

Effective Parent Teacher Meetings

Effectiveness

Parent-teacher meetings are a regular feature of school life. Often they add to our stress loads. Not only do they usually occur before or after a busy day of teaching, many teachers feel uncomfortable dealing with parents. Planning and preparation are essential to increase effectiveness and reduce stress.

Setting up the environment for the interviews is important. You should have a clear space to meet with the parent. Wherever possible, avoid setting up a table between you and the parent. Ideally you should be seated alongside the parent so that you can discuss and look at examples together. It is important to ensure the space is private and that conversations can be held confidentially. A clearly sign-posted waiting area should be provided for parents. If possible, provide waiting parents with a folder of their child's work samples or a list of questions they might like to reflect on.

The intention of Parent-Teacher meetings should always be for both parties to share information about the student. The aim should be for both parties to have a better (hopefully shared) understanding of the student. It is therefore important to listen as well as give information to parents. Ask if they have any information that you should be aware of. However this needs to be measured. From the parent's perspective, they are coming to you to hear how their child is progressing. They only get a very limited amount of time each. We need to respect this time and use it well.

The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

Be prepared! Identify key points and issues to discuss. Use work samples to illustrate key messages.

Always begin the meeting with something positive about the student. Many teachers find the 'sandwich approach' helpful. Start with a positive, discuss areas where improvements can be made and close with a positive statement. Parents want to know that you know and care about their child - even if there are challenges.

It is essential that the meetings are honest and clear. The Stephen Covey term 'Talk straight' is particularly relevant. It is important to ensure you are not 'sugar coating' things too much to avoid confrontation or being too blunt and thereby causing offence. Parents need to be given accurate information. However we also need to phrase things carefully so that we are not seen as criticising their parenting. Getting the balance right ensures that at the conclusion of the meeting the parent has received the clear message that you had intended.

It is important to adhere to the designated appointment times. If a longer period of time is likely to be needed, book a double block of time. If the allocated time has been utilised and there are more issues to be discussed, make another appointment.

Avoid meetings becoming a 'point scoring' event. The meetings are NOT about who is right and who is wrong. They are about building a partnership to assist the student. Give some thought to how parents of this particular student could assist them at home.

At the end of the session, summarise the plans or commitments that have been made and agree on the timeline. Allow time in your schedule to jot some notes of the key points and any commitments made.

Key points

Set up the environment - avoid hiding behind your desk, prevent interruptions and be prepared.

Always keep in mind - The intention of the meeting is to share information to assist the student's learning.

Parents want assurance that you know and care about their child.

TALK STRAIGHT - avoid 'sugar coating' and being too blunt.



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