

## Conduct Successful Parent Conferences

Parent conferences can produce high-level anxiety for everyone involved: students, parents, and teachers. Despite the anxiety they produce, face-to-face meetings can be a very effective way to solve problems.

Teachers who want to communicate well realize that parents and guardians want to be reassured that their child is doing well and can succeed in school. Even if that is not what is happening at the moment, parents want teachers to work with them to help their children. A strong connection with your students' parents and guardians is achievable if you make sure that your goals for conferences are clear.

### Five Essential Goals to Accomplish in a Parent Conference

**Goal 1:** Parents should see you as a friendly and knowledgeable teacher who has their children's best interests at heart.

**Goal 2:** Parents should feel an atmosphere of cooperation and support when they are meeting with you.

**Goal 3:** Parents should leave a conference with all their questions answered and all the points they wanted to discuss covered.

**Goal 4:** You and the parents should have a sense of mutual respect and an understanding of each other's problems and viewpoints.

**Goal 5:** Workable solutions to any problems should be agreed on, and everyone involved should agree to work together to help the student.

## GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE PARENT CONFERENCES

A parent conference is much more involved than a quick chat after school. Successful conferences require planning, attention to details, and effort. Use the guidelines that follow to guarantee that the parent conferences you have this year are positive and productive.

### Actions to Take Before a Parent Conference

- ▶ Make sure you have a clear purpose for the conference and a clear understanding of the outcome you would like.
- ▶ Plan the points you want to cover. Write them down.
- ▶ Gather samples of student work or other evidence that you would like to show parents in the conference. Include progress reports and other information related to grades or behavior.
- ▶ Review cumulative records and report card information.

- ▶ Make notes on the student's strengths and weaknesses as well as any other special information you would like to present.
- ▶ Anticipate a parent's reactions and questions, and jot down notes about possible answers that you may be too nervous to recall in the conference.
- ▶ Create a seating arrangement that will be comfortable for adults. Arrange chairs around a table or desks large enough for adults in a circle. Do not sit behind your desk.
- ▶ Make sure you provide a pen and paper for everyone.
- ▶ Remain calm before, during, and after the conference. If you lose your cool, you will gain nothing.
- ▶ Make a neat "Do Not Disturb" sign; post it on your door so that you can meet without distractions.
- ▶ Meet parents and escort them to your room.



### Actions to Take During a Parent Conference

- ▶ Be prepared to begin promptly. Do not make parents or guardians wait while you shuffle papers.
- ▶ Begin by expressing your appreciation that the parents have come to the conference. Try to establish a tone of good will and friendly cooperation as quickly as you can.
- ▶ Use language that will make parents comfortable. Do not use educational jargon.
- ▶ Begin with positive remarks about the child. Talk about the student's aptitude, special talents, improvements, and potential. Focus on strengths even if there is a serious problem. Never lose sight of the fact that the child is very important to his or her parents.
- ▶ Convey the attitude that the child's welfare is your primary concern.
- ▶ State any problems in simple, factual terms. Express your desire to work with parents for a successful resolution.
- ▶ Discuss specific examples of a problem. Show examples of work that illustrates or give details about the student's behavior.
- ▶ Always allow upset or angry parents to speak first. After parents have had the opportunity to say everything they need to say, then—and only then—can they listen to what you have to say or begin to work on a solution to a problem.
- ▶ If you have discussed a problem before, let the parents know of any improvement.
- ▶ Be sure to state what you have done to try to correct problem situations.
- ▶ If you want to solve a problem, you need to give your full attention throughout the entire conference. Your nonverbal language is crucial for success. Be friendly and attentive.

- ▶ Don't put parents on the defensive by becoming angry or by asking personal questions.
- ▶ Don't try to outtalk parents. You may make your point, but the parents will not listen to you. Do not give in to the temptation to interrupt.
- ▶ End the conference gracefully by recapping the points that you have covered.
- ▶ Determine what you will do to follow up on the conference and to keep in contact with the parent.
- ▶ Express appreciation again for the parents' concern and the time they have spent with you in the conference.

### Actions to Take After a Parent Conference

- ▶ Immediately complete your notes and the documentary evidence of what was discussed and the agreed-on decisions. Spend enough time on this so that your records are complete. Should you need to refer to this material later, you may not remember details accurately if your notes are not complete.

**Take a breath and think before speaking or deciding on something.**

—Yann Pirrone,  
15 years' experience

## WHY SOME PARENTS AND GUARDIANS MAY NOT RELATE WELL TO YOU

As you gain experience, you will find that not all parents and guardians are supportive of you and the other teachers in your school. While your first tendency may be to take this personally, there are many possible reasons for such negative attitudes:

- Some parents and guardians may have had unpleasant experiences in school themselves.
- Their child may have told them something objectionable (though probably exaggerated or false) about you.
- One of your lessons may have contained information they find inappropriate.
- You may not have presented yourself as professionally as possible when you first met them.
- You may have allowed a problem to escalate by not contacting them as quickly as you should have.
- They may be reacting out of their own frustration with their child's behavior, particularly if the problem is a long-standing one.
- They may disagree with you about the consequences of their child's behavior.
- They may feel embarrassment at their child's behavior or lack of success.

- Their child may have had unsympathetic or unsupportive teachers in the past.
- Previous teachers may have reacted negatively to their efforts to parent the child.
- Your uncertainty and lack of confidence may be obvious.
- They may want to protect their child from potential embarrassment or punishment.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN PARENTS OR GUARDIANS ARE UNCOOPERATIVE

No matter how hard you try, parents and guardians will not always be as cooperative as you would like. The best way to avoid this situation is by intervening early, following procedures and rules, maintaining accurate records, presenting yourself as a professional, and keeping parents informed about their child's progress.

If you find yourself in a confrontation with a hostile parent, it is up to you to assume control of the situation. The following steps can help you manage meetings with parents so that the meetings result in productive outcomes instead of heated words.

- ▶ Listen to what angry parents or guardians have to say, without trying to interrupt or correct them. Do not try to present your side of the disagreement until they have had an opportunity to express themselves.
- ▶ Show your interest by asking questions about specific details. Often, a simple misunderstanding is the cause of the problem.
- ▶ Make sure to restate the problem, so that the other person can be reassured that you do understand. Try, "I think you're saying . . ."
- ▶ Explain the problem from your viewpoint as objectively as you can. Be specific about what was expected, what the child did that was not appropriate, and how you responded.
- ▶ Make it clear throughout the confrontation that you want to work with the parent for the child's welfare.
- ▶ Remain calm.
- ▶ It will only harm you in the eyes of the parents and your supervisors if you act on your natural desire to justify your actions in a loud tone or to return insults.
- ▶ You do not have to accept threats or abuse from a parent. If, after you have sincerely tried to resolve a problem, the parents or guardians remain upset, suggest calling in an administrator to help.
- ▶ If you suspect that a parent plans to contact an administrator, you should make the contact first. It is never wise to allow your supervisors to be surprised with bad news. Instead, see an administrator, present your point of view, and ask for assistance.