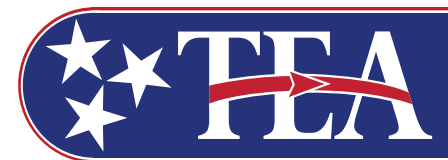


ENGAGING FAMILIES THROUGH EFFECTIVE CONFERENCES



TENNESSEE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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Dear Educator,

Parent-teacher conferences should be viewed as a personal invitation for the parent(s) and teacher(s) to meet and discuss the best possible education for the child. Ideally, there should be a conference with each child's parent(s) after the school year is well established. It gives both parties an opportunity for full exploration of progress, behavior and the reasons behind each student's strengths and weaknesses. Bear in mind that parents are the child's most important teachers.

Research supports the positive value of effective parent-teacher conferences, but it also acknowledges that many parents feel polarized and threatened by them. Beginning with middle school, the parent-teacher conference day is often limited to conferring about struggling learners, which can make parents feel defensive from the onset.

The word "parent" is used throughout this guide to represent the responsible adult in a child's life. It is used non-judgmentally, realizing that many students have non-traditional family or living arrangements. It may apply to guardians, grandparents, foster parents or step-parents.

Teacher preparation programs often lack coursework dealing with the necessary communication skills for an effective conference. Good conferences don't just happen. They require a positive attitude, a plan of action and good communication skills. With these goals in mind, this guide contains tips on preparation for conferences, conference techniques and post-conference suggestions for teachers at all grade levels.

Instructional Advocacy

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Before the Conference

What Kind of Conference Works Best?

Parent-teacher conferences usually occur around the time the first report cards are sent home. All school districts have built-in parent-teacher conference day(s) that hopefully reflect community needs. Some systems try to hold conferences in late afternoons or at staggered times so that parents have several options. Some systems have only one scheduled day during the academic school year while others plan for one each semester.

Many schools also have a general open house early in the school year which should serve as an introduction rather than a conference. Some parents do not realize that the open house is not a time to discuss specific problems. It is helpful if the administration communicates this expectation during the general meeting before dismissing parents to the classrooms.

In many schools, each teacher schedules a conference with each child's parent as a routine procedure, regardless of academic progress or grades. The individual conference provides a chance for the teacher to discuss the progress and potential of each individual child.

At the middle school or high school level, it may be more appropriate to have a group conference than to hold individual conferences. This is especially true in middle school settings where teaming occurs. Also, inclusion classes may have co-teachers or paraprofessionals who should be involved in the conference. Such group conferences give parents a better picture of the overall progress; however, group members need to take all necessary precautions to ensure parents do not feel overwhelmed by this arrangement. Without sensitivity, some parents may feel like they have faced the "firing squad."

Another question that should be predetermined is whether or not to include the student in the conference. Some schools encourage student participation while others prefer to keep the formal conference between parents and teachers. Check with the administration about school policies and routine practices. Information on student-led conferences is included in the "Start to Finish" workshop offered by TEA.

What Can Teachers Hope to Learn?

As you prepare to meet parents, you may want to find ways to learn more about the following:

- Child's reaction to school
- Health and emotional problems
- Hobbies, special interests and abilities
- Homework—where, how and when it is done
- Rules and responsibilities at home
- Family relationships such as joint custody, etc
- Convenient times and ways to contact parents
- Discipline at home
- Cultural or language differences

Other Resources for Parents

Books from Birth — Governor's Foundation (www.governorsfoundation.com), A Partnership with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library: This program provides a new, age-appropriate, hardcover book every month to children from birth to age five — at no cost to the family, regardless of income!

History Matters — History Matters (www.historymatters.gmu.edu) serves as a gateway to Web resources and offers other useful materials for teaching U.S. history for high school and college teachers and students.

National Sleep Foundation — The National Sleep Foundation (www.sleepfoundation.org) offers "red flags" to help determine if your child is getting enough sleep as well as some priorities for helping "prioritize sleep" for all the members of your family.

Links to these and other resources can be found in the Parent Center at www.teateachers.org.

Conference Notes

Conference Tips (cont.)

- Remember to keep all information about other students, teachers and parents confidential. Also, avoid comparing siblings.
- Watch for possible signs of emotions—changes in voice, gestures, expressions or even tears. Be on guard for your own emotions as well.
- Show the whole range of a student's work. If possible, show how work has improved or changed.
- When you offer suggestions to parents, try to give options. Most parents really want support, not advice.
- When concluding, concentrate on one or two ways in which you can work together to help the child.
- If parents do become angry or upset, acknowledge that they may wish to set up a meeting including an administrator.
- Always end with an action plan and roles clarified. If the parents offer a plan of action, accept it if at all possible.
- If you are unable to complete a conference within the allotted time, suggest a future time for continuation.

After the Conference

After parent-teacher conferences are officially over, there is still much to be done. Any brief notes should be transcribed into a more permanent document or action plan. Review the notes to see if you need to work on seating charts, referrals, behavior contracts or schedule follow-up conferences. Some conference sessions require a follow-up with other departments, such as special education referrals. In some school systems, there is a formal report required to document each conference and its outcome.

Many teachers send follow-up personal notes to parents thanking them for their participation in the parent-teacher conference. This gives an opportunity to report on any follow-up activities agreed upon in the conference as well as communicating the desire to work together for the child's benefit.

Make another attempt to set up a "face-to-face" conference for all parents who were unable to attend. Perseverance, patience and creativity are important in winning over "no-shows." Call and express regrets that they were unable to attend. Send notes home to parents where phone calls have been unsuccessful. When attempting to set up another conference time, make at least one positive comment concerning your interaction with the student. Try to assess whether there may be physical, cultural or language barriers that stand in the way.

What Can Parents Hope to Learn?

Most parents are full of curiosity, and they want to know about their child's experience in the classroom. They know that things have changed since they were in school, but most parents don't know exactly how. You have an opportunity to let them know about current education practices as well as provide information about the specifics of their child's progress. Avoid using educational jargon when possible. Fully explain any terms that may not be familiar during these conversations.

Many parents begin by asking an open-ended question such as "How's he/she doing?" That question may translate to their asking about any or all of the following:

- Grades
- Behavior
- Standardized tests
- Homework
- Social adjustments
- Personal development
- Samples of their child's work
- How to help at home

Be prepared for other questions or comments. "Does Emily behave in your class?" "I told John that I was going to come up here to the school and find out what's really going on." "Do you think that Juan is gifted?" "Brittney tells us that she is bored." Obviously, comments such as these are "loaded" and have many possible answers.

Other parents may have informational needs that are more general such as:

- School rules
- Dress code
- Textbooks
- Daily schedule
- School calendar
- Seating arrangement
- Discipline policies/consequences
- Subjects covered in your class

Providing a school/classroom handbook and information at the beginning of the school year can assist in clarifying the above items.

What Does the Student Need to Know?

The student should know that the sole aim of the conference is to help him/her. Often serving as the person responsible for the delivery of the invitation and the answer, students need to understand that they have a larger role to play. To allay apprehension, talk over the goals and format of the conference with your students several days ahead of time.

- Ask students about their perceived strengths and areas for improvement.
- Ask students to complete an inventory ranking their skills and abilities.
- Ask students to compile a list of questions for parents to ask the teacher.
- Ask students to choose samples of work to share with their parents.

Some teachers hold conferences with students before the actual parent-teacher conference so they can discuss strengths and areas identified for improvement. This also provides an opportunity to show students the samples of work that will be shown to the parents.

Setting the Stage

In addition to having all papers graded, work samples and other diagnostic records available, it is important to set the stage for a productive conference. Look objectively at the classroom or conference setting. Make sure that it is reflective of a positive learning environment.

- Is it neat and clean?
- Are examples of student work on display in both the classroom and waiting area?
- Do the bulletin boards reflect current content?

Taking some tips from marketing experts can help make for a smoother conference. Soft background music, plug-in scents, fresh flowers and soft lighting can help make people more at ease.

Parents often want to know where their child sits in class. In a self-contained classroom, it is helpful to have name tags on the desks. For middle school and high school students, it is important that you have seating charts available.

Carefully plan the seating arrangement. Consider using chairs or desks grouped together in twos or threes. In the primary grades, make sure you have adequate seating for adults. A round table is the best arrangement because it can provide display space and symbolically promotes the unity of the conference. Avoid using your desk as it may be perceived as a barricade between you and the parents. Have tissues readily available as conferences can be rather emotional. Provide pen and paper for parents if they want to take notes.

Plan to meet where you have access to materials such as computerized records but avoid being too close to the door. Many things are said in confidence, and often other parents must wait outside the door within earshot. It may be helpful to post a neat sign at the door that says: CONFERENCE IN SESSION.

Be realistic in scheduling. Allow time to record your notes, collect your thoughts and take a break. Have the classroom clock within your range of vision. It is important to keep conferences moving on schedule, but an obvious glance at your watch can send the wrong message.

Have a set of student textbooks and school assignment books accessible. Sometimes parents need to know what to look for at home or in backpacks. For middle school and high school levels, have locker number assignments handy. Often parents will want to look for certain things in their child's locker at the conclusion of the conference.

Think about ways to make the waiting area comfortable and relaxing. Try to have reading materials, a child play area, a clock and/or even refreshments for your parents. Ungraded examples of student work in the hallways allow parents to see what the class is doing. If all students are scheduled for a conference, post the master schedule in the waiting area.

Dress with care for parent-teacher conferences. You want to show that you are a professional, but overdressing or underdressing for the occasion can undermine the whole process. It is helpful for teachers participating in group conferences to wear nametags with their names, subjects and any special roles identified.

During the Conference

Communication Tips

Remember that the conference is a parent-teacher conference which means that the parents should be encouraged to talk as well as listen. When the parents are not encouraged to speak, the purpose of the conference is undermined. Below are some conference communication tips to remember:

- The other person will act as you act. Talk loudly and he/she will talk loudly. Be enthusiastic and he/she will be enthusiastic.
- First impressions are important. If you want the conversation to be informal and friendly, start it off that way. If you want the parents to believe that you are professional, act that way.
- Be a good listener. Communication is a two-way street. Remember that you invited the parent in to give as well as to get.
- No one ever wins an argument. Let parents state their case fully. Pause and reflect before answering. Talk calmly and confidently. Be objective.
- Be free with genuine praise. Begin and end the conference with a positive comment about the child.
- Make sure that your story holds together. What you say in the conference should agree with what you write on the report card.
- Try to put yourself in the place of the other person. Remember to combine truth with tact.
- Use encouragers or body language to help reinforce the parents' desire to communicate. Lean forward, make eye contact and restate some of the parents' words to keep them involved in two-way communication.
- Watch your language and avoid educational jargon.
- Avoid generalities such as "Your child is doing all right." Parents want specifics and appreciate concrete examples.

Conference Tips

Below are some proven tips that should make the conference go more smoothly:

- Go to the door to greet your guests and start by introducing yourself.
- Express appreciation for the opportunity for the conference and the privilege of working together before plunging into the grade book.