

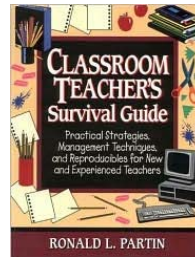
Parent Conference Considerations

Professionally conducted parent-teacher conferences can prove a most valuable strategy for improving student classroom behavior as well as enhancing learning. Here are some ideas used by successful teachers to reap the maximum benefit from parent-teacher conferences.

- Before the conference, plan what you hope to accomplish. What information do you want to share with the parent? What problems need solving? Do not overwhelm the parent. Settle on no more than two or three concerns to be addressed. A laundry list of complaints will only discourage or alienate them.
- If you are requesting the conference in response to a specific problem with the child, allow some time to cool off before meeting with the parent. You'll be less emotionally charged and more objective after a couple of days. Remember, you are a professional educator.
- When a student begins to misbehave in class, begin to keep an index card recording specific disturbances noted. Include the name, date, description of problem behavior, and action taken. Make your notes as soon after an incident as possible. It helps you to identify patterns and gives more credibility to your complaint when talking with the child's parent.
- If possible, clarify ahead of time who will be attending the conference and their relationship to the child. Is this the child's mother, father, guardian? Also verify from the school records the person's name. Do not assume their surname will be the same as the student's. Don't make a big point of it in front of the parent, but a bit of advance checking can help avoid potentially embarrassing gaffes during the conference. Some teachers have mistakenly assumed that an older parent was the student's grandparent.
- Within reason, try to accommodate the parent's schedule. Many parents cannot readily take off work to attend school conferences. If parents have more than one child, attempt to coordinate their appointments so they only have to come to school once. Such small considerations can reap significant cooperation.
- Consider sending a reminder of the time, date, and place to the parent a couple of days before the scheduled conference. If special directions are needed for parking or for finding your room, include those as well. If you are seeing several parents back-to-back, inform them how much time is allotted for their appointment.
- Put your name on the door to make it easier for parents to locate your room.
- Create an inviting room atmosphere. Displays of students' work, projects in progress, bulletin board displays, posters or learning centers, and "Welcome Parents" signs can all help create a warm atmosphere.
- Arrange the room setting to minimize potential distractions or interruptions during the conference. Close the door if necessary.
- Assemble samples of the student's work and a list of his or her grades before the conference. It will save you the time of having to look them up during the conference. Some teachers have their students assemble a work portfolio in a folder. This might include a greeting from their child. You might also include a page where the parent can return a positive note to their child about their schoolwork.

- Many teachers keep a note card for each student, recording points to discuss at the parent-teacher conference. Try to anticipate any questions a parent might ask and note your thoughts related to that issue.
- Greet parents cordially when they arrive, again being sure to verify their names immediately. Ideally, try to greet them at the door. Thank them for coming to see you.
- Be the gracious host. Some teachers set up coffee, juice, or snacks for parents, especially if they might have to wait in the hallway while you finish a prior conference. If they must wait in the hall, provide some chairs and perhaps copies of your textbooks or other materials to scan while waiting.
- Practice the very best of manners, treating each parent with full respect and dignity. Whatever their occupation or socio-economic status, treat all parents as you would the president of a corporation or a physician. Strive to make them feel as welcome and comfortable as possible.
- Address all parents by their last names preceded by the appropriate Mr., Mrs., or Ms. until you are invited by them to use their first name.
- Don't hide behind your desk. It can be a barrier to developing a working relationship. If possible, sit beside the parent at a table. Also avoid seating parents in small children's chairs.
- Begin the conference on a positive note. Think of two or three positive descriptors for each student (e.g., "Michelle is so eager to help" or "Brandon seems well liked by his classmates"). You might jot these down on each student's card or file to stimulate your memory. It is important to find something to praise with each student.
- Establish rapport with the parent. This need not take long, but try to establish a personal connection and create an inviting atmosphere. If you know about the parent's job, hobby, or special interest, make a brief inquiry (e.g., "Matt tells me you've been working on your family genealogy"). Help put the parent at ease.
- Do question the parent about the student's special talents, interests, or accomplishments. Express a genuine interest to better understand their child's successes and strengths as well as challenges.
- Be specific when discussing difficulties the student is experiencing. It is generally better to be candid, yet non-blaming. It is unwise to mislead the parent into thinking all is well if there is a problem with their child. Stick to the facts, giving concrete examples, rather than broad generalities.
- Don't dwell on any student's attributes that are unlikely to change or over which the parents have little control.
- It is best to avoid getting emotional in discussing problems you may be having with the student. Remember, your goal is to enlist the parent's cooperation in resolving any difficulties the student may be experiencing in your class.
- Actively listen to the parent. Respond empathically to feelings expressed by the parent (e.g., "You are disappointed Laurie isn't getting more individual attention in class"). This communicates that you really are trying to understand the parents' perspective; it does not imply you necessarily agree with their view. Such active listening is an especially effective way to handle the angry parent.
- Encourage parents to ask questions and respond fully yet tactfully. Avoid jargon, "educationese," or psychological labels. Allow parents time to talk.

- Inquire about home routines (responsibilities, homework habits, play, etc.). Seek information that might help you gain a better understanding of the student's talents, interests, and challenges.
- Try to offer two or three specific suggestions for the parent to implement at home that might help the student. Offer them not as commands, but as ideas that have worked with other students.
- Invite the parents to contact you with any future concerns about their child's classroom progress.
- Some traps to avoid: discussing family problems, discussing other teachers' classroom treatment of the student, comparing the student with siblings, arguing with the parent, attempting to psychoanalyze the student, blaming the parent for the student's misbehavior.
- End the conference in a hopeful tone. Summarize the main points discussed and any steps to be taken to resolve identified problems. Again commend them for coming to the conference.
- Do follow up with notes or a phone call, especially if a particular problem has been identified for attention.
- If other parents are waiting, be sure to end the meeting at the scheduled time. Ideally, allow yourself a few minutes between sessions to permit time to note any major points discussed during the conference. If necessary, offer to schedule another conference with the parent.



Excerpted from [*Classroom Teacher's Survival Guide*](#).