

Communicating Effectively With Parents



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Effectively communicating with parents is one of the most important roles of an educator. When parent(s) and teacher can work together with the student's success as a common goal, the atmosphere is one of trust, respect, and support.

Communicating Informally

It is advantageous to communicate with parents before the first formal parent/ teacher conference, and certainly before any problems have escalated. Initial positive communications set the stage for a teacher-parent partnership that emphasizes the positive and works toward improvement of any negatives. Some vehicles for informal communication are:

- Personal telephone calls
- Notes
- Open houses
- Newsletters
- Weekly reports
- Email

Parent/ Teacher Conferences

Formal parent/teacher conferences are scheduled in October and April. The careful preparation for conferences will help make them productive and successful. Some hints for success follow.

Preparation for the Conference

- √ **Initiate the conference early.** Use a typed letter indicating the purpose, the date, and the beginning and ending times.
- √ **Eliminate surprises.** Include in the letter a "return" section for the parents to indicate any specific areas that they would like addressed at the conference. This enables the teacher to be prepared to discuss parents' concerns, and often eliminates questions from the parents for which the teacher is not prepared to answer.
- √ **Plan ahead.** Have a general, but flexible, outline of each conference, including a survey of the student's progress, a review of the student's strengths and needs, and a proposed plan of action.
- √ **Get organized in advance.** Assemble all of the materials that may be needed prior to the conference. This may include your grade book, student work, attendance records, and other pertinent data.
- √ **Prepare an inviting and informal setting.** Plan a space for the conferences away from the teacher's desk. This area should be private and free from interruption.
- √ **Provide a waiting area that is away from the conference area.** Have samples of student work or some interesting reading available just in case a parent comes early and must wait. Be certain to include some work from each student!

Preparing the Students for Parent Conferences

Parent conference time can be traumatic for students when they have no indication as to the nature of the information to be given to their parents. To ease the tension surrounding report cards and conferences, try the idea below.

√ **Allow students the opportunity to do a personal evaluation.** Duplicate a blank report card. Discuss the grading criteria with the students. Give the students a blank card and let each student make out a personal report, thus evaluating self-progress. Discuss with each student your card and the student's card. You will often find that your students are more severe in the grading of themselves than you are! Share the two cards with the parents at the parent conference.

The Conference

- √ **Stay on schedule.** Parents who wait for an unreasonable amount of time often enter the conference in a negative frame of mind. If a conference is running longer than scheduled and more time is needed, arrange another meeting within the next day or so.
- √ **Greet parents in a pleasant manner.** Take the responsibility for making them comfortable before the conference actually begins.
- √ **Use body language.** The mood of a conference can be established through the effective use of body language. Nonverbal cues such as smiling, leaning forward, nodding, and eye contact let parents know that you are interested and approving.
- √ **Listen to the parents.** Encourage parents to share their view of the student's strengths, needs, interests, and concerns. This lets parents know that you value and are interested in their opinions.
- √ **Be positive.** Begin and end the conference on a warm, positive note. These notes may relate to the student's abilities, work, or interests.
- √ **Structure the conference.** At the beginning of the conference, review with the parents the structure you have prepared. This will give you both an agenda. Keep yourself in an informational mode.
- √ **Be specific and clear.** Rather than just dealing in generalities, such as "John doesn't accept responsibility," clarify the problem by saying, "John had an entire week to complete a book report; however, he only wrote two paragraphs."

- Stress collaboration.** Help parents realize that you are allies working with the best interests of the student as a focus. A statement such as, "I'd like to discuss with you how we might work together to improve Susie's work habits," indicates to parents that you are sincerely interested in a productive parent-teacher relationship.
- √ **Be knowledgeable.** Be prepared to interpret standardized test results. Familiarize yourself before the conference with the most recent test results and their interpretations.
 - √ **Use simple vocabulary.** Parents may be reluctant to indicate that they do not really understand what you mean when terms such as "least restrictive environment" or "perceptual skills" are used. The goal is to use language that is easily translated as to word meanings and the context in which the words are used.
 - √ **Offer a specific course of action.** Give specific suggestions for actions you and the parent can take to improve problem areas.
 - √ **Be professional.** Avoid commenting on other students or teachers.
 - √ **Summarize.** Close the conference with a few summarizing statements and a warm and positive comment about the student.

After the Conference

- √ **Make a record.** A brief record of what was said at the conference, suggestions made for improvement, and their important information are useful. If notes are made soon after the conference is over, the details will be fresh for accurate recording.

Note:

You will receive additional information on conferences from the Office of Professional Development in early October. Two videos made in the HCPSS are available through your school library or Teacher Resource Center. If you cannot locate these videos, please contact Bonnie Brownell at 410-313-7009.

Working With Upset Parents

There may be a time when a verbally abusive parent is encountered in either a scheduled conference, or an unscheduled "drop in" meeting. Remember that this is usually a rare instance. It is best, however, to be prepared to respond to such an encounter with effective techniques. This will give you a feeling of professional strength. Following are some ideas to consider.

- √ **Remain calm.** Do not raise your voice or become defensive.
- √ **Listen without interrupting.** Allow the parent to talk, uninterrupted, until the parent has finished. Sometimes a parent will stop and move to more productive statements. Be certain that you understand the problem. Ask questions, if necessary.
- √ **Acknowledge the anger.** Give serious concern to what has caused the anger. Focus on the specific issue. Use a statement such as:
 - "I understand that this has really angered you. Let's talk about it."
 - "I hear that you are very angry, but I don't quite understand the cause. Let's talk about it."
 - "I really don't blame you for being upset about this. Let me tell you what happened and we'll discuss how to solve the problem."
- √ **Seek solutions.** Come to some decision as to action that can be taken. If there is no immediate solution to the problem, let the parent know that you will get back with him/her after you have had an opportunity to investigate the situation further.
- √ **Remain objective.** Do not take the comments personally. If necessary, let the parent know how you feel without becoming emotional. For example:
 - "I understand what you are saying, however your tone does not help me think or even make me want to listen."
 - "When you raise your voice like that I feel that we cannot really communicate with each other."
- √ **Terminate the conference if all else fails.** If the parent is still too angry to communicate clearly after having vented all concerns, end the conference and reschedule it when feelings are more settled. Terminate the conference by using a statement such as:
 - "We are not being productive at all. I suggest that we meet at another time. I will call you in a few days to set up another meeting."
 - "You continue to be very angry, and I do not feel that it will be productive for us to continue."
 - "I really cannot talk to you when you are so angry. Let's make another appointment for a time when we can solve this problem."

Notes:

1. *Be certain to inform an administrator of any terminated meetings.*
2. *Consider having an administrator, counselor, or another teacher present for the entire conference if there is reason to believe that a parent will be highly emotional for a scheduled conference, or if a conference is rescheduled due to an unsuccessful initial one.*
3. *A video on this topic is available through your media specialist or Teacher Support Team. If you cannot locate the video, please contact Bonnie Brownell at 410-313-7009.*