

Parent/Teacher Conferences: Finding Common Ground

By communicating effectively with parents, teachers may be able to save some students from school failure.

While we extol the virtue of involving all parents as partners with school personnel, in reality the present system could not withstand such stress. Time is not available for in-depth interaction with all parents. Nevertheless, teachers and administrators can and should commit time and energy to working with parents of "target children"—those for whom ongoing communications may spell the difference between success and failure. School personnel can identify "target parents" by identifying students

- about whom they have concerns,
- about whom additional information is needed,
- who come to school in poor physical or emotional states,
- who are frequently absent, or
- who have chronic behavior problems.

Contact with these parents early in the students' school life and school year can provide a basis for dealing with problems early, before they can escalate.

Preparing for the Conference

Parent participation in conferences can be markedly increased if the initial communication is carefully planned and executed (Wolf and Troup 1980). School personnel want parents to be

involved, but our procedures often alienate them. If parents are invited to school by letter, for example, the letter should be written clearly in plain language, free of educational jargon, and worded in a way that is positive and inviting.

As most conferences take place in the school—on the professional's turf—some parents may feel threat-

ened by the setting. Teachers should hold the conference in a comfortable private place. If teachers use their classrooms, they should provide adult-sized chairs that are not separated by the teacher's desk.

Conducting the Conference

A successful conference includes the following steps: building rapport, ob-

Do's and Don'ts for Informing Parents about Children's School Progress

Parents are typically eager to gain information regarding their child's performance. Teachers must provide accurate and relevant information in a sensitive manner. Following are some do's and don'ts when informing parents about children's school progress:

DO:

- Organize information into broad categories.
- Begin with positive information.
- Cite specific examples to make your point.
- Encourage parents to discuss and clarify as needed.
- Have dated examples of students' work available.
- Explain how instruction is individualized and how progress is evaluated.

DON'T:

- Overwhelm parents with too much detailed information.
- Use educational jargon.
- Be evasive. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so.
- Defend an archaic grading system. If it's school policy, say so. If it's yours, change it!
- Predict life success from any data.
- Describe your problems to the parent.

taining information, providing information, and planning strategies for follow-up (Stephens and Wolf 1980).

Building rapport. Teachers need to establish a comfortable relationship with parents. Without rapport, both teachers and parents may become defensive. Teachers should make parents feel welcome and at ease; offering a beverage might help. Starting with small talk encourages informality. A few friendly comments about the weather or some other neutral topic will help put the parent at ease. Teachers should avoid emotionally laden topics (for example, religion or politics).

Parents who are anxious may want to plunge in: "Jenny's doing terrible work in school, isn't she?" If she is not, a quick "no" will alleviate concern. But if she is, the teacher must make a quick decision. Is the parent too upset to deal with the information that needs to be shared? Is some background information needed first? The teacher may then choose to develop rapport further with a reflective statement, that lets the parent know that the question was received: "You're concerned about Jenny's performance." A reflective statement usually results in the parent's providing more helpful information. The question about Jenny's work will be addressed later in the conference.

Some parents may persist in small talk as a way of avoiding the topic at hand. In these circumstances, the

teacher must eventually initiate the topic: "What has Jeff shared with you about what we are doing in class?" With the parent's response, the next phase of the conference begins.

Obtaining information. A key factor in the success of the conference is the teacher's ability to elicit information from the parents. Teachers should function as sensitive, active listeners. They should start with general, open-

The Home Visit—An Irreplaceable Tool

Mary Joyce Love

The countdown was on. School would begin in 21 days, but my teaching had already begun with visits to the 24 new 1st graders assigned to me.

For Alice, too shy to talk, my presence in her home became a bridge to the classroom. Just before I left, she ventured, "But I can't read." Jessica eagerly fired questions, "reading" a page of pictures she had drawn to remind her of each. Jammi wanted to know me: "Do you have a little girl? Where do you live?" Adam earnestly asked, "Will it be hard?" David was concerned: "Will we go to the principal?"

Gerald Stouffer, principal of Fairview Elementary School, Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, had encouraged home visits, providing a list of the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of children in my class. He had also helped refine the purpose of the visits, to communicate a single message: I care about you. The focus would be the child, not the parent or me. My only agenda would be to listen, and relate to, each child.

Curriculum encompasses all that a child experiences in relation to school: it begins with, and is enriched by, a home visit. The child, meeting her teacher on her own territory, knows that she matters. A sense of security ensues, increasing the likelihood that she will work to achieve her potential. She expects more of herself, of her teacher, and of her school experience.

Insights gained in home visits also influence the arrangement of classroom space to reinforce, within the child, a sense of ownership, so crucial to success. A child refers to "my room," "my desk," and "my teacher." It is inevitable that he will look for the photo of himself, taken during the home visit and mounted in an area where he may display his own work. Further, a child with partial sight or hearing, who needs special seating, or a child who is mainstreamed—both enter the room with a bond of belonging; they know their teacher.

First-day-of-school "surprises," ranging from the perplexing (the battery in Jim's artificial arm was dead) to the catastrophic (Bonnie had a seizure, and the other children were alarmed) were easier. I was prepared. Family crises, during the school year, involving a latchkey child or a child of poverty, divorce, separation, or abuse also can be dealt with more effectively when the teacher has made a home visit prior to school.

Principals who encourage and even require the making of home visits find that parents are more likely to become allies with the teacher and the administrative staff on behalf of the child's learning experience. Parents who welcome a teacher into the home gain a more positive attitude and are more supportive of the school. In our case, a greater percentage also become volunteer aides and participate in parent-teacher organizations and school functions.

A brief, informal visit in a child's home once before the start of school and later during the year has a positive ripple effect on everyone concerned. For the child, for the parent, for the teacher, and for the principal—home visits are an irreplaceable tool!

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Students Belong in the "Parent-Teacher" Conference, Too

Beverley D. Hubert

The name alone, *parent-teacher conference*—and certainly the practice—exclude from the process its primary constituent—the student. But it is the *student's* academic performance, attitude, work habits, and social interaction that are being scrutinized, analyzed, and theorized about. Simply for the sake of fairness, students should play an active role in the parent-teacher conference.

At Elbow Park Elementary School in Calgary, Alberta, we decided to include students in our March reporting period conferences. This idea, when first proposed, had attracted strong support by parents in the community. To prepare for the conferences, both teachers and parents first attended inservice sessions. Then teachers oriented their students by discussing the conference format and answering questions. Many teachers had their students write questions to ask during the conference. For example, students were curious about "marks" (codes) on the report card and about the reporting process in general.

All students from K-6 had the opportunity to participate in the conferences. The meetings were scheduled for 30 minutes each with the understanding that arrangements could be made for an additional "private" meeting between parents and teachers if either party desired it. Such an arrangement occurred in only one or two cases.

Later when teachers and parents (with their children's input) completed questionnaires, we found an overall positive feeling about the benefits of including students in the conferences and general agreement that the procedure should be continued. Everyone agreed that including students in the conferences is an effective way to get students to exercise more ownership of and responsibility for their learning.

Parents said they gained valuable insights into the relationship between the teacher and their child. They also expressed an appreciation for the open, honest communication, suggesting that, with all participants present, misunderstandings were kept at a minimum. Not having to relay teachers' concerns, comments, or suggestions to their children was also mentioned as a benefit of the conferences. As one parent put it: "It was helpful for Michael to hear his teacher's comments first-hand."

For those schools wishing to embark on such a rewarding project, the following recommendations may prove helpful.

1. As a staff, clearly define the purpose of including students in the conference period, and be prepared to convince others of its value.
2. Gain the support of parents and senior administrators for this endeavor, as additional time for conferences may be required.
3. Maintain open communication with parents about the new format for conferences, and offer them the option of having a conference that includes the student. Don't mandate anything!
4. Discuss the purpose of this format with students, and work with them to develop questions they may want to ask.
5. Prepare for each conference by developing questions that will actively involve both students and parents in the conversation.
6. Evaluate the conference, and seek input from all participants in the interest of making improvements.

Including students in the traditional parent-teacher conference was a worthwhile endeavor for the staff, students, and parents of the Elbow Park School community. Perhaps it can work for you, too.

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ended questions. Good question: "What does Carla say about her school activities?" Poor question: "Has Carla mentioned what we are now doing in school?" Rather than taking notes, they should listen carefully, ask for clarification, and pose questions to direct the discussion toward relevant topics.

Teachers should avoid negative or emotionally laden questions, such as "Does Sammy still refuse to do his homework?" Instead, they should try: "How does Sammy feel about homework?" The first question elicits little information and may cause the parent to feel defensive. The second question requires more than a "yes" or "no" response, allows parents to share perceptions about the topic, and may lead the teacher to providing suggestions.

By obtaining information *before* providing it, teachers give parents a chance to share their knowledge about their child. The teacher can gain insight into parental expectations, insight helpful both in the conference and in working with the child.

Providing information. Next the teacher can focus on offering suggestions for enhancing the child's learning. If rapport is not strong, if emotions are running high, or the conference has reached an impasse, the teacher should weigh the next step. One option is to close the conference and reschedule it in hopes of being more successful at another time. Another is to complete the conference as well as possible, expecting little if

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any change as a result of the session. A third option is to make another effort to develop rapport and gain needed information. The teacher should always avoid damaging scenes and keep the door open to further interaction.

When teachers describe students' progress, parents may express their concerns verbally ("Is that all he can do?"), nonverbally (showing physical discomfort or anger), with psychological withdrawal (displaying no reaction), or with fear ("Will she fail?"). Teachers should acknowledge parents' concerns and then respond to their statements. When parents show distress, teachers should reassure them that help for their child is being provided. Teachers should not comment on body language or withdrawal: when parents do not verbalize their concerns, they are choosing not to discuss them.

Follow-up strategies. The final component in a parent/teacher conference is to summarize and then to plan follow-up strategies. Toward the end of the conference, the teacher should review the major points of the meeting and mention any unresolved issues that may need further discussion or action. For example:

We seem to agree that Kathy is making good progress now that she is getting help in the Resource Room. She is still not doing any recreational reading, which we both view as important. I will send you a list of materials so that you can help Kathy select books and magazines she'll enjoy reading. You express concern about Kathy's performance in arithmetic. I agree that division is hard for her, but I believe

there has been progress in this skill, too. Let me contact you in about three weeks, and we will set up an appointment to review this area. Meanwhile, feel free to contact me before that if you feel the need.

If another conference is needed, the teacher should schedule it at this time. Teachers must follow through on these plans if they are to develop the parent trust and investment vital to in-depth communication.

After the Conference

Following the conference, teachers should contact the parents within two weeks. For conferences that were satisfactory, with no unresolved issues, a simple thank-you note may be all that's needed. In cases where home/school interventions have been arranged, regularly scheduled notes and phone calls will be needed to exchange information and to evaluate progress. If the conference did not go well, a phone call to the parents a few days after the meeting can be the first step toward re-establishing friendly relations.

The conference structure described here is an effective one for school administrators and support staff as well as for teachers. Through conferences, teachers and principals can extend their effectiveness with target students by creating an environment in which parents feel that they are working in partnership with the schools. Building such partnerships will also enhance parents' beliefs that teachers really want to help their children. □

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