

Adapted from a blog post by Nancy Flanagan in Education Week Teacher on October 5, 2012

Parent-Teacher conferences are an important opportunity for two-way communication. They are not merely a stage for teachers to give parents information on classroom performance, although many teachers do just that. They are also an opportunity for parents to understand and develop trust in their child’s teacher.

Parent-Teacher conferences are NOT just about results. If a parent leaves a conference with a list of grades and nothing else, it's wasted time.

**Conferences are also a place for parents to tell teachers things about their child**: How he likes to learn. What she says about the class at home. How he enjoys spending free time. What motivates and interests them.

Parent-Teacher conferences are a key strategy in establishing a partnership with parents, after all, they are the child’s first educator. It is important that teachers demonstrate that they know the student, their interests and their learning characteristics, not just their results. The better that you know your students, the stronger the partnership with parents.

To enhance this approach try to create a physical environment where you are working WITH parents to focus on this joint ‘project’ – the best possible learning outcomes for this student.

A conference with parties sitting on either side of a table or desk is adversarial and reinforces hierarchies. This is not a time for ‘point scoring’ or proving we are right. Figure out a comfortable seating arrangement with no barriers. For example, sitting side by side to look at the student’s work samples, emphasises a common focus as a third point of reference.

Making parents queue up outside your door, or sit in little tiny chairs, is neither efficient nor courteous. Is the image you are conveying professional, organised and student centred?

**Ask parents how they want to stay in touch** about important things (*not* reporting a weekly running grade). Open that channel by sending a quick initial e-mail or calling. The conference should merely be the first contact, the open door. Even if you never use the channel, it's there.

If a parent seems to be exaggerating, there's an underlying message.

“*My child sits at the table every night for three hours, doing homework!”*

If a teacher seems to be testy or resistant, “*I only give 15 minutes of homework per night!”* - a different message. Somewhere between the two claims lies the truth - but finding it will take some clarifying questions. Is the student unwilling to admit he doesn't understand something? Is the teacher tied to unnecessary homework? **It's hard to ask uncomfortable questions. Do it anyway.**

**The outcome of a successful Parent-Teacher conference is a shared focus and an increased level of knowledge and understanding, on both sides, of how to support the student to achieve their potential.**

Suggestions For Improving Parent-Teacher Conferences

Working in schools can be stressful!

These articles are intended to help the great people who work in schools.

Key points

Parent-Teacher conferences are an important opportunity for two way communication

Conferences are NOT just about the students’ results

Create a physical environment that supports a partnership rather than an adversarial approach

***Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.***

Henry Ford

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