



## Twenty-Seven Tips for Parent Conferences

- 1. Invite both parents.** Encourage both parents to attend conferences when possible. Misunderstandings are less common if both parents hear what you have to say, and you'll be able to gauge the kind of support both parents give the child. (Of course, remember that both mother and father may not be available. Today, when some 60 percent of adult women work outside the home, it may not always be the mother who's available to meet. And many children come from single-parent homes; you could unwittingly hurt a child's feelings by always asking to meet the "mother.")
- 2. Make contact early.** You'll get your relationship with parents off to a good start if you contact them early in the year, perhaps with a memo or newsletter sent home to all pupils. Give parents an outline of what their children will be studying, and let them know you'll be happy to meet with them during the year. (Be sure to say how and when they may contact you for conferences.)
- 3. Allow enough time.** Schedule plenty of time for the meeting. Twenty to thirty minutes is usually adequate. If you're scheduling back-to-back conferences, be sure to allow enough time between them (10 minutes or so) to make necessary notes on the just-concluded conference and prepare for the upcoming one.
- 4. Be ready for questions.** Be prepared to answer specific questions parents may have. They're likely to ask questions such as:
  - What is my child's ability level?
  - Is my child working up to his/her ability level?
  - How is my child doing in specific subjects?
  - Does my child cause any trouble?
  - Does my child have any specific skills or abilities in schoolwork?
- 5. Get your papers organized in advance.** Assemble your grade book, test papers, samples of the student's work, attendance records and other pertinent data together ahead of time. That way you won't be fumbling through stacks on your desk during the meeting.
- 6. Plan ahead.** Have in mind a general but flexible outline of what you're going to say, including a survey of student progress, a review of his or her strengths and needs, and a proposed plan of action.
- 7. Greet parents near the entrance they'll use.** You'll alleviate anxiety and frustration (nothing is more confusing to the uninitiated than wandering around those look-alike school hallways trying to find the right classroom) and makes parents feel more welcome.
- 8. Get the name right.** Don't assume that Jennifer Peabody's mother is Mrs. Peabody. She could well have been married again since Jennifer was born. Check your records ahead of time to make sure you've got the parents' names right. And don't assume that the wrinkled gray-haired gentleman coming in with Johnny is his grandfather. It could be his father, or an uncle. Politely ask. Try not to talk to the Smiths about their son "Stan" when their son's name is "Steve".
- 9. Avoid physical barriers.** Don't sit behind your desk, while forcing the parents to squeeze into the children's desks on the front row or perch miserably on folding chairs. Arrange a conference-style seating if possible so you'll all be equals together.
- 10. Open on a positive note.** Begin conferences on a warm, positive note to get everyone relaxed. Start with a positive statement about the child's abilities, work or interests.
- 11. Structure the session.** As soon as the parents arrive, review the structure of the conference—the why, what, how, and when so that you'll both have an "agenda."
- 12. Be specific in your comments.** Parents may flounder if you deal only in generalities. Instead of saying "She doesn't accept responsibility," pin down the problem by pointing out "Amanda had a whole week to finish her report but she only wrote two paragraphs."

*This list of tips is provided courtesy of the Beginning Teachers' Tool Box.*

**13. Offer a suggested course of action.** Parents appreciate being given some specific direction. If Jane is immature, it might be helpful to suggest parents give her a list of weekly chores, allow her to take care of a pet, or give her a notebook to write down assignments. (Of course, when you offer advice, let parents know you're only making a suggestion.)

**14. Forget the jargon.** Education jargon phrases like "criterion-referenced testing," "perceptual skills" and "least restrictive environment" may be just too much double-talk to many parents.

**15. Turn the other cheek.** In routine parent conferences, it's unusual to run into parents who are abusive and hostile. But it can happen. Try to not be rude, whatever the provocation. Hear out the parents in as pleasant a manner as possible, without getting defensive if you can.

**16. Ask for parents' opinions.** Let parents know you're interested in their opinions, are eager to answer their questions and want to work with them throughout the year to help make their child's education the best.

**17. Focus on strengths.** It's very easy for parents to feel defensive since many of them see themselves in their children. You'll help if you review the child's strengths and areas of need rather than dwelling on criticism or stressing weaknesses.

**18. Use body language.** Non-verbal cues set the mood of the conference. Smile, nod, make eye contact and lean forward slightly. You'll be using your body language to let parents know you're interested and approving.

**19. Stress collaboration.** Let the parent know you want to work together in the best interests of the child. A statement like "You need to see me as soon as possible to discuss Johnny's poor study habits" only arouses hostility, while "I'd like to discuss with you how we might work together to improve Johnny's study habits" gets the relationship off on the right foot.

**20. Listen to what parents say.** Despite the fact that we spend nearly a third of our lives listening, most adults are poor listeners. We concentrate on what we're going to say next, or we let our minds drift off to other concerns, or we hear only part of what a speaker is saying. You'll get more out of a parent conference if you really listen to what parents are saying to you.

**21. Ask about the child.** You don't want to pry, of course, but remember to ask the parents if there's anything they think you should know about the child (such as study habits, relationship with siblings, any important events in his or her life) which may affect his or her school work.

**22. Focus on solutions.** Ideally all parent conferences would concern only positive events. Realistically, many conferences are held because there's a problem somewhere. Things will go smoother if you focus on solutions rather than on the child's problem. Discuss what you and the parents can do to help improve the situation. Plan a course of action together.

**23. Don't judge.** It may not always be possible to react neutrally to what parents say, but communicating your judgments of parents' behaviors can be a roadblock to a productive relationship with them.

**24. Summarize.** Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what actions you and the parents have decided to take.

**25. Wind up on a positive note.** When you can, save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement about the student for the end of the conference.

**26. Meet again if you need to.** If you feel you need more time, arrange another meeting later rather than trying to rush everything before the kids get back from art class.

**27. Keep a record of the conference.** You may find it helpful later to have a brief record of what was said at the conference, what suggestions for improvement were made and so forth. Make notes as soon as possible after the conference while the details are still fresh.