



Parents as Partners: Creating Connections, Engaging Parents

A strong partnership with parents will have a tremendous impact on your success as a teacher and the achievement of your students. The best way to engage parents is to invite them to be partners in their child's education. Some parents will naturally engage but others may not so make sure you reach out to them as well. Your classroom is community that extends to the parents and/or guardians of your students. Take time and make time to get to know your students and their parents and always make sure your first contact with a parent is positive.

The NEA Foundation asked educators involved in successful dropout prevention programs nationwide how they enlist and energize parents as partners. Here's what these educators had to say:

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

provide office or lounge space where parents will feel comfortable.

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

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

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

Remember to say, "thank you" to parents for their efforts with a call or a note.

Encourage parents to spend time at school. Add a "parent section" to the school library and

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 (make sure your first contact is positive).

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.

The Parent/Teacher Conference

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.

Effective teachers utilize the “FOUR C’s” to ensure successful parent conferences - **CONNECT, COMMUNICATE, COLLABORATE,** and **CONTROL**. Control is not about controlling the parent/teacher conference to the point the parents do not matter. Rather, it is about making sure there is order to the process and the conference stays on track and accomplishes its intended purpose.

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

CONNECT

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.

Greet parents near the entrance they’ll use. You’ll alleviate anxiety and frustration (nothing is more confusing than wandering around those look-alike school hallways trying to find the right classroom) and make parents feel more welcome. Make sure you let them know how to enter the building.

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. Also, don't assume that the wrinkled gray-haired gentleman coming in with Johnny is his grandfather. It could be his father, or an uncle. Politely ask. Family structures are diverse so know as much about the family structure prior to the conference as possible to avoid mistakes or embarrassment.

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.

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.

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.

End with a positive. When you can, save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement about the student for the end of the conference. Make sure they're smiling when they leave.

COMMUNICATE

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. Use terminology that a lay person would understand.

Listen to what parents say. Despite the fact 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.

Share concerns with your principal.

Sometimes issues come up during parent conferences that need to be shared with your principal - especially if the conference became hostile. Make sure you inform your principal immediately so he or she is not blindsided if the parent makes contact.

COLLABORATE

Ask for parents' opinions. Let parents know you are 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.

Stress collaboration. Let parents 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.

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 focus on solutions rather than problems. Discuss what you and the parents can do to help improve the situation. Plan a course of action together.

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.

CONTROL

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.

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.

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.

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 agenda or questions they want answered, so you'll have to be flexible.

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.

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.

Maintain confidentiality. Share pertinent information from the conference with colleagues and other professionals but respect anything a parent may have said in confidence, such as revealing the loss of a job or financial hardships.

Summarize. Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what actions you and the parents have decided to take.

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 and share a copy with the parents to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Point out class rules. The rules apply to everyone who comes into your classroom.

Stay Safe. Most parent/teacher conferences take place without any problems; however, you still need to be prepared when one does not go well. Always position yourself between the parent(s) and the door. This provides you an exit in the event the parent(s) become agitated or angry and you need to (1) summon assistance or (2) remove yourself to safety.

Have on Hand at the Conference

- Schedule.
- Student work folders.
- Samples of student work that shows both progress and achievement.
- Student data.
- Seating/waiting area in hall.
- “Adult-sized” chairs and table for your conference area.
- Student self-assessment.
- Any correspondence from between you and the parents.
- Written expectations for student work/behavior.
- Personalized comment or observation for each student.
- Discussion agenda for each student (share a copy with the parent).
- Suggestions for home activities.
- Pre-conference parent survey for parents to identify their agenda items.
- Snack items, especially if the parents are coming after school.
- Coffee/hot water/tea; sugar/creamers; cups/napkins.
- Pens/pencils and paper so the parents can take notes.
- Kleenex or other tissue (in the event the parent becomes emotional).
- Table toys or children’s books, especially if the parent is bringing the student or a younger child.
- Any information for the parents to take when they leave.

Make sure you have done as much as possible to make the context of the conference comfortable and the content of the conference supportive and affirming.

Questions You May be Asked by the Parents

Be prepared to answer questions parents may have during the conference, such as:

- What is my child’s ability level?
- Is my child working up to his or 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?
- How does my child interact with the other students?
- Is my child making friends?
- Who is my child’s best friend?
- How does my child compare to other students?
- Why do you say that?
- What does my child say about his or her home life?
- What do I need to do to help my child be successful in school?
- Why do you think my child is the way he or she is?
- Do you think my child has a disability or should be tested?
- What does my child enjoy the most at school?

Always think before you respond to a parent’s question, especially if it asks for a judgment. Every parent has hopes and dreams for their children and you don’t want the parent conference to be the place where those hopes and dreams are destroyed.

Effective parent conferences strike a balance between diplomacy and reality.

Dear Parents:

I am your child's 5th Grade teacher. I am delighted to have your child in my class this year and I am 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, too. I expect 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 may 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. You can help your child with homework by setting aside a time and place at home for doing homework.

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 in accordance with district policy.
- If the assigned work is not turned in, or turned in after the one-day late period, the grade for that assignment will be determined in accordance with district policy.
- Within each grading period, the single lowest grade (just one) will not be averaged.
- Work is due at the time it is asked for it on the assigned day. If a student is not prepared at that time, but finishes the assignment later that day, the assignment will still be considered late.
- Absences will be dealt with on an individual basis.

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 at **[INSERT PHONE NUMBER]**. I am available to talk to you every day during my conference period, which is from **[INSERT TIME]** and after school between **[INSERT TIME]**.

Your child's daily schedule and the class expectations and norms are attached. Please review these together with your child. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at my school email address, which is **[INSERT EMAIL ADDRESS]**.

Sincerely,