Harvard Family Research Project

Parent–Teacher Conference Tip Sheets

for Principals, Teachers, and Parents

Harvard Family Research Project

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For questions or comments about this paper,
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Parent–Teacher Conferences Tip Sheets

A growing body of evidence suggests that family engagement matters for student success. Research shows that family engagement improves school readiness, student achievement, and social skills. Furthermore, an increasing number of innovative approaches to education leverage and connect the many settings and times in which children learn and grow to create seamless *complementary learning* systems that place families as core partners in the learning process.

As this research base and local, state, and national policies and models converge in support of family engagement, there is a growing demand to provide practical tools that reflect the current state of the field. This set of parent–teacher conference tip sheets provides administrators, educators, and families with ideas and strategies that honor their shared responsibility in supporting family engagement.

Family engagement does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it takes the committed actions of both families and schools working together—through parent–teacher conferences as well as other forms of engagement—to support student success. Through this shared responsibility, schools reach out to and engage families in meaningful ways, and, similarly, families do their part to actively support their children's learning and development.

Defining Family Engagement

Research demonstrates that family engagement is a dynamic, interactive process that provides a pathway to student success. In particular, family engagement is:

1. A shared responsibility among families, community organizations, and schools.
2. Continuous throughout a child's life, from birth through adolescence.
3. Occurring across the multiple settings and contexts in which children grow and learn.

These three tip sheets—for principals, teachers, and parents—can help ensure that parent–teacher conferences achieve their maximum potential by providing guidance that reflects each person's role and responsibility in promoting productive home–school communication. Designed to be used as a set, the tip sheets combine consistent information with targeted suggestions, so that parents and educators enter into conferences with shared expectations and an increased ability to work together to improve children's educational outcomes.

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Parent–Teacher Conferences: A Tip Sheet for Principals

Parent–teacher conferences are an important component of ongoing home–school communication and family involvement in your school. Years of research demonstrate that family involvement in education can lead to positive benefits for children and youth, such as increased school attendance, higher academic performance, and improved attitudes about school. As principal, your leadership will ensure that these conferences achieve their maximum potential. This tip sheet offers some suggestions to support you as you lead the effort to improve the attendance and effectiveness of parent–teacher conferences at your school.

Ideas for before the conferences

- **Send the message**. Communicate the importance of conferences to the whole school. As a form of family involvement, parent–teacher conferences can be an important instructional improvement strategy.
- **Share guidelines.** Let both families and teachers know about goals and logistics of parent–teacher conferences. Include information about the availability of child care, transportation, and/or translation services, as well as alternate scheduling options.
- **Publicize.** Disseminate information about parent–teacher conferences in the broader community to help overall attendance.
- **Provide professional development**. Work with teachers to provide information about best practices in conducting effective parent–teacher conferences.
- **Make student data accessible.** Help families access data about their child's attendance and performance electronically and through other formats. Let families know that this information is meant to support student learning and growth.
- **Create a welcoming school environment.** Ensure that families feel welcomed into your school by considering the following: displaying student work throughout the building, allocating space where parents can wait comfortably for conferences to begin, having school information in multiple languages and translators available for conferences, and providing transportation and/or child care support during conferences.

Approaching Parent–Teacher Conferences

- **A two-way conversation.** The parent–teacher conference is an opportunity for parents to learn about their children's progress in school and for teachers to gain insights into their students' home and community lives. Parent perspectives on student strengths and needs, learning styles, and nonschool learning opportunities can help teachers shape their instructional methods.
- **Emphasis on learning.** Research shows that family involvement is most effective when it is "linked to learning." An important goal of the first parent–teacher conference is to develop new strategies to support student learning at school and at home. Teachers should be prepared to discuss the academic progress of their students by using examples of student work and assessments during conferences.
- **Opportunities and challenges.** The tone of parent–teacher conferences should be balanced so that all involved understand what the student is doing well and what he or she can improve upon. Achieving this balance sends the message that your school values student strengths and has high expectations for all.

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Ideas for during the conferences

- **Be available.** Ask teachers if they need support or additional information to help them conduct conferences. Enlist experienced teachers to check in with newer faculty if you cannot do so individually. Help teachers demystify student data. Offer guidance to parents about ways to build on a child's strengths and overcome learning or behavioral challenges.
- **Be visible.** Walk through the school building and introduce yourself to parents. Communicate your school's appreciation for families who have taken the time to attend conferences.
- **Provide information.** Use parent–teacher conferences as an entry point for additional family involvement. Share information with parents (through flyers, conversations, etc.) about the roles they can play in the school—from volunteering to decision making. Also make available your school's visitation policy, so that families know when and how they can visit the school at other times.

"BE HEARD"

Principles for effective parent–teacher conferences:

Best intentions assumed
Emphasis on learning
Home–school collaboration
Examples and evidence
Active listening
Respect for all
Dedication to follow-up

Ideas for after the conferences

- **Get feedback from teachers and parents.** There are many ways you can get feedback about what did and did not work well during parent–teacher conferences. Surveys and focus groups are helpful to assess both teacher and parent experiences leading up to and during the conferences, but informal feedback can be just as important. Use this information to continuously improve the planning, professional development, and implementation of parent–teacher conferences.
- **Take leadership on family involvement.** Ensure that ongoing home–school communication continues by encouraging teachers to reach out to families to discuss their child's progress. Provide meaningful opportunities for families to get involved that are well publicized and responsive to the needs and interests of families in your school community.

For more resources on family involvement, visit www.hfrp.org.

These tips are based on the following resources:

Henderson, A., Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: The New Press.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Pappano, L. (2007). Meeting of the minds. *Harvard Education Letter*, *23*(4), 1–3.

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Parent–Teacher Conferences: A Tip Sheet for Teachers

Parent–teacher conferences are an important component of ongoing home–school communication and family involvement in your classroom. Did you also know that home–school communication predicts positive outcomes for students and for schools? Although you may already be working hard to engage parents in their children's education, this tip sheet is designed to build on your own experiences and provide you with additional information to help make your parent–teacher conferences productive and effective.

Ideas for before the conferences

- **Send invitations**. Disseminate information about conferences to families through flyers, notes, phone calls, and community meetings. Include information about the timing and goals of the conferences, as well as alternative scheduling options in your invitations.
- **Review student work.** Be prepared to go over student data, assignments, and assessments during the conferences. Think of what more you would like to learn about your students from their parents.
- **Prepare thoughts and materials.** Create an agenda or list of key issues you want to discuss about each student's progress and growth. Also consider creating a portfolio of student work to walk through with families during the conferences.
- **Send reminders.** The week before the conferences, send home a reminder for when and where the conferences will be held. You may also want to include an outline of your agenda to prepare parents for the conferences.
- **Create a welcoming environment**. Make your classroom comfortable for families by displaying student work, arranging seating in circles (with adult chairs, if possible), and making a private space for the conferences.

Approaching Parent–Teacher Conferences

- **A two-way conversation.** The parent–teacher conference is not only an opportunity for parents to learn from you, but for you to learn from them. Nobody knows your students better than their families. Their insights into their child's strengths and needs, learning styles, and nonschool learning opportunities can help you improve your instructional methods. Your efforts to better understand their aspirations and perspectives make parents feel respected and build trust with them.
- **Emphasis on learning.** You can make the most of parent–teacher conferences, and other forms of family involvement, by "linking them to learning." This means bringing events and communication back to a discussion of strategies to support student learning. You can arm parents with knowledge and suggestions for how to help their children learn.
- **Opportunities and challenges.** We all need praise and constructive criticism to grow. All parents are proud of their children and need to hear about their strengths as well as their challenges from you. This helps show parents that you value the unique strengths of their children and have high expectations for their ability to succeed in school and in life.

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Ideas for during the conferences

- **Discuss progress and growth.** Starting with the positive, let families know about their child's ability level in different subjects and in relationship to his or her peers. Help families understand student data to demonstrate progress against learning goals and to identify areas that need to be addressed.
- **Use examples**. Walk parents through the assignments and assessments that are particularly demonstrative of the student's progress and abilities.
- **Ask questions and listen actively.** Solicit family input into student strengths and needs, learning styles, and nonschool learning opportunities. Ask parents about their hopes and dreams for their child.
- **Share ideas for supporting learning**. Provide suggestions for activities and strategies families can use at home to help their child learn and grow.

"BE HEARD"

Keep these principles in mind for a great parent–teacher conference:

Best intentions assumed
Emphasis on learning
Home–school collaboration
Examples and evidence
Active listening
Respect for all
Dedication to follow-up

- **Seek solutions collaboratively**. Avoid judgments about what "they" should do and instead emphasize how "we" can work together to resolve any problems.
- **Make an action plan.** Spend the last few minutes discussing how you and the family will support the student. Be specific about the kinds of things you will do, for how long you will do them, and how you will check in with one another about progress.
- **Establish lines of communication.** Describe how you will communicate with families (i.e., through notes home, phone calls, email etc.) and they can contact you. Schedule a way to follow up on your conference in the next few months.

Ideas for after the conferences

- **Follow up with families**. If practical, contact parents (either by phone or in a note) who attended the conference and thank them for doing so. Ask if they have further questions or concerns and send home materials that can help them support learning at home. Contact parents who did not attend, as well, and offer alternative ways to communicate about their child.
- **Communicate regularly**. Communicate on an ongoing basis with families, with positive news as well as updates on student progress and challenges. Also let families know about other opportunities for them to be involved.
- **Connect in-class activities.** Create responsive instructional practices based on what you learned about family cultures, home learning environments, and student strengths and needs.

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Parent–Teacher Conferences: A Tip Sheet for Parents

As a parent, you are your child's first and most important teacher. You and your child's school have something in common: You both want your child to learn and do well. When parents and teachers talk to each other, each person can share important information about your child's talents and needs. Each person can also learn something new about how to help your child. Parent–teacher conferences are a great way to start talking to your child's teachers. This tip sheet suggests ways that you can make the most of parent-teacher conferences so that everyone wins, especially your child.

What should you expect?

- **A two-way conversation.** Like all good conversations, parent–teacher conferences are best when both people talk *and* listen. The conference is a time for you to learn about your child's progress in school: Ask to see data about your child's attendance, grades, and test scores. Find out whether your child is meeting school expectations and academic standards. This is also a time for the teacher to learn about what your child is like at home. When you tell the teacher about your child's skills, interests, needs, and dreams, the teacher can help your child more.
- **Emphasis on learning.** Good parent–teacher conferences focus on how well the child is doing in school. They also talk about how the child can do even better. To get ready for the conversation, look at your child's homework, tests, and notices before the conference. Be sure to bring a list of questions that you would like to ask the teacher.
- **Opportunities and challenges.** Just like you, teachers want your child to succeed. You will probably hear positive feedback about your child's progress *and* areas for improvement. Be prepared by thinking about your child's strengths and challenges beforehand. Be ready to ask questions about ways you and the teacher can help your child with some of his or her challenges.

Checklist: Before the conference

- ✓ Schedule a time to meet. If you can't go at the scheduled time, ask the teacher about other times.
- ✓ Review your child's work, grades, and progress reports.
- ✓ Talk with your child about his or her progress in school.
- ✓ Talk with others—family members, after school staff, mentors, etc.—about your child's strengths and needs.
- ✓ Make a list of questions to ask during the conference.
- ✓ Think about ways you would like to be involved in your child's learning so that you can discuss them with the teacher.

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What should you talk to the teacher about?

- **Progress.** Find out how your child is doing by asking questions like: Is my child performing at grade level? How is he or she doing compared to the rest of the class? What do you see as his or her strengths? How could he or she improve?
- **Assignments and assessments.** Ask to see examples of your child's work. Ask how the teacher gives grades.
- **Your thoughts about your child.** Be sure to share your thoughts and feelings about your child. Tell the teacher what you think your child is good at. Explain what he or she needs more help with.
- **Support learning at home.** Ask what you can do at home to help your child learn. Ask if the teacher knows of other programs or services in the community that could also help your child.
- **Support learning at school.** Find out what services are available at the school to help your child. Ask how the teacher will both challenge your child and support your child when he or she needs it.

"BE HEARD"

Keep these principles in mind for a great parent–teacher conference:

Best intentions assumed

Emphasis on learning

Home–school collaboration

Examples and evidence

Active listening

Respect for all

Dedication to follow-up

How should you follow up?

- **Make a plan.** Write down the things that you and the teacher will each do to support your child. You can do this during the conference or after. Write down what you will do, when, and how often. Make plans to check in with the teacher in the coming months.
- **Schedule another time to talk.** Communication should go both ways. Ask how you can contact the teacher. And don't forget to ask how the teacher will contact you too. There are many ways to communicate—in person, by phone, notes, email. Make a plan that works for both of you. Be sure to schedule at least one more time to talk in the next few months.
- **Talk to your child.** The parent–teacher conference is all about your child, so don't forget to include him or her. Share with your child what you learned. Show him or her how you will help with learning at home. Ask for his or her suggestions.

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