

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

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Abstract

Parent-Teacher conferences are an ideal time for the important adults in a child's life to arrange to work together to help the child succeed. Successful conferences are based on teacher preparation. Pre-service teachers or new teachers may consider structuring their first conference into four sections: (1) *Performance*, (2) *Growth*, (3) *Strengths* and (4) *Questions*. *Performance* examines the overall grade first then some specifics including assignments created by the student. *Growth* includes comments on one of the three stages to success - Attendance, Readiness, and Skill. *Strengths* suggest that the teacher recognizes that the student is doing well in at least some areas. Leaving time for *questions* allows the parents to go over specific areas that may have been missed. Ending an interview on a positive note is vital. Email and telephone are best for setting up a face-to-face conferences however parents often ask such specific questions that these have become conferences and preparation for these will also increase the chances of insuring student improvement. Successful conferences can be an effective way of benefiting the student.

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

Parent-teacher conferences are an opportunity to; open communication between home and school, keep parents informed about their child's achievement, and develop cooperative strategies that can ultimately benefit your student. They are an ideal time for the important adults in a child's life to arrange to work together to help the child succeed. Successful conferences are based on teacher preparation. Moving the conference through a series of well thought out steps can give structure and focus to your time. When preparing for a conference it is important to have in mind the overall structure and how you can best use the time given. Pre-service teachers or new teachers may consider structuring their first conference into four sections: (1) *Performance*, (2) *Growth*, (3) *Strengths* and (4) *Questions*. *Performance* examines the overall grade first then the specifics including assignments created by the student. *Growth* includes comments on one of the three stages to success - Attendance, Readiness, and Skill. *Strengths* suggest that the teacher recognizes that the student is doing well

in at least some areas. Leaving time for *questions* allows the parents to go over specific areas that may have been missed. Consider being sensitive that parents tend to personalize criticism of their child. If you tell parents that their son is failing, you are telling the parents that they too, are failures. Consider putting suggestions for improvement in context of how their child is valued by you.

Closing a conference on a positive note is vital. After the conference consider creating a note for yourself, especially if a plan has been created to improve the student's performance. Email and telephone are best for setting up a face to face conference but parents are often asking such specific questions that these become conferences and preparation will also help insure student improvement.

Before the Conference

PREPARATION FOR CONFERENCE

Planning to succeed in your parent-teacher conference is vital. Pre-conference preparation often determines whether the conference will be a success and this is where you could consider spending a considerable amount of time. Parents want to feel that the teacher actually cares about their child and this most readily can be communicated via an organized Parent-Teacher conference.

Parents generally don't have to hear only positive comments, but they do want to know that they are part of a team that cares for their child and that all are working towards common goals. A focus of your preparation could be the eventual structure of your interview. After greeting the parents move through (1) Performance, (2) Growth, (3) Strengths and (4) Questions.

SETTING

Ideally the setting for you conference should be: (1) in a place of safety, (2) where confidentiality can be attained, (3) well lit, (4) with appropriate seating. Try to schedule plenty of time to deal with your agenda. Often you will be in your own classroom. Consider:

1. Having large signs outside and inside your room welcoming the parents indicating room number, your name, and the subject(s) you teach.

2. Having (both in the classroom and in the waiting area) documents your students would have received: such as a syllabus or an outline of general areas of study and a copy of your classroom rules and procedures.
3. Having displays of students' work including projects in progress.
4. Having adult sized chairs set up outside your room positioned so that the people waiting cannot easily hear what is being discussed in your room if the door is open. Leaving the door open while conducting the interview is acceptable and in some cases preferable. Close the door only if necessary.
5. Pre-thinking how you want the room set up. Set the chairs in your room in a non-formal manner. That is, try not to have a large desk between you and the parents. A small table with documents you will need in the interview could be set beside you. A small coffee table could be placed between you and the parents.
6. Greeting each parent that arrives with a handshake.
7. Having a jar of pens/pencils that parents can use if they want to make notes as well as a box of tissues.

Interviews are often scheduled in the gym. Consider arriving early and try to modify your space to give you and your parents as much privacy as possible. Arrange your area to minimize potential distractions or interruptions during the conference. Find adult sized chairs so that parents who might arrive early can sit while waiting. If an interview moves into extremely personal areas of discussion and can be overheard, consider rescheduling.

CONCERNS

It may be that there are problems that need to be addressed. Do not overwhelm the parent. Deal with one or (maximum) two concerns. A lengthy list of complaints may be cathartic but may only discourage or alienate the parents.

How you want the student to improve is a manifestation of your vision you have for your class and for the specific student. You should have an overall idea of how you want all of your students to get better. You might want to consult the curriculum as a starting point. Consider answering the question, "After a year with me, in what ways do I want my students to be better?" Review this before the conference so you have a solid philosophical base to your suggestions for improvement.

You need specifics to support your concerns. If the student is regularly disrupting the class or is impeding the learning of others, documentation of those events might be important. Consider creating a system to record specific disturbances. Include the date, student's name, description of the behavior, and action taken. Make your notes as soon as possible after the incident. These notes will help to identify patterns and gives more credibility to your concern.

Consider clarifying ahead of time who will be attending the conference, their name(s), and their relationship to the child. Assuming that their surname will be the same as the student's could be problematic.

PORTFOLIO

You, as the teacher, need to have as much information as possible. Consider preparing a portfolio of each student with all or some of the following pertinent information.

- name, grade and age
- grade(s)
- progress/achievements
- work samples
- student attendance
- friends
- examples of praiseworthy behaviour
- concerns
 - with specific examples
 - state what you have done so far
 - suggestions for improvement with a plan

This portfolio or part of the portfolio can be created by the students. If the students create the portfolio consider having them also create a personal greeting to the parent. Consider also including a section whereby the parent can return a positive note to their child.

QUESTIONS

The following are common questions parents may ask. To prepare for the interviews, consider choosing a random sample of your students and checking what your answers would be to some or all of these.

- What is my child like in your class?
- What is my child succeeding in?

- What is my child's worst subject?
- Is my child meeting grade expectations?
- Does my child get along with others?
- Who does my child associate with?
- How well does my child participate in class discussions and activities?
- How is my child being assessed?
- What do the tests tell about my child's progress?
- Is my child engaging in activity that I would not approve of?
- Has my child missed any classes other than ones I contacted the school about?
- Is my child working up to his or her ability?
- Has my child done something that I would be proud of?

REQUESTED CONFERENCES

If you requested this conference due to a specific problem, allow time to cool off before the parent-teacher meeting. It is important that you are objective and emotionally neutral.

Professional behaviour suggests a cool and focused individual not someone who is sullen or snippy.

It is important that you remain the professional educator. Emotional behaviour by you will probably not serve you well. If the parent requests the interview make sure you prepare. Having pre-thought what you hope to happen and planned accordingly will pay off, even if you don't directly use the prepared material. Consider conducting a requested interview in the presence of a supportive administrator.

During the Conference

FIRST IMPRESSION

You only have one opportunity to make a first impression. Dress professionally. Please do not wear clothes with stains. Some teachers keep a suit jacket in a closet at school to use in these situations. Consider conservative professional dress. Parents will remember how you dressed when the next teacher employment contracts hit the news.

Use your best of manners, treating each parent with full respect and dignity. Don't hide behind your desk. It can be a barrier to developing a working relationship. Turn off your cell phone, even text messaging beeps can be disruptive.

Thank the parents for coming, shake hands, and use their names. Have something general and positive to say for example:

- Hello Mr. ---. I'm glad you had time to come.
- Welcome Mr. and Mrs. --- It's nice to meet you.
- Come in Mrs. --- I've been looking forward to speaking with you.
- Hi Ms. --- I've heard so much about you from your daughter.
- Thank you for coming Mrs. ---. Your son is a very important member of my class.

Indicate where you have planned for them to sit and begin. Avoid seating parents in small children's chairs. Consider beginning promptly but there may be more ground covered if you exchange pleasantries. Some parents take the measure of the teacher during opening conversations about the weather. Of course, you may be strapped for time but pushing forward might cause an antagonistic atmosphere.

Consider a few pleasantries before getting down to business to get to know your audience. Remember emotions and values affect communication. Consider being rather bland until you get a sense of who the parent is. Do not criticize the local, provincial, or national governments. Do not condemn sports teams or the ballet. The reason for being as neutral as possible is that the focus of interview is the student. You and the parent should be on the same side and creating animosity early could sideline the process. Cultural differences might make you adapt this opening to make the parents comfortable.

FOCUSING THE INTERVIEW

Be polite and professional. Suggest the structure of the interview and with approval from the parent proceed using statements such as:

- Well, with your permission I would like to focus on three areas during this interview.
- I realize that you may have a tight schedule so with your permission can I suggest we look at three areas?
- If you don't mind, I might start by talking about _____'s performance.

Telling the parents what structure you are going to use can be very helpful to some individuals who like to know the agenda before beginning. Consider an organization that looks at (1) Performance, (2) Growth, and (3) Strengths.

PERFORMANCE

The opening remarks should be generally positive and supportive. Consider saying something like:

- _____ is an important member of my class.
- _____ has strong leadership skills.
- _____ has had marked improvement in Math this month.

Then you can look at the grades from general to specific or from the grade given to how that grade was calculated from the contributing assignments. A simple structure when examining performance could be: (1) Look at overall grade, (2) Examine specific grades and the corresponding assignments, and (3) Questions, concerns, or comments.

After showing the overall grade, examine specific work done by their child. This part of the interview might go smoothly if the work can be easily accessed. If your students had to place assignments on their desk in a certain order before leaving, then it might be easy to walk to the desk and present the assignments. Consider having your comments connected to the assignments available as well. For example, a group presentation should have a rubric attached to the grade but you may have given verbal comments as well. Consider making notes on the back of the rubric with the essence of your comments.

If the parents have questions or comments that do not allow you to comment on the student's performance then, of course, you should listen but continue to try to bring the interview back to your structure. Having a structure and using it can give the greatest chance of success. Not only do you get the information out but also the parents should get a sense that you are organized and that their child is in good hands.

Don't compare the student with other individuals in the class however; this might be a good time to report progress of the child, in relation to the age/grade level expectations. It might be appropriate to give quartile ranking such as, "_____ is performing in the top quarter of the class."

GROWTH

At this point the parents may have concerns that they feel must be addressed. Consider finding out if that is the case for example:

- I would like to talk about _____'s growth, unless you have any questions.
- The next stage of this interview could look at growth. Is that acceptable?
- Do you have any concerns or comments before I look at in which area I would like your child to improve?

Try to avoid confrontational interviews that lay blame. If the parents' tone becomes aggressive sit straight and remain calm. Continually assess the situation, asking yourself if you feel in physical danger. If you answer yes, then call for help. Staying calm and remaining professional can most often bring the situation back to constructive areas.

If there are no questions or if you have answered the questions, introduce the idea of growth. Consider indicating that you want to work with the parents and the student to improve performance and learning. Chose one of the three stages to success - Attendance, Readiness, and Skill. If the student isn't meeting your requirements, one of the three stages can become the basis of a remedial strategy.

Consider the three steps in order. If the attendance is good, then comment on readiness. If the first two are acceptable, then comment on skill. It can be very appealing to try to hit a homerun by fixing all the student's problems at once. Do not, at this stage, overwhelm the parent. If the student needs work in all of the stages comment only on attendance.

- Better attendance will improve _____'s performance.
- _____ has missed X days in this reporting period. This has seriously impeded his progress.
- _____ missed the day of presentations. Not only does this negatively affect his mark, but this also negatively affects the class.

If the parents push, you might also comment on the other areas but consider holding off as this can make the parents feel like everything is wrong. If they have only one thing to work on, it might seem more attainable.

Readiness includes the student's on time attendance, with the correct materials, homework completed, and a "ready to learn" attitude. The foundation of readiness is often attitude however it can be difficult to talk constructively about attitude. Stating, "Your son has a poor attitude," can be lead to disaster.

Indicating how readiness can be improved in practical terms can often help attitude, for example coming to class with the correct textbook means that when the other students are required to read, the student in question can read as well and thereby become a positive part of the group. By physically engaging in the actions of a student with a good attitude, individuals can change. That is, doing those things that good students do can lead a struggling student to a better attitude.

This area might also include specifics of work habits. Some students have not learned how to optimize their own learning and having the parents as partners in this form of improvement can be exciting for both parents and student. Consider comments that focus on specifics for example:

- The students were allowed to pick their own groups (name the specific assignment) and _____ was with some students who have proved to have attendance problems. We have spoken about choosing groups with the assignment in mind.
- _____ has trouble getting down to work when given time. Sometimes she has not even started the assignment when others are done (give specific example).
- I believe that _____ has a talent in this area but better preparation would improve his grade (give a specific example).
- _____ often comes to class without the required textbook. This means that it takes her longer to get settled and down to work and this, I think, is reflected in her grade (give a specific date when the student did not have the textbook).
- _____ seldom completes his homework. This means that when the class discusses the homework _____ is less interested (give a specific day when the homework was not completed).
- _____'s mark reflects his effort. She can get higher grades when she puts in her best effort (give specific examples of when the student put in good effort and when she did not).

SKILL

If attendance and readiness are both acceptable then talk about skill. A major component of skill is aptitude. Aptitude is the student's natural ability or talent for your subject or part of your subject. Often at this stage the talent is not yet fully or even partially developed.

Aptitude can also deal with quickness or ease in learning. Sometimes students do not have the ability for the subject and are working as hard as they can.

State the facts. The student's work should help clarify where the student could improve, point out the next steps to be taken (new work or remediation), and be specific. If the student is in attendance, this is the ideal time to involve him or her. Consider comments such as:

- _____ worked well to begin with. She seemed to become frustrated toward the middle. We have spoken about how she can improve in this area and I think that she is working on her tenacity.
- _____ scored very high on an early assignment but he scored poorly on this later one. He has agreed to really focus on the next assignment.
- _____ needs to be reminded to stay on task. I try to check on her every 10 minutes. She needs this persistence to ensure learning.
- _____ is working hard and yet is not meeting grade level expectations. We have spoken about this and she has tried a number of solutions (give a description of what you have tried).
- _____ can improve with individual help. The problem is that when I am not working directly with him, he drifts off task.
- _____ finds this subject very difficult. One on one assistance helps with understanding but she becomes frustrated quickly.

Following these comments consider creating a plan to help the student. Probably this will entail some remedial work at home. Consider having the materials for this remedial plan ready with the instructions as to how they could be used. It is important to remember that baby steps might be important. Instead of trying to solve all of the problems in one interview it may be more useful to start with a manageable goal and connected plan.

The ideal situation is one in which the parent asks how to help their child succeed. They are interested in creating a team with the teacher and school to improve their child's learning. As a team try to set a goal and a plan that may include:

1. identify school behaviours that need to change,
2. determine what action will be taken in class,
3. identify parent action that will be taken at home,
4. identify alternate things the parent can do,
5. select the re-enforcer that will promote improvements, and
6. clarify steps on how to implement the plan.

Hopefully you will also talk to the parents of the brilliant student who is performing well at this level. Consider admitting to having no complaints and that suggestions for improvement would be difficult to find. If pressed, consider indicating that the student seems to have a natural ability

to discover what his/her weaknesses are and that the student seems able to work on any areas that need attention quickly and effectively. Indicate that this form of “metacognition” (thinking about thinking) is vital for continued growth. That is, their child is developing an ability to improve on their own without teacher pressure and this bodes well for his or her future.

Commenting on aptitude could be positive, for example:

- Your child has a natural flair for this.
- Your child is extremely gifted in this area.
- This last unit has been relatively easy for your child.

STRENGTHS

You have to end the conference on a positive note. This is not meant to be saccharine, rather this is to reaffirm that you see value in the student. The intention is to end on a hopeful note for students who are struggling, a sense that average students can improve, and that high functioning students are at the right place in their development. You may have to think to come up with a positive statement, but the child is important to the parents and therefore important to you.

Consider the following:

_____ has always been respectful and kind in the class.

_____ is a leader in the class and the students respect him.

_____ was put into a group with X and Y. Her work in that group was much better and showed her potential.

_____ is an important member of my class.

I sincerely like _____ and appreciate his sense of humour.

QUESTIONS

Before you close the conference ask the parents if they have any questions, concerns, or comments. It is important that you ask directly for questions and then wait. It may be that your organization and presentation has been so good that the parents are shell-shocked and need time to re-group.

It is probable that your time is running short so you may be conflicted between wanting to engage in a conversation and wanting to end the conference so you can be on time for your next conference. Consider allowing the conference to come to an end. Try to take a deep breath as you wait and use as low a tone of voice as possible as you move to ending the conference.

TIME

Parent -teacher conferences are often scheduled tightly. Organize yourself and try to focus on the reason the parents are there. If you are going over time and there are other parents scheduled and waiting, stop, and schedule another interview for later when time won't be a time problem. Try to continually refocus the interview with parents who tend to drift off topic. The focus of the interview should be the student.

CAUTIONS

Be cautious about

- using technical jargon such as Bloom's taxonomy, Cognitive skills, Decoding, and Psychomotor. These can alienate parents.
- using vagueness without specifics to back up the comment, such as: contacts on the playground are physical or writes about things other students don't seem interested in reading.
- labeling in a negative manner such as stubborn, lazy, immature, hostile, disruptive, attention-seeking, stupid. These are probably unprofessional. They only categorize students and do nothing to get to the root of the problem.

Please do not overwhelm or insult the parent by being mean. Following are some less than helpful things to say:

- _____ hasn't handed in homework for two weeks. She said you don't care. Is that true? (trapping)
- _____ is feeling down lately. Something seems to be bothering her. Is she getting lots of pressure at home for something? (aggressive)
- _____ is out of her league. She seems unable to understand anything. (dismissive)
- _____ is not handing in any homework. Are you able to make her finish what is expected? (demanding)

Teachers do not have to take verbal abuse or feel interrogated. If you arrive at a dangerous point in the interview either ask for help or stop the interview. After which you will have to make another appointment time. Do not make the next appointment time right then, leaving a bit of time is probably wise. Make sure that there is an administrator at the next meeting.

Do not; discuss family problems, talk about other teachers' treatment of the student, compare the student with siblings, argue with the parent, attempt to psychoanalyze the student, or blame the parent for the student's misbehavior.

Closing a Conference

In closing, sum up briefly what was said to be sure the parents have something to take home. Re-visit how communication will continue – via phone calls, emails, notes, or logs. Set a date for a follow up meeting if needed. It is important that the parent knows who gets to report the results of this Parent-Teacher meeting to the student (usually the parent) and what will be reported. Thank the parent. Indicate that the parents and you have done a lot of work to make this meeting meaningful and successful. Invite the parents to contact you with any future concerns about their child's classroom progress.

Even at this stage be cautious about being too negative. Consider showing not telling. If you are sharing some negative information with parents, consider “sandwiching” it. Begin with some positive information, then share the negative information, and conclude with another piece of positive information.

Don't just dismiss parents from the table. Stand up with them and personally escort them to the door with a smile, a handshake, and a “Thank you for coming.” Most important, always end a conference on a positive note!

After the Conference

After each conference, jot down notes. Don't take notes during the conference, it can be considered rude and may tend to inhibit many parents. Record your observations, perceptions, or suggestions. If a plan was created make sure you record what was agreed on. This could be placed into the students file or have a page attached to your plan book that has all the conference notes. Summarize some of the major points, and clarify any action that will be taken.

It may be odd to walk the parents to the door and then ask the next parents to wait even longer while you make your notes. If you have made a plan for remediation then it is important to complete the notes immediately. If the conference was relatively easy you might be able to make notes later and invite the next set of parents in.

Conference Particulars

OUTSIDERS

Sometimes it is necessary to involve other people in conferences (classroom assistants, psychologists, nurse, etc.). In these cases, the teacher needs to be able to facilitate. Try to place yourself in the shoes of the parents, make sure that they are “cared for” – don’t leave them wondering where to go, where to sit, and what is going to happen. Make sure; that there is someone to greet them, to introduce them to everyone in the room, and that they are aware of the agenda. Manners are important. Be patient and keep the focus on improvement of the student’s performance.

TELEPHONE/E-MAIL

In some cases it is necessary to have telephone/email contact with parents. E-mail and telephone are best used to communicate positive information, set up meetings/follow-up and emergency contact however parents often ask so many pointed questions that email and phone communication have become conferences.

Phone interviews can be difficult because teachers cannot see and respond to the non-verbal signals. Voice projection and vocal clarity may be problematic. Email can be even more problematic as there are no visual or vocal clues available. Composing an email in delicate situations can be difficult and time consuming.

Yet, phone and e-mail contact can be valuable tools. They may be the only way to contact parents. Consider developing a patient manner when on the phone. Make sure you reread and spell check your emails. Consider creating emails destined for parents one day and sending them the next after you have reread them.

There is a danger of an emotional issue arising and one party becoming so heated that they hang up. This can lead to greater problems. Let your Principal know immediately if a parent or you have hung up or if the emails have become inflammatory.

If you have to give difficult news that must be delivered via email consider creating the email and have others look at it before sending. Also consider “ccing” administration.

AVOIDANCE

A positive interpersonal exchange is important during Parent-teacher conferences, however if you feel frustrated that after one or two conferences issues are being avoided consider being more clear in your explanations.

Sometimes individuals avoid dealing with real problems.

- A subject not brought up when everyone knows it's a problem; for example - high achieving parents don't want to talk about their child's lack of progress.
- General talk, world situation, politics etc., are discussed, but, no issues relating to the student, for example, "Sure my child has problems but nothing like the Mayor!"
- Postponing action because of latent unseen talent for example, "After all, Einstein was a slow learner."
- Not dealing with issues because teacher is afraid parents may be insulted and angry.

This can be frustrating and counter productive. Your job is to help your student succeed and interviews that miss the mark can be frustrating. You must remain calm. Consider getting help at your next interview. Invite an administrator. Maybe initiate a group interview where other teachers will be present.

ADVICE SEEKERS

Some parents ask the teacher for suggestions but may not take action. This type of parent may solicit advice from many people but not act. If the problem with the student is serious and you find yourself in a cycle of creating plans with no apparent will to engage in action consider trying the following to break this cycle:

1. Ask the parents to clarify what they have tried.
2. Try to ascertain the reason for the failure of the plans.
3. Provide emotional support - "The situation has not improved. This must be frustrating."
4. Clarify the main concern "The problem we are trying to deal with is..."
5. Ascertain whether another try may succeed.
6. If they agree to try again, create a plan with a timeline such that at a certain point another professional will be brought in to help the situation.

ANGRY PARENT

An angry parent can be painful (at a conference or not). Do not respond angrily. It is important to remain professional. Have good posture, stay silent, and wait till they cool off. It may be that after an outburst you can get back to the matter at hand. It may be uncomfortable but this might be the best thing to do. Consider moving back into the interview by refocusing the reason for the interview:

- I hear that you are passionate about this and that you want your child to succeed. So do I.

- I hear anger in your voice. I have a sense that this comes from frustration and that it is not necessarily directed at me. Am I right?
- Your tone makes me uncomfortable. I would like to calmly discuss the situation. Would you like to see if there are ways that we can improve the situation with your son/daughter?

If they are not cooling off, stop conference or get help. Discuss the situation with an administrator. You don't have to feel responsible for the parent's anger.

DROP-INS

Parents might drop-in on your class. They may ask permission or try to sneak into the back of the class. No one is prepared for this. The best way to handle drop-in parents is to acknowledge their presence and offer to set up an appointment. Even if you have time, it is probably best to make an appointment. That is, even if the students are working well on their own and you might be able to slip out, it is probably best to make an appointment. Even if you are on your spare, make an appointment. After establishing an appointment time ask what this meeting concerns. If the parent starts to explain at length about their concern, indicate that the appointment has been made and that you will welcome discussion at that time.

STUDENT LED CONFERENCES

Some teachers will opt for student-led conferences. In these cases, students should be well prepared. The students should have gathered the relevant material and have it organized. They should have gone through a dress rehearsal by presenting their material to someone else before showing it to their parents. At some point, consider excusing the student in case there are things you or the parents have to say that are not appropriate for the child to hear at this point (you may be wondering about sibling relationships). The child is a minor and adults can be expected to have "adult time." Be ready to add to the students self assessment with your own comments.

CLOSURE

Parent-teacher conferences can be reaffirming. Hopefully you will hear that your student's parents appreciate the work you are doing on their behalf. Often this requires that the teacher be well organized. Students can be refocused due to a successful conference as they realize that their parents and teacher are interested in their continued improvement. There is no other instrument that can be as effective in improving your student's work and benefiting their performance.

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