

10 Parent/Teacher Conference To Do's:

by Meredith Goldberg

1. About two weeks before conferences, send home a parent feedback sheet. Ask the parents/guardians of your students pointed questions about their child's academic strengths and weaknesses, their perception of their child's peer relationships, as well as any questions they may have about the school year thus far. Use this feedback in preparing for conferences. This way you won't be caught off guard by an unanticipated question or viewpoint. You can even do a little research on a particular issue and be prepared with more information for the parents. For example, one year a parent was concerned about her daughter's spelling. I believed her spelling was on grade-level but went to the learning specialist and collected some spelling activities they could do at home. The parent was very thankful that I had taken time to find these activities and it put her at ease to have a concrete way to help her daughter. Many times parents ask for just-right independent reading titles. Having a list prepared is an easy way to help out parents.
2. Have your students' fill out a "check-in" sheet prior to conferences. Ask them to think about their own strengths in subject areas, friendships and goals for the near future. Pull quotes from this check-in to use at conferences so the child's perspective is heard.
3. Create a template to collect notes for each child in your classroom. Begin with a space for an opening anecdote. Then leave room for social/emotional health, all the subject areas and goals. Spend time going through work from each child and note things that stand out on this form.
4. Integrate specific anecdotes into your conference notes. The more examples you have to back up your words the better. For example, if you say that the child has great creative problem solving strategies in math, follow that by adding, "The other day I was watching Kendrick tackle a difficult multiplication problem, 12×12 . Instead of trying to skip count by 12, he first did 12×10 , then 12×2 , and added these two products together for his final answer." The illustration gives your point more weight.
5. Before each conference make an agenda. I use a note card to write down about 3 main points. Using the parents' feedback sheet and my own topics to cover, I jot down points like roof time, reading and writing, and homework. The first thing I do after the parents are welcomed is to go over the agenda with them. I ask them if they would like to add or change anything. Having a plan helps us stay organized and also helps budget the time.
6. Try not to use teacher jargon in your conference. We are very used to words like decoding, higher-order thinking, scaffolding, etc. but parents may not be.
7. Be an active listener. Maintain strong eye contact. Jot down short notes as the parent is speaking so you don't forget to address their thoughts.

8. If you are addressing a difficult topic, make sure you have plenty of evidence to support your point. Many times parents don't see the issue you are seeing in their child. It helps to be as specific and concrete as possible. For example, after telling a family that their child had trouble with homework organization, I shared the child's homework from the past several weeks. I had documented the date and time it had been turned in (often late) and if I needed to remind the child to turn in the work. Then I showed them the many times directions weren't followed and the many times pen was used even though I had asked the child to always use pencil. It was hard for them not to acknowledge the issue with the evidence in front of them.

9. End the conference with some goal setting. Using the main points touched on in the conference, as well as the child's goals for themselves written on their check-in sheet, set some realistic goals for the child to work on between the fall and spring. It is nice to leave a conference feeling as if there is a plan in motion that is concrete and agreed upon by both the family and teacher.

10. Share the goals set in the conference with the child. Take some time to address your whole class about the structure of your time with the parents and the reason for goal setting, or meet with individual children to discuss their personal goals. Give the children a list of the goals you'd like them to consider and have them post it in a personal place where that they see often, like the inside of a writing notebook or their desk. Make time to brainstorm strategies with the children about working on their goals and periodically check in with students about progress on their individual goals.