

Partnerships for Learning

Conferencing with Families

Conferencing with families is one of a teacher's most important responsibilities. Effective parent-teacher conferences help support young children's learning and development by fostering vital home-school linkages.

Head Start Program Performance Standards, many statewide early childhood education standards, curriculum models, and instruments for determining program quality (*Accreditation Criteria and Procedures* [NAEYC 1998] and *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* [Harms, Clifford, & Cryer 1998]) identify regular parent-teacher conferences as essential ingredients for quality early childhood education.

In NAEYC's position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, the fifth guideline for decisions about developmentally appropriate practice—Establishing reciprocal relationships with families—stresses that program practices are developmentally appropriate when “Teachers and parents share their knowledge of the child and understanding of children's development and learning as part of day-to-day communication and planned conferences. Teachers support families in ways that maximally promote family

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decision-making capabilities and competence” (Bredekamp & Copple 1997, 22). Effective parent-teacher conferences open the dialogue and offer one vehicle for establishing and strengthening partnerships with families.

While schools and programs vary in the frequency of conferences, all successful and productive parent-teacher conferences share some common features. This article presents a baker's dozen of conferencing tips gleaned from my own experiences as a teacher and as an administrator supporting teachers in building strong partnerships through conferencing.

1. Offer a flexible conferencing schedule. With their varying work schedules and other family commitments, not all parents are able to attend a conference during the day or on one designated night. Many parents juggle multiple roles. It helps to offer alternative conferencing times—such as early morning hours, lunch breaks, late afternoons, and early evening hours on different days. Some teachers even meet, say, at the local library on a Saturday to accommodate a parent or guardian who cannot come at other times.

2. Allow enough time. Conferences typically run approximately 15–20 minutes. For back-to-back

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conferences, be sure to schedule some time (about 10 minutes) between each. This will allow for a conference that lasts a little long or a parent who arrives a few minutes late. It also gives you time to jot down any follow-up notes or prepare for the next appointment. If you know you need more time to discuss a special situation, schedule the conference to last longer.

3. Provide a welcoming atmosphere. Avoid physical barriers. Don't sit behind your desk, and whenever possible, sit next to rather than across from the parent. Amenities such as adult-size chairs, soft music, and light refreshments help everyone relax. Know the parents' names; check records ahead of time to make sure you have them right. Don't assume that Maria Doe's mother is Mrs. Doe. Nonverbal cues sometimes speak





louder than words. Smile, nod, make eye contact, lean forward slightly. Let parents know you're interested and listening.

4. Be prepared and organized.

Think about which items from the child's portfolio you want to share. Don't overwhelm the family. Select a few work samples that provide evidence of the child's abilities.

5. Be culturally appropriate.

Effective communication is based on respect for others' values, attitudes, expectations, and culture. Keep in mind that childrearing values and practices are culturally embedded; differences may occur in norms, behaviors, values, role relations (mother/father, grandparent, other family members' roles and responsibilities), and communication patterns. Conferences provide an opportunity to learn more about diverse cultures and family structures and parents' hopes and dreams for their child. Effective teachers develop an appreciation and understanding of issues of diversity and where parents are coming from. Accept differences and avoid stereotyping. No parent wants to be a *bad* parent. Suspend judgment and come to a consensus on goals and values for the child. Remember, parents are the single most important influence and resource in a child's life. Respect families and work toward bridging cultural differences and valuing diversity.

6. Stay focused on the child. The purpose of parent-teacher conferences is to share information about the individual child and to share ideas for fostering continued growth. While parents may tell you of other family needs and concerns, it's important to remember that you are not a professional counselor or social

worker. You are trained as a teacher of young children and should make referrals to appropriate staff for other issues that arise. If there are no qualified professionals on staff, give the family a list of community resources. You are also not their friend or confidant. Don't allow the conference to lose focus.

7. Start by describing the child's strengths, interests, or abilities.

Sharing positive examples with parents typically puts them at ease. You want to establish a connection, and the child is the link. Be specific: share an anecdote of something humorous or interesting that happened last week or today, or show a photo of the child's work or a work sample on display in your room. One teacher I know calls these positive points "glows and grows."

8. Encourage parents to share ideas and information.

Conferences are a time to build teamwork and collaboration. Listen to what parents have to say about their child. Solicit their ideas. Parents want to be good parents and want the best for their child. Recognize and accept that there are multiple avenues for families to be involved in their child's education. Use the conference as a way to learn more about the child and the family. Successful partnerships encourage sharing and learning.

9. Refrain from responding to seemingly hostile or threatening comments. It's natural for parents to have concerns and even to worry about their child. Their ideas about the kind of role teachers should fill are colored by their own past school experiences. Remember, parenting can be difficult, and many parents have less formal training for their role than you have for yours. If the conference does get out of control, end it tactfully. Schedule another time to meet.

10. Avoid using jargon and loaded words such as *immature* or *problems*.

Terms such as *cognitive development*, *gross motor skills*, and *phonemic awareness* can be confusing. Use language that can be understood by all, and avoid generalizations and labeling. Instead of saying "Keron has strong classification skills," say, for example, "Keron does well sorting objects by categories such as size and shape."

11. Share suggestions for at-home activities.

Parents appreciate specific tips for doable activities that can help their child. Recommend simple activities that use readily available household items. Emphasize that everyday tasks like doing laundry and grocery shopping are vehicles for learning. Consider family budgets and available time. Don't expect parents to buy special materials. (And remember, not everyone cooks with a measuring cup.) Don't overwhelm parents with lists of things their child needs to work on. Focus on one or two specific action steps you can work on together.

12. End the conference on a positive note.

Thank all parents for coming to the conference. Stress partnering and continued open communication, and let families know their support is needed and appre-

“We”: The Most Important Feature of a Parent-Teacher Conference

The foundation for constructive parent-teacher relationships is frequent and open communication and mutual respect. When you are positively involved in your child’s education, your child will flourish. Teachers prepare for conferences by reflecting on each child’s interests and progress. Here are some ways you can prepare to actively participate in parent-teacher conferences.

Be willing and ready to share information about your child and family. Families are the most important influence and resource in a child’s life. You know your child better than anyone else and have valuable insights to share with the teacher. Advocate for your child. Share things about your child’s life at home—personality traits, challenges, habits, friends, hobbies, and talents—that you feel are important for the teacher to know. What kinds of things do you enjoy doing with your child? How do siblings relate to their brother/sister and vice versa? What kind of discipline do you use? What are your dreams for your child? What are your concerns?

Stay focused on your child. You are no longer the shy student who avoided the teacher’s gaze. Nor are you the active four-year-old who seemed to always need the teacher’s help to stay on task. It is natural for your ideas about teachers and their role to be shaped by your own school experiences, but being aware of

these views can help you stay focused on your child and his/her unique temperament, individual needs, and special interests.

Never miss a parent-teacher conference. Use the conference as an opportunity to exchange information with the teacher and discuss ways to work together to enhance your child’s education. If your work schedule makes it difficult to meet during regular hours, make this clear to the teacher and try to set up a meeting time that is good for both of you. If you can’t visit in person, schedule a telephone call to discuss your child’s progress.

Arrive on time. Teachers usually have a tight schedule for conferences—typically 20 minutes per child and family. If you would like additional time to talk, ask for it ahead of time so you and the teacher can discuss your ideas, concerns, and suggestions. Be considerate of other parents whose conferences will take place after yours. Remember that the teacher needs a few minutes between conferences to record and reflect on the information shared and to prepare for the next parent.

Remember, children can hear and remember what is said. Young children often get mixed messages when they hear adults talking about them, no matter how positive the conversation may be. Arrange for a caregiver for your child or bring a family member to occupy him or her during the

conference. If this is not possible, bring a favorite toy or activity to engage the child in another part of the room. Unless a child is expressly invited to take part, the conference is a time for you and the teacher to discuss your child.

Listen with an open mind. Concentrate on what the teacher is saying instead of what you are going to say next. Ask questions when you don’t understand. If you disagree with a strategy, say so and tell the teacher why. Voice your concerns, but be open to suggestions. Stay on the subject: your child’s progress.

Be prepared. Think about or write down one or two questions to ask the teacher. It’s a good idea to ask the most important question first, in case time runs out. Remember, while teachers have specialized education, they don’t have answers for everything. Teaching just isn’t that simple.

Keep the conversation focused on what can be done for your child. When there are problems, parents and teachers need to stay calm and work together for the best interest of the child.

Stay involved. Try to visit the center or school frequently, not just for conferences and Back to School Night. Ask the teacher to suggest activities you can do at home to reinforce your child’s learning. Look for opportunities to engage yourself in your child’s education.

Note to teachers: Photocopy this chart and send home to each family a few days before conference time.

ciated. Engage parents in planning the best ways to assist their child. Express confidence in the child's abilities to continue to grow and develop. Save at least one encouraging or positive comment about the child to end the conference.

13. Take a moment to reflect and document the discussion and plans. Jot down a few notes about the gist of the conference and any follow-up needed. Assess your own performance. Were you well prepared? Was the atmosphere comfort

able and supportive? Did you use time well? Did you begin on a positive note? Did you encourage parents to talk and offer suggestions? How could the conference have been better? What did you learn that will help you foster the child's continued development and learning?

References

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