

Tips for New Teachers

Making the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences offer great opportunities to deepen your working relationship with parents. As you highlight their child's strengths, discuss academic or social concerns, and share information about child development, parents come to see you as an ally and themselves as true partners in their child's education. A little thinking and planning will help you make the most of these great opportunities.

Tips for Success

Make an outline and gather materials. A plan for how you'll divide up the time will help you stay on track. Here's a general outline for a 30-minute conference:

- 5 minutes: Opening conversation
- 10 minutes: Report on academic progress and concerns
- 10 minutes: Report on social progress and concerns
- 5 minutes: Summing up

However, you may need to put your plan aside if a parent raises an urgent issue that you weren't expecting. Remember that you can always schedule another conference!

In addition to writing an outline, you'll want to make notes for topics you want to cover and have at hand student work, assessment results, information on child development, and anything else you want to share with parents.

Offer conversation starters. Put parents (and yourself) at ease with a question or two: "What did Sam like about school last year?," "What does Tina like to do at home?," or "What are some things you'd like her to accomplish this year?"

Invite parents to share their thoughts. As experts on their children, parents can share valuable insights. And they'll appreciate your respectful recognition of their role in helping their children.

Highlight the positives. Recognize a child's strengths before discussing her struggles. You'll give parents some perspective while encouraging them to work productively with you.

Address just one or two concerns. Listing too many problems can make parents (and their children) feel defeated. Mention that you'd like to help the student with several things, but for now you'd like to concentrate on just one or two.

Let parents know if you need thinking time. It's perfectly OK to tell parents you want to think through what they've said, observe their children for a bit, consult others, or read up on an issue they've raised.

Be Prepared for Surprises

Parents sometimes surprise us with negative or personal questions or comments: "My son's teacher bullied him all last year." "My daughter's lazy. She never tries at anything." "My husband doesn't care about Mark. He never comes to these conferences." "My wife's divorcing me. Things are falling apart."

What can you do in such an instance?

Steer the conversation back to positives: "I'm sorry things didn't go well for Adam last year. But because our time is limited, I'd like to focus on what we can accomplish this year if we work together."

Focus on the child: "You seem to be going through some tough stuff right now. I wonder if that's taking Jasmine's attention away from school. What do you think we might do to help her concentrate?"

Listen with empathy: "That must be hard" or "You've been through a lot" can help parents feel heard without injecting your own opinion or advice.

Offer to get help: "You seem to be wondering what to do next. Our school counselor may have some ideas for you."

Follow Up and Follow Through

After each parent-teacher conference, send a note thanking parents for sharing time with you. If you offered to find resources, gather information, and so forth, make sure you do so—and share the results with parents.

Each parent-teacher conference can be a powerful occasion for meaningful communication with families. Thinking ahead and following some simple guidelines will help ensure that conferences are positive and productive for everyone.

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