

Survival tip: invite parents to get involved.

A strong partnership with parents can have a tremendous impact.

Checklist

- Take the initiative.
- Schedule home visits.
- Encourage parents to spend time at school.
- Give parents a chance to share their talent and experience.
- Remember to say “thank you.”
- Work with alternative caregivers.
- Turn “back-to-school” night into “family night.”
- Encourage parents to provide a good learning environment.
- Don’t jump to conclusions.
- Publish a newsletter.
- Give parents a hands-on role.
- Open lines of communication.
- Write to parents.

Parents as partners

Educators know what an important difference parent involvement can make in a child’s education. But what can you do to show parents the role they can play and make them a strong and lasting school ally? The NEA Foundation asked educators involved in successful dropout prevention programs nationwide how they enlist and energize parents as partners. Here’s what they had to say.

Take the initiative to involve parents. They want to be active in their child’s education.

Schedule one-on-one conferences and ask parents what they want to know. Then share your knowledge, guidance and support.

Schedule home visits. Parents are apt to be more open and at ease in their own homes.

Encourage parents to spend time at school. Add a “parent section” to the school library and provide office or lounge space where parents will feel comfortable.

Give parents a chance to share their talents and experiences in the classroom, on field trips, or before school-wide audiences.

Remember to say “thank you” to parents for their efforts with a call or a note.

Work with alternative caregivers. When parents are not available, reach out to grandparents, foster parents or community volunteers who are serving as mentors, or “big brothers” and “big sisters” to your students.

Turn “back-to-school night” into “family night.” Invite students and parents to come together to discuss what they can anticipate from the school year and what will be expected of students, parents and teachers.

Encourage parents to provide a good learning environment for their children with a

quiet study area, a good breakfast, a time to read together, and guidance and supervision over television viewing habits.

Don’t jump to conclusions. Invite parents in a non-threatening way to talk with you about behaviors that concern you, and work together to develop solutions to problems.

Publish a newsletter or organize a discussion group to give parents a forum to seek support, share ideas, or brainstorm solutions to concerns they have.

Give parents a hands-on role in their child’s work and experiences in school. Require parents to sign homework and permission slips for activities.

Open the lines of communication with parents through phone calls and personal notes. Share positive, as well as negative, feedback.

Write to parents. We’ve included an example. You may also want to ask the more experienced colleagues in your building if they have parent letters they use. One word of caution: most building principals will appreciate seeing a copy of any parent letter you write before you send it home with students.

Taken from the NEA Foundation publication, “A Blueprint for Success,” a part of its dropout prevention initiative sponsored by Sears-Roebuck Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, and the National Education Association. The NEA Foundation is a non-profit tax-exempt foundation created by the National Education Association.

Survival tip: send parents a letter.

Dear Parents:

I am your child's 5th Grade teacher, and I am delighted to have your child in my class this year! I'm looking forward to a very successful year, and I know you are, too. I have high expectations for your child, and I will be doing all that I can to help your child achieve those expectations.

You can help. I will be expecting all work assigned in class to be completed. Of course, all children do not work at the same pace. Some children will get their work done in class and some will not. Whether or not a child gets his or her work done in class has no effect on their grade. If your child does not complete an assignment in class, he or she will be required to complete it at home. The way you can help is to ask your child every school day if schoolwork needs to be done and, if so, make sure your child completes the assignment.

I want you to be fully aware of the following policies:

- ⇒ Work may be turned in one day late; however, an assignment turned in one day late will receive an automatic penalty of minus-20 grade points.
- ⇒ If the assigned work is not turned in, or turned in after the one-day late period, the grade for that assignment will be recorded as "zero."
- ⇒ Within each six-week grading period, the single lowest grade (just one) will not be averaged.
- ⇒ Work is due at the time the teacher asks for it on the assigned day. If the student is not prepared at that time, but finishes the assignment later that day, the assignment will still be considered late.
- ⇒ Students who have late work will automatically attend "study hall" during recess.
- ⇒ Absences will be dealt with on an individual basis.

In addition, I will be assigning projects in various subjects throughout the school year. Projects are to be completed at home. Your help and support will not only make your child more successful in school this year, but will instill good study habits that will last a lifetime.

Finally, I want you to know that one of my most important goals this year is to keep the lines of communication open with you. Please do not hesitate to call me at school. I am available to talk to you every day between 9 a.m. and 9:45 a.m. and between 3 p.m. and 3:40 p.m. Your child's daily schedule and the class expectations are attached. Please review these together with your child.

Sincerely,

Note: This letter may need to be translated into languages other than English. Translations can often be obtained by contacting major universities in your area. You may want to personalize the letters using mail merge.

Survival tip: create a team.

Sit down together before there's a problem.

Checklist

- Invite both parents.
- Make contact early.
- Allow enough time.
- Be ready for questions.
- Get your papers organized in advance.
- Plan ahead.
- Greet parents near the entrance they'll use.
- Get the name right.
- Avoid physical barriers.
- Open on a positive, friendly note.
- Structure the session.
- Be specific in your comments.
- Offer a suggested course of action.
- Forget the jargon.
- Turn the other cheek.
- Ask for parents' opinions.
- Focus on strengths.
- Use body language.
- Stress collaboration.
- Listen to what parents say.
- Ask about the child.
- Focus on solutions.
- Don't judge.
- Summarize.
- Wind up on a positive note.
- Meet again if you need to.
- Keep a record of the conference.

Parent/teacher conferences

Communicating with parents is one of the most important things we do as teachers. When we can work together with a child's parents toward common goals, we improve the atmosphere for learning.

Most successful teacher-parent "teams" begin with a conference, usually one conducted before there's a real need to meet. Of course, while parent conferences can be one of the most helpful techniques in a teacher's "bag of tricks," we also know that sometimes they can be a discouraging waste of time or even turn into ugly confrontations.

Here are some tips to help make all your parent conferences productive and successful:

Invite both parents. Encourage both parents to attend conferences when possible. Misunderstandings are less common if both parents hear what you have to say, and you'll be able to gauge the kind of support both parents give the child. Of course, remember that both mother and father may not be available.

Make contact early. You'll get your relationship with parents off to a good start if you contact them early in the year, perhaps with a memo or newsletter sent home to all pupils. Give parents an outline of what their children will be studying, and let them know you'll be happy to meet with them during the year. Be sure to say how and when they may contact you for conferences.

Allow enough time. Schedule plenty of time for the meeting. Twenty to thirty minutes is usually adequate. If you're scheduling back-to-back conferences, be sure to allow enough time between them (10 minutes or so) so you can make necessary notes on the just-concluded conference and prepare for the upcoming one.

Be ready for questions. Be prepared to answer specific questions parents may have. They're likely to ask questions such as:

- What is my child's ability level?

- Is my child working up to his/her ability level?
- How is my child doing in specific subjects?
- Does my child cause any trouble?
- Does my child have any specific skills or abilities?

Get your papers organized in advance.

Assemble your grade book, test papers, samples of the student's work, attendance records and other pertinent data ahead of time. That way you won't be fumbling through stacks on your desk during the meeting.

Plan ahead. Have in mind a general but flexible outline of what you're going to say, including a survey of student progress, a review of strengths and needs, and proposed plan of action.

Greet parents near the entrance they'll use. You'll alleviate anxiety and frustration (nothing is more confusing to the uninitiated than wandering around those look-alike school hallways trying to find the right classroom) and make parents feel more welcome.

Get the name right. Don't assume that Jennifer Peabody's mother is Mrs. Peabody. She may have a different surname. Check your records ahead of time to make sure you've got the parents' names right. And don't assume that the wrinkled grey-haired gentleman coming in with Johnny is his grandfather. It could be his father, or an uncle. Politely ask.

Avoid physical barriers. Don't sit behind your desk, while forcing the parents to squeeze into the children's desks on the front row or perch miserably on folding chairs. Arrange conference-style seating if possible so you'll be seated equally.

Open on a positive and friendly note. Begin on a warm, positive note to get everyone relaxed. Start with a positive statement about the child's abilities, work or interests.

Structure the session. As soon as the parents arrive, review the structure of the conference—the why, what, how and when—so you'll both have an “agenda.” Remember, of course, that parents often come with their own agendas or questions they want answered, so you'll have to be flexible.

Be specific in your comments. Parents may flounder if you deal only in generalities. Instead of saying “She doesn't accept responsibility,” pin down the problem by pointing out “Amanda had a whole week to finish her report, but she only wrote two paragraphs.”

Offer a suggested course of action. Parents appreciate being given some specific direction. If Maria is immature, it might be helpful to suggest parents give her a list of weekly chores, allow her to take care of a pet, or give her a notebook to write down assignments. Of course, when you offer advice, let parents know you're only making a suggestion.

Forget the jargon. Education jargon phrases like “criterion-referenced testing,” “perceptual skills” and “least restrictive environment” may sound like gibberish to many parents.

Turn the other cheek. In routine parent conferences, it's unusual to run into parents who are abusive and hostile. But it can happen. Try to not be rude, whatever the provocation. Listen to the parents in as pleasant a manner as possible, without getting defensive if you can. If you anticipate or encounter a problem, you should try to include a counselor or administrator in the conference.

Ask for parents' opinions. Let parents know you're interested in their opinions, are eager to answer their questions and want to work with them throughout the year to help make their child's education the best.

Focus on strengths. It's very easy for parents to feel defensive, since many of them see themselves in their children. You'll help if you review the child's strengths and areas of need, rather than dwelling on criticism or stressing weaknesses.

Use body language. Non-verbal cues set the mood of the conference. Smile, nod, make eye contact and lean forward slightly. You'll be using your body language to let parents know you're interested and approving.

Stress collaboration. Let the parent know you want to work together in the best interests of the child. A statement like “You need to see me as soon as possible to discuss Johnny's poor study habits” only arouses hostility, while “I'd like to discuss how we might work together to improve Johnny's study habits” gets the relationship off on the right foot.

Listen to what parents say. Despite the fact that we spend nearly a third of our lives listening, most adults are poor listeners. We concentrate on what we're going to say next, or we let our minds drift off to other concerns, or we hear only part of what a speaker is saying. You'll get more out of a parent conference if you really listen to what parents are saying to you.

Ask about the child. You don't want to pry, of course, but remember to ask parents if there's anything they think you should know about the child (such as study habits, relationship with siblings, any important events in his or her life) which may affect his or her school work.

Focus on solutions. Ideally, all parent conferences would concern only positive events. Realistically, many conferences are held because there's a problem somewhere. Things will go smoother if you'll focus on solutions rather than on the child's problem. Discuss what you and the parents can do to help improve the situation. Plan a course of action together.

Don't judge. It may not always be possible to react neutrally to what parents say but communicating your judgments of parents' behaviors can be a roadblock to a productive relationship with them.

Summarize. Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what actions

you and the parents have decided to take.

Wind up on a positive note. When you can, save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement about the student for the end of the conference.

Meet again if you need to. If you feel you need more time, arrange another meeting later rather than trying to rush everything before the kids get back from art class.

Keep a record of the conference. You may find it helpful later to have a brief record of what was said at the conference, what suggestions for improvement were made and so forth. Make notes as soon as possible after the conference, while details are still fresh.

Have on hand before the conference:

- Schedule
- Student work folders
- Student data
- Seating/waiting area in hall
- “Adult-sized” chairs and table for your conference area
- Student self-assessment
- Written expectations for student work/behavior
- Personalized comment or observation for each student
- Discussion agenda for each student
- Suggestions for home activities
- Pre-conference parent survey for parents to identify their agenda items
- Coffee/hot water/tea; sugar/creamer; cups/napkins; pens/pencils



Available from the NEA Professional Library:

Building Parent Partnerships by Beth Christensen, et al; 96 pp., 1996, stock #291 1900; non-members \$12.95, NEA members \$9.95

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