

Making The Most Of Parent/Teacher Conferences



Introduction

No matter how long you have been teaching, the thought of parent/teacher conferences can produce feelings of anxiety and unease. Figuring out how to show parents that you care as much about their child's success as they do is relatively easy for those students who are performing well, but for those who are not it can be a tough sell. While there is no one perfect way to handle all conferences, there are strategies that you can employ to make them more productive.

Making The Most Of Parent/Teacher Conferences is designed to be a resource to help you do just that.

The e-book is broken down into five main topics that address everything from scheduling conferences to reading parents' body language during the meeting. You are encouraged to print the book out, make notes, and choose the strategies that will work best for you. Try some of the new ideas in the book this school year and watch your parent/teacher conferences become something to look forward to instead of dread.

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Scheduling

Many schools have dates and times set aside for parent/teacher conferences after the first and third marking periods. While the dates and blocks of time may be predetermined, there are ways that you can schedule those times to make them be more effective for both you and your students' parents. Finding the right balance of time slots and giving each parent the attention he or she deserves can be tricky. Try to schedule conferences in 20-30 minute sessions if your conference schedule allows. This will give you plenty of time to go over any issues that need to be brought up and, more importantly, to listen to parents' feedback.

No matter which type of invitation you choose to issue, it should clearly explain the conference process. Firm start and end times should be included, as well as a note that you will start and end each conference promptly.

Let parents know what to expect during the conference to lessen their anxiety. By having somewhat of a routine during the conference process, it will also lessen your worries about covering all of the information you want to cover.

Assigned Times

One way to facilitate scheduling of parent/teacher conferences is to schedule the times yourself. While this can free up your need to plan around parents' schedules, it can also be a problem if the conferences are during times when parents usually work. Not everyone can easily get out of work to attend parent/teacher conferences, so keep that in mind if you are trying to schedule without giving parents time options. You might also want to make it an option to do a phone conference during the scheduled time in case the parent cannot actually make it in. For those with video conferencing abilities, Skype is an excellent, free option that might work for some. While it may not be ideal, at least you will be connecting with parents about their child.

Invitations/Sign-Ups

If assigning times for parents is not for you, let them choose from times that you have available. Thankfully, the days of having to sort through twenty or thirty responses with boxes checked for time preferences are over. Instead, have parents fill in the time slots on a Google Docs form. Parents can quickly see what times are still available and enter their information into the form. Be sure to include a space for their preferred contact number, so that you can reach them in case of inclement weather or to call and remind them of their appointment. You can either send them the link via email, put it on your class blog, or include it in a newsletter home.

For those who prefer the traditional way of doing things, you may want to consider having child-created parent/teacher conference invitations. Have a list of times available printed on half-sheets of paper along with a

letter explaining conferences and how the times will be selected. Students can then create and decorate a folder from a large piece of construction paper for the invitations. The personal invitation from their child may encourage some parents to attend the conference.

Conference Area Set-Up

The set-up of your classroom during parent/teacher conferences is just as important as it is during lessons. There are two basic approaches to conference area set-up. Some prefer to use a table to promote a more authoritative air, while others choose a more informal grouping of chairs with a side table or desk. Depending on the conference and the child being discussed, you may want to alternate seating areas.

If you choose to have a table, designate one away from the classroom door to use for conferences. It should be in a well-lit area of the room and at a comfortable height for adults, if possible. Many teachers opt to use their small group tables for conferences, and those are fine, but try to place yourself in a neutral position at the table

instead of at the head. You want to create a “we’re in this together” feeling, as opposed to, “I’m in charge.”

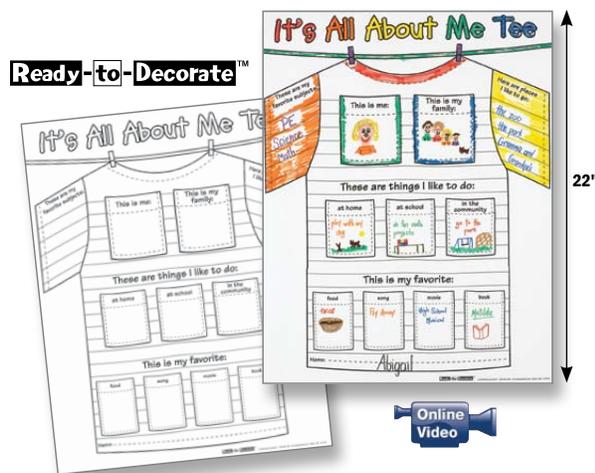
Parents should also be seated away from distraction. For example, have their seats be positioned so that they are not facing the door or windows. They will be much more engaged and focused on the conference if they are not being visually distracted by people walking by or what is going on outside.

A positive greeting can go a long way in establishing the rapport you want with parents.

Some teachers also like to include decorations in the conference area. Really Good Stuff® items such as the **All About Me Tee Ready-To-Decorate™ Posters** or the **Ready-To-Decorate™ Guess Who's Who!** cards are perfect for displaying. Parents become invested in finding out who is who and enjoy seeing what their child has written about themselves.

Connecting With Parents

A positive greeting can go a long way in establishing the rapport you want with parents. More important than anything else when connecting with them is your attitude.



All About Me Tee Ready-To-Decorate™ Posters

These ready-to-decorate T-shirt posters are a great getting-to-know-you activity at the beginning of the year or a special way to feature students throughout the year. Students can color, paint, and decorate their posters to personalize them. Includes 32 posters, 17" by 22" each. (Item #161991)



Ready-To-Decorate™ Guess Who's Who!

These ready-to-decorate activity mats are a great way to start the year as a getting-to-know-you project. Students decorate the folded mats and complete the information about themselves. Classmates and parents read the mats and guess who each belongs to. Includes 32 activity mats, 10½" by 8¼" each, folded. (Item #157716)

The more positive and upbeat you are, the more receptive they will be. While it may be difficult to be upbeat about a child who is particularly challenging, remember that there are always two ways to see behavior. Instead of saying that a child talks too much and is disruptive, phrase it as the child being highly social and eager to engage in conversation. A slight switch in language can be a key to a positive connection with parents.

Sometimes, when a parent comes to parent/teacher conferences, there is an unintentional sense of defensiveness that comes into play. Most parents are naturally protective of their children and a parent/teacher conference can be a place where they are faced with some unpleasant reports or updates. Their reaction may also be due to prior conferences that they have had with other teachers in years past. As this year's teacher, it is important to put yourself in their shoes and start off by building a good rapport from the very beginning. If you have focused on building those relationships since the start of the school year, chances are that the anxiety surrounding parent/teacher conferences will be diminished some.

At conference time, focus on body language and rapport before beginning to discuss academic and behavioral issues.

Body Language – Yours & Theirs

A parent who enters your room with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face should give you a clear indication that he is defensive. Pay particular attention to the way parents hold their arms and the expressions on their faces. Crossed arms are a defensive posture, while loose arms at the side are more open and engaged. If a parent seems agitated or shifts a lot in the chair while you are talking about the student, that is an indication that they are uncomfortable about what is being said, or about how it is being presented. Leaning back in the chair with arms and legs crossed is also another indication of a defensive posture.

By watching their body language, you can adjust your

own to make the conference run smoother. Realize that you have the ability to provide them with a great experience simply by how you respond and listen to their concerns. Some tricks you may want to try include having a warm, welcoming smile when you greet them to make them feel more comfortable and leaning forward slightly when talking as this shows that you are highly engaged in the conversation. Hold your arms loosely with relaxed shoulders. Above all, be genuine in your enthusiasm for their child's success and when talking about past achievements.

Building Rapport

When it comes to parent/teacher conferences, you are not only the teacher, you are also a salesman. Stay positive! A cheerful, happy teacher has a much better chance of selling herself, her classroom, and her way of doing things than a grumpy one does. When you are building rapport your first conversation should be all about the parent and child, not about you.

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Salesmen know that the way to win someone over is to take an interest in them. While you do not have all day to

listen to parents tell you their life story, you can comment on things that you have heard their child mention. Keep a small notepad handy during the weeks preceding conference time and jot down things that each child says about home. It could be anything from, "My mom is a great cook!" to "I love playing tag with my dad."

At conference time, start off by focusing on the positive interactions that they have with their child that have been mentioned in class. Parents will appreciate the recognition and will warm up to you more quickly. Remember that being genuine is the key to building rapport. Parents will see right through you if you are being fake and phony.

Addressing Issues

One of the most challenging parts of any conference is addressing academic and/or behavioral issues about students. Parents naturally become defensive and wary

when they feel as though their child is being targeted. A key point to remember is that when you address issues that need improvement, engaging the parents in a solution process is critical.

If Danny is having trouble turning in his math homework, come up with a solution with his parents to help solve the problem. They may not even be aware that he has homework, let alone that he is not turning it in. Be clear, calm, and proactive about what needs to improve and possible solutions. Then listen to the parents.

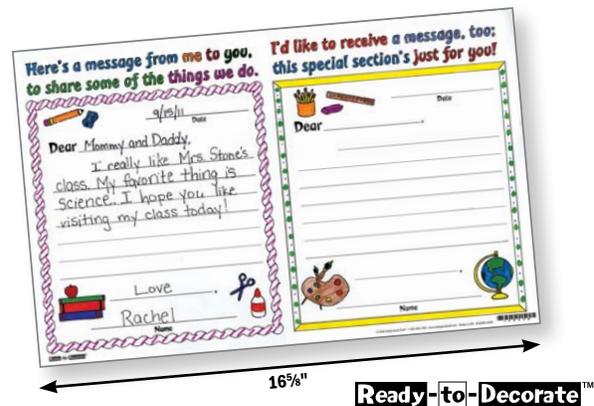
Listen to what they say, as well as what they do not say. Watch their body language and listen to what they leave out. Is math homework due every Thursday? Pay attention then when his mom says that he has Cub Scouts on Wednesday nights and help them come up with a solution. Everyone has Danny's best interest at heart, so working together as a team to find a reasonable solution is going to be the easiest way to have Danny consistently turn in his work.

Challenges, whether they are behavioral or academic, are opportunities for the student to grow, so address them as such. The more positive you remain and the more upbeat you are about phrasing issues, the more parents will be willing to work with you. By taking the time to listen and figure out a solution together, you ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Student Work

When parents come to conferences, they like to see and hear a few things. They want to know how their child is doing academically, behaviorally, and socially. They also want to see examples of their child's work and what she has been doing in class. As the teacher, it is important to pick out the best examples of the child's work. Keep one excellent sample a week during the month before conferences that you can showcase for her parents. Try to choose pieces that were started and completed independently in class, so that the parents can get a true indication of their child's independent work

When parents come to conferences, they like to see and hear a few things about their child.



Ready-to-Decorate™ Parent Night Note Swap

Each ready-to-decorate mat provides plenty of room for students to write a note, as well as space for a response. And just in case a parent can't attend, the open-ended format lets you write a note instead so every student has a message to read the next day. Includes 32 activity mats, 16 $\frac{5}{8}$ " by 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " each.

level. Once you have the pieces selected, figure out a clever way to present them to parents.

Ways To Present

Instead of just handing parents a pile of papers showcasing their child's work, create a fun notebook instead. Cut a manila folder in half along the seam and use the pieces to create a front and back cover for the work. Have students decorate the covers during the week before conferences. Hole punch three holes through the covers and the papers and tie pretty ribbon or a length of colorful yarn through them to hold everything together.

You might also want to record a short video of each child to play at conferences. Record students saying hello to their parents and telling them how happy they are to have their parents attend. Play the video on your computer or interactive classroom board at the start of the conference. This is also a great way for children to generate excitement at home about parent/teacher conferences, as they will be excited for their parent or guardian to see the video.

Notes To Parents/Notes To Students

One special way to connect parents and students during parent/teacher conference time is to have notes written.

Students can begin by writing a note to their parents during the days before conferences begin, and parents can leave a special note during conference time on their child's desk. The Really Good Stuff® **Ready-To-Decorate™ Parent Night Note Swap** is perfect for parent/teacher conferences! Students write on one side, and parents respond on the other. Not only do parents enjoy seeing a note from their child, but also children enjoy seeing a positive note from their parents when they come in in the morning.

Special Considerations

Not all students come from traditional families and, for teachers, this can pose some issues. Depending on the family's background, language, and marital status, you may need to have either a translator present or schedule multiple conferences to accommodate different sets of parents. By meeting the needs of each student's family, you help to build that relationship of trust and spirit of camaraderie that is so important to helping students succeed.

Parents Of ELL/ESL Students

The first thing to consider is whether or not you will need a translator to attend the conference of a parent of an ELL/ESL student. In many cases, the parents' English language skills are not developed enough to be able to understand everything that you need to convey during the conference. The translator can be a family friend or relative who speaks English fluently, or a school counselor who is bilingual.

Be sure to invite the parents with clear notice as to the starting and ending times of the appointment, as not all cultures are as focused on punctuality as ours. It is also a good idea to issue a verbal invitation to the parents of ESL/ELL students, so that they are aware of the appointment and the times. While doing so, find out what the parents would like to be called. Names and the proper way to address people differs from culture to culture and you do not want to start off the conference by offending the parents.

Keep the conference pace easy and slow. Use uncomplicated sentences to make translation easier for the translator. Place the parents between you and the translator at the table, so that they can focus on what you are presenting to them. If possible, do a bit of research on the family's traditions and customs before the conference so that you are aware of anything that you might do that could unintentionally offend them.

Non-Traditional Families

Children of non-traditional families also need you to be savvy about handling unusual family dynamics. Today, more and more children come from homes with divorced parents or are living with people who are not their biological mother and father. It is always a good idea to ask the school guidance counselor about any situations where tension might arise between parents. For some families, it may be best to have the parents meet at separate times if they have joint custody. If you are unsure of whom to invite, check with the school principal and guidance counselor to be sure. As always, it is a good idea to start off the conference by asking the adults who attend how they wish to be addressed.

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In Conclusion

Parent/teacher conferences do not have to be something that is dreaded. Look at them as a time to collaborate with parents, get excited about the students you adore, and figure out ways to help them succeed. Even the most defensive parents may become some of your greatest allies when presented with a positive conference experience. After all, you are all working toward the same goal of helping the child. With a great attitude, a willingness to look at things in a slightly different way, and a bit of planning, parent/teacher conferences may be some of the most productive days of the whole school year.