

Teaching Module: Parent/Teacher Conference

Overview:

Communication with parents and guardians of your students require considerable planning and effort on the teacher's part. One method will not work with all parents. Communication with families can be face-to-face, written or electronic. An opportunity for face-to-face verbal communication occurs at parent-teacher conferences. If run effectively, conferences can offer great opportunities to establish good relationships, but if handled poorly, they can have negative consequences.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Identify the steps to preparing for a group conference
- Identify barriers and roadblocks for a successful conference
- Develop strategies that will insure a positive parent conference

Introduction:

Types of conferences

- During a **parent / teacher conference**, the parent and the teacher work together to develop a plan to ensure the child is performing to the fullest extent.
- A **student-led conference** allows students to take the lead as they provide the teacher and their parents with examples of their academic progress. It encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and to share their work.
- A **group conference** provides an opportunity for the teacher to meet with parents in a large or small group setting. These meetings can provide information about curriculum, classroom expectations, and school programs. Individual student progress or lack of progress is not discussed at group conferences.

Activity:

1. Quick write

- Participants will write for two minutes about what they think are characteristics of successful parent/teacher conference.
- Discuss a few examples from participants

2. Before the conferences

- Invite both parents
- Get names as you prepare for the conference
- Let parents know the purpose of the conference
- Schedule enough time for the conference
- Be ready for questions.
- Organize your records

3. At the conference

- Greet parents near the door
- Avoid physical barriers (e.g., sit together; avoid sitting behind the desk)
- Sit in adult size chairs
- Open and end with positive comments
- Review the purpose for the conference – the why, what, how and when so that you'll both have an "agenda."

- Be specific in your comments
- Include student work to share
- It's OK to make suggestions
- Avoid educational jargon
- Ask for parents' opinion
- Stress collaboration and finding solutions
- Summarize. Schedule a follow-up conference or arrange for future contacts as needed.
- Keep a record of the conference

4. Dealing with difficult conferences

- During a meeting, pause and say nothing to give yourself time to gather your thoughts.
- Regroup by taking a minute to summarize the information or progress so far.
- Never commit to or even suggest an action that involves other individuals without first consulting them.
- Ask for time to gather more information or to consult with a superior.
- When a meeting is headed nowhere, schedule a follow-up meeting.

5. Your task

- Get into a group
- Decide how you will handle one of the following parent conferences.
- Share with the class

Group 1. (Elementary)

The goal of the teacher in this conference is to secure support from Nathan's mother for his attending summer school. What approach would you choose if you were the teacher in this situation?

Teacher: Thank you so much for coming. This conference is to discuss Nathan's reading progress this year. He was the success of my year! He started the year with reading as a challenge. He had little knowledge of letters and sounds, and his sight word retention was slight. But with one-on-one work, he is now reading on grade level.

Parent: It took him a long time to pick up reading. He seems to resist when he has trouble learning. I really worked on helping him understand that just because things are difficult doesn't mean they can't be done. I keep telling him it's like playing Nintendo not that I like him to sit there hour after hour-- but there are things that are hard, and he can get help and learn to do hard things!

Teacher: I am so pleased with his progress this year. We've worked so hard and he's come along so well. I don't want him to hit the "summer slide." I think we ought to consider summer school for Nathan.

Parent: Why are you concerned about summer slippage when we spend so much time reading with Nathan at home? We have nearly twenty library books taken out! Besides, I kept trying to get him into a special reading program this year, but there were other kids ahead of him. Their needs must have been greater than his! And now you want him to miss his summer, and he's only finishing first grade. I feel as if this idea of summer school is coming out of nowhere."

Group 2. (Secondary)

"Let's see, who's next? Oh, the Hollingsworth's," Angela Gordon muttered to herself. It was the second day of parent conferences. Only a few parents had signed up for conferences, despite numerous reminders and urgings. Family apathy was a serious concern at the school, and the staff and administrators hoped that having parent conferences would get more parents involved. So far, however, most of the parents Angela had seen were the ones who were already highly involved in their children's educational experiences. The Hollingsworth were a surprise, because they did not fit the mold.

Angela had yet to meet Mr. and Mrs. Hollingsworth or to have communication with them. Their daughter Tara was an average student, both in academics and in class participation. Tara generally handed in assignments on time, was usually present in class, and sometimes participated on her own initiative. Her tests and quizzes were in the B-/C+ range, with an occasional high or low score.

As Angela leafed through Tara's folder in preparation for the meeting, she had to admit that she did not know Tara very well. Tara was one of those students who placed few demands on Angela's time, and for that Angela was, to some extent, grateful. Angela rarely interacted with Tara on a one-on-one basis, although Tara did come to her writing conference as required. Angela remembered the conference as being one-sided, with Angela doing most of the talking.

Angela was still pondering what to say about Tara when the Hollingsworth appeared at the open door to the classroom. "Mr. and Mrs. Hollingsworth? I'm so glad to meet you. I'm Ms. Gordon, Tara's teacher. Please come in and sit down." After the couple was seated, Angela launched into her usual conference opener. "I have Tara's folder of work here for you to review. We can talk about her grades to date and talk about her strengths and...."

She was surprised to be interrupted by Mrs. Hollingsworth, whose face was stony. "Tara tells us you don't like her and that you pick on her all the time in class when you're not ignoring her. She hates the class and comes home crying every day," Mrs. Hollingsworth informed Angela. "We try not to interfere in our children's schooling, but English has always been Tara's favorite subject, and now she can't stand it. We want to know why you dislike our daughter so much," the mother continued, before ending with what sounded to Angela like a threat. "We thought it was only right to talk to you first before we go to the principal and demand that Tara be put in a different English class." Angela was stunned by the Hollingsworth's' comments. Angela mentally reviewed the daily classes to try to understand what she was hearing. She called on Tara, but she tried to call on everyone in class, whether they raised their hands or not. Did Tara see that as picking on her?

Why would Tara think she hated her?

Why would Tara think she is picking on her?

What exactly is Tara saying to her parents?

What should Angela say to Tara's angry parents?

How would you deal with the parents if you were in this teacher's situation?

Propose strategies to help the teacher defuse the situation and resolve the conflict.

Group 3. (Secondary)

Meet Holly. At our high school, conference time is in early November. We send out notices and invite parents to sign up for a conference. Not every parent wants to attend a parent/teacher meeting but most do. I think the counselors do a great job accommodating the needs of our parents. We have evening meetings, childcare, translation, even transportation available so more families can come.

My first conference was an eye-opener. Daniel Vanton's mother arrived right on time. She was dressed up and ready to go. Daniel's mother was very friendly. We talked briefly about his work. I showed her his grades. We got along famously. Perhaps that's why I got into trouble.

Daniel's mother asked me about homework. Specifically she asked if she should check over his assignments. Now I have strong opinions about most things and very strong opinions about homework. I told her what parents should do. I told her what I do with my son. I told her stories of him fibbing about his homework, hiding his homework, and correcting his homework. Before I knew it, our time was up.

Ms. Vanton left quickly. I felt a little like a preacher who doesn't get to finish a sermon. I just could not let it go, this feeling of incompleteness. **What do you think Holly's problem was?**

Group 4.

- Evaluate each performance
- Offer suggestions to each group

- Would you have handled the conference differently? How? Why?
- Propose strategies that would help the teacher in each situation
- Create and share a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) that parents may ask during a parent teacher conference.

Closure:

- Students will share major points learned about creating a family-friendly school
- Instructor will summarize and clarify any questions

Reflection:

- “What I learned from this experience is...”.
- Did your ideas of the characteristics of a successful parent/teacher conference change?
- What part of this lesson would have the least impact on student learning?

Information and handouts for this module adapted from the following sources:

- Scenarios of parent-teacher conference - The Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)
www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/resources
- Making Public Schools Great For Every Child: 25 Tips for Successful Parent Conferences
Kansas National Education Association
www.ks.nea.org/resources
- Parent Teacher Conferences. The Florida Partnership For Family involvement in Education
www.partnershipcenter.usf.edu
- Planning for Parent Conferences
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/positiveparentint.htm>
- Guidelines for Successful Parent Conferences - University of North Texas
<http://www.tcet.unt.edu/pteconnect/>