offered jointly to men and the children in their lives. This series brought both groups into the schools during the evening hours and provided them with a jointly created meal, as well as with the programs they wanted. One ancillary outcome of this program was that attendance by males at other education-related activities and programs increased significantly.

Often parents do not have the same priorities as teachers. Education may not be their top priority. To reach parents, it is vital that the school’s staff ask what parents want and provide them with that.

4. Positive interaction. How do your school’s teachers view parents and children? Some teachers may have a tendency to blame parents rather than attempt to help them. Many educators can recall with dismay conversations in the teachers’ break room and the sinking feelings they get when a colleague who feels a sense of hopelessness and frustration blames a child’s parents.

Children’s parents can be seen as colleagues. Their cultures, perspectives, and family values may be different from those of their child’s teacher, but it is important for teachers to learn as much as possible about them. Some parents go through their whole lives moving from one job or crisis to another, bending all their efforts toward just putting food on the table. As busy professionals, educators, too, can find themselves going from crisis to crisis and day to day in their own personal lives. What private crises do some students’ parents experience that educators do not know about, and vice versa?

Ultimately, parents and educators share a common goal: to improve the future quality of life for children by seeing that they receive the best possible education. With each party working alone, there is less chance of reaching that goal. But in working together there is power, and children deserve to have their parents and teachers work together as equals.

5. Preparation activities. What are the objectives of the conference? What specific information do teachers wish to obtain from parents or convey to them? When getting ready for a conference, teachers need to determine the purpose, focus, or plan for the conference. They should be prepared with the main questions or points they wish to discuss, as well as specific examples of student work or behavior. To see things in perspective, it is often helpful for a teacher to step back and focus on the whole child rather than only on problem areas.

Teachers should be prepared to speak with the parents of all their students, not just with those whose children may be having problems. For those meetings in which the teacher may anticipate a problem with parents or have difficulty viewing the child in a positive light, it may be helpful to start the conference with a sincere compliment about the child. Every child has a strength that a teacher can state. Some simple preparation and planning can help keep a conference focused on the specific goals a teacher wishes to accomplish.

6. Good communication. Do you and your colleagues practice good communication skills? During the meeting it may be important to stop, look, and listen to what is actually going on. Are you making eye contact with the parents? Are you spending time truly listening to what is being said? Or are you planning what you’ll say next? Is there actual communication and interaction? Or does each person simply present his or her own perspective? It pays to monitor your use of communication skills, including reflection, paraphrasing, and summarizing.

Is your language easily understandable, or is it educational jargon? When explaining things like test scores to parents, teachers need to be prepared to explain such spe-
cialized terms as "standard score" or "percentile" without oversimplifying. Visual aids or examples can often help with this task.

One goal of the conference is the formation of an alliance between the teacher and the parent. In order for this to happen, teachers should show confidence in their point of view without being defensive, use conflict resolution skills, and be open to other perspectives and opinions.11

7. Participation and involvement. Are parents really involved in the conference, or are they left out of the process? Asking parents for ideas and suggestions is important. After all, they live with their child. Parents often have a unique perspective and important insights that can help solve a problem. Teachers need to take the time to determine each participant's thoughts and possible contributions. Getting everyone to participate actively and collaboratively is the most difficult part of a parent conference. Yet it can be the most rewarding. A parent advocacy program can help with this process by developing and encouraging parent participation.12

Ensuring that each participant's perspective is recognized and thoughtfully considered in the process of achieving a consensus takes considerable effort. Treating each person with warmth and respect will help to encourage him or her to participate. If all parties feel that their views are heard and understood, the likelihood of reaching a consensus is increased.

8. Planning for the future. After a consensus has been reached, it is necessary to develop a plan and determine whether there are any problems with it. Is the plan reasonable? Are the expectations for the child specific and measurable? Have culturally sensitive issues been considered? Do any parties need support to ensure that the plan is implemented? How can this support be delivered?

Sharing information, modeling, and reinforcing changes are techniques that can be used to provide support for the parents, the student, and even the teacher. Are these and other support services and resources such as consultants and counselors available in your school? For example, perhaps parents are permitted to check out books from the school library or perhaps there is an information or a homework hotline for them.

Just as any plan for the school must be successfully integrated with school policies, procedures, and culture, any plan for the child at home should fit the family's lifestyle and balance with other family needs. At the close of the conference, teachers should offer a brief summary statement that mentions their availability for future assistance to parents and any special provisions made for monitoring student progress.

9. Paper record. Don't let the plans made at your meetings be forgotten. It is important to make a record of the conference, focusing particularly on any conclusions or plans that result from it. Giving a copy of this summary to parents provides official documentation of the meeting and allows them to recall easily what was said. It is also a tool for accountability to use in measuring changes in the child's behavior. This helps both the teacher and the parent to support the child by monitoring the plan and its effectiveness.

10. Partnership for progress. Does your school create comfortable and productive parent/teacher conferences? The suggestions listed above should help you to work more effectively with parents, as well as helping school staff members to create increased respect and more comfortable environments for communication. Positive, dynamic conferences between teachers and parents can pave the way to maximizing home/school cooperation and providing vital links for the student's future education.

Many of the ideas and procedures outlined here are models that come directly from the spirit and the letter of special education mandates. Today, positive conferences with parents are routine in conferences for children with disabilities. Teachers and administrators can learn from the experience of special educators. We invite readers to create their own lists and to develop classrooms, schools, and school systems that will produce friendly, comfortable, and productive parent conferences.

7. Foster, op. cit.
12. Lindaur et al., op. cit.