

# Parent-Teacher Conferences ... or Collaborative Conversations?

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Parent-teacher conferences are one of the few opportunities for families to converse with teachers about their children's progress and needs. Lines of people wait their turn for these 15- to 20-minute interactions. One result is a conversation that establishes a relationship and delivers essential information about a student's progress.

Teachers usually carry the burden of making the conference productive, yet if families were included more through communications and collaborative meeting planning, the experience could become more mutually fruitful. To this end, I'll introduce each of my points with voices from families suggesting collaborative communication about their needs.

## **Build a Team: Make Frequent Contacts Before Each Conference**

*I hoped teachers would inform me between conferences if anything was amiss or pleasing about my children's progress, socially or academically, so that there would be no big surprises during the conferences.*

*I value a teacher who communicates expectations using a website, blog, or email. In today's busy world, it is nice to have the information at your fingertips when you need it.*

Parent-teacher conferences tend to be the first time that discussions happen about the student. Transform those short, focused sessions into a meaningful dialogue by sending updates several times before the event. Start simple with two to three contacts before the conference. Consider doing more based on individual student needs. Providing these timely diagnostic updates will help families have meatier discussions with their students:

### *1. Lead with areas of progress and/or exhibited strengths.*

Families need to know how their child is demonstrating positive growth. Highlighting strengths becomes a foundation for motivation to tackle any challenges. Some parents rarely hear about successes by their child.

### *2. Share needs and next steps.*

Parents should be informed about any learning challenges that their children face. Also share the next steps that *you* will take. People listen better to challenges and obstacles when a professional provides solutions. Certainly, families can and should assist, but they aren't the trained experts. Understanding the teacher's next steps reassures them that their child's progress is in good hands.

### *3. Suggest at least one parent support.*

Parent support depends on parents' skills and understanding. This is hard to identify early in the year when the relationship is new. Start with general suggestions such as: "Provide a space where your child can complete homework undisturbed." Ultimately, the teacher, like a doctor, is the expert who must bear the load for designing and implementing remedies.

Offer the opportunity for a follow-up conversation at the parents' request. This invitation sends a message: "We are a Team."

## **Empower Parents/Families to Be Equal Partners**

*I'd like the teacher to start by telling me something my kid did right. Then I'd like her/him to ask, "What questions do you have?"*

*I want evidence that the teacher has put together a thoughtful plan for meeting the needs of my child, and it is one that he/she can articulate and provide evidence for how it is being implemented.*

Frequent contacts result in a stronger parent-teacher relationship and a foundation for transforming the traditional conference into a collaboration about meeting student needs. With such a relationship established, the following steps can help parents and teachers prepare collectively for a productive face-to-face meeting.

### *1. Establish a collaborative focus.*

Meeting time tends to be limited because of the need to schedule so many families. Establishing the meeting's purpose helps to frame the conversation. Share a structure so that parents know what to expect. For example:

- Have the student attend the meeting.
- Celebrate learning strengths.
- Parents and teacher explore needs and questions for learning improvements and enrichments.
- 3-2-1: Agree on next steps for the teacher (3), parent/family (2), and student (1). As the professional, the teacher can provide nuanced supports. Doing more can motivate the families to take action.

Invite families' input and questions about possible changes. When parents share questions, the teacher has time to prepare responses and customize the meeting. Families will likely agree with the teacher's established purpose -- it's extending the invitation that matters.

### *2. Brief and debrief.*

Invite parents to discuss student progress and needs with their child before and after the conference.

*I want communication that supports the discussions I can have with my child.*

A conversation between parent and child can uncover needs and perspectives of which the teacher may be unaware. Parents come to the meeting ready to share affirmations, successes, and concerns that are informed by such a conversation. One challenge for this to be successful is that many parents would benefit from a planning guide. This list of steps can be as simple as identifying two likes and concerns that the student has about the class, or it can follow a more formal structure such as the following:

1. Invite families to discuss the child's perceptions about his or her work. Consider having students share their classroom reflections on selected assignments with their families. This could eventually lead to [student-led conferences](#).
2. Bring to the conference a list two or three strengths and one or two concerns regarding the child's learning experiences.

## **Collaboration = Student Progress**

*I appreciate that teachers take time away from their own families to treat my child as their own.*

The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," is true with the collaborative relationship of families and teachers. Working together means interacting on equal footing. The teacher is an expert of education. Families know their children far more deeply than the teacher. When parents and teachers are in sync regarding what learners need and the next steps, student progress is inevitable.

<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/parent-teacher-conferences-collaborative-conversations-john-mccarthy>