

Getting the Most from Parent Conferences

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Parent conferences provide the teacher with an opportunity to obtain more insight into the life of the student. As all experienced teachers know, unfortunately some of the parents you need to speak with the most don't attend. This can be especially true at the junior and senior level where some of the parents have the attitude that they have done everything possible up to this point and they no longer have a great deal of influence on their son or daughter. At the same time teachers must stay positive and look forward to conferences with optimism. Here are a few tips that can help make the parent conference a rewarding experience.

Conference Tips

1. **Be Prepared** – Make sure you have gathered all the background information about the student. This means knowing more than just test scores and how the student is doing in your class. This is where a student profile card filled out during the first week of class will come in handy.
2. **Look and Act Professional** – You have only one chance to make a good first impression. Dress for success and greet the parents with a warm smile and friendly handshake. Get a good night's sleep, and be prepared to be as sharp during the last conference as you are for the first.
3. **Start with a Conversation** – By discussing a topic or two of mutual interest, you will relax the parents and yourself. Your time is important, but don't act rushed. Take the time to establish a common foundation and demonstrate your communication skills. Think how much you value your doctor or dentist who take the time to show interest in you and your family.
4. **Reach Out by Asking Questions** – I always liked to start the discussion by inquiring how the student feels about school, the class, activities or a related topic. By providing the parent with the opportunity to speak, the teacher has a chance to determine the attitude of the parent.
5. **Be an Active Listener** - Focus on what is being said. Show interest, respect, and consideration for every comment made. Remember the keys to active listening: eye contact, lean forward, nod, verbal affirmations, etc. When the parent realizes you value his or her comments, he or she will be more willing to ask the difficult questions and listen more attentively when you speak.
6. **Discuss Relationships and Social Adjustment** – While teachers at the elementary and middle school levels elaborate on these items, too often high school teachers go directly to academic performance. A computer printout showing all assignments and test scores is valuable, but it always impresses parents when the teacher shares thoughts about teamwork, behavior, communication, and emotional maturity.
7. **Be Organized** - This includes showing some examples of the child's work and samples of the activities you do to promote higher level thinking. It is impressive when you share several of your most creative projects with the parents. Have folders on each student so you can refer to them when needed. It is embarrassing to be looking for something and being unable to find it. This has happened to me, and it is painful.
8. **Have a Plan for Improvement** – Be proactive in your conference. As Covey says, "Begin with the end in mind." Know what you want to accomplish and remember you are looking for a "Win – Win." When student performance is in need of improvement, lay out a plan for success. This is where the previously described 12-step card is invaluable. Go over it step by step with the parents. This works well when the student is present, and he or she can participate in formulating the personal improvement plan.
9. **Maintain high Values** – I always had high expectations for my students and did my best to challenge them. During several conferences, I had parents confront me by saying, "Our daughter has all A's, but a B in your class. What is wrong?" Some even accused me of being the problem! It is best to stay calm and point out what has to be done to earn an A. Always remain positive, stress what the student is doing right, and lay out a plan for success.
10. **Finish on a Positive Note** – Regardless of previous performance, emphasize that what transpires from this point on is what is most important. Briefly review the points of agreement and stress the importance of working together. Focus on the future and conclude with a smile and a friendly handshake.

The parent-teacher conference is an excellent opportunity to gain a better understanding of the student and then more effectively meet his or her needs on a daily basis. Much of the value is determined by your degree of preparation. Success is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. This is your opportunity to make a difference.