

Tips From Your School Psychologist

Making the Most of Home School Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences are an ideal opportunity to touch base with your child's teacher and establish a supportive and informative relationship. Effective home-school collaboration benefits students through higher grades, improved behavior, and more positive attitudes towards themselves and school. Attending your child's conference tells your son or daughter that you care about their education and that school is a priority.

Many schools have regularly scheduled conferences that take place between two and four times per year. These tend to last a limited amount of time. Additionally, a parent or teacher may request a conference at any time to address concerns as they arise.

Preparing for the Parent Teacher Conference

Assemble and review relevant materials. This might include report cards, test scores, immunization/health records, or home-school correspondences. Keep material together so that you can add to it periodically and access it for every school conference or communication.

Talk with your child. Inform your child about the purpose of the meeting (is it a regularly scheduled conference or related to a specific concern?). Assure your child that you are working with their teacher to help them succeed, not to punish them. Ask your child for input regarding questions to ask or topics to address.

Learn about school policies. Check the student handbook or school website to review policies related to behavior, attendance, and dress code.

Be familiar with your child's homework. Know how your child has been performing on homework assignments. How long does it take to complete? Is it being turned in? Is your child able to complete assignments with minimal assistance?

Prepare a list of questions for the teacher. Think of your questions ahead of time so that you do not feel rushed at the meeting. If you are not able to get all questions answered in the allotted time, ask the teacher if you can continue the conversation over phone or e-mail. Some common questions: Does my child follow school rules? Is my child meeting expectations for learning and behavior? Is my child struggling in any area? What are my child's strengths? Are there materials or resources that you would recommend we review at home?

Be ready to collaborate. Information about concerns or areas for improvement are shared not to indicate that your child is bad but to discover collaborative ways to help him or her improve. At times the message may come across as placing blame on the parent or child; this is not likely the intention. Offer to meet further to discuss the concern and work out a solution. Remember: teachers are often as afraid to deliver difficult information as parents are to hear it.

During the Conference

Listen carefully. Take notes if necessary. This is particularly helpful if one parent or caretaker is not able to attend. It also helps you remember details so that you can ask follow-up questions.

Offer your perspective. Teachers should know your child's activities or behaviors at home relevant to school issues as well as your views on your child's strengths and needs.

Ask for positive information about your child. If the teacher does not offer it directly, then ask, "What does my child do well?" If you have them, share positive comments about and with the teacher as well. Let them know that you appreciate what they are doing for your child.

Ask questions. Don't hesitate to ask questions or for clarifications. Teachers, at times, may use academic or instructional language that is not familiar to parents. Ask what test scores mean and what the results mean for your child. Ask for explanation of unfamiliar terms.

Adapted from: "Home School Conferences: A Guide for Parents," Andrea Canter, Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators, NASP, 2004. The full handout is available online at www.nasponline.org/families.