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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate what, if anything, was lacking in training teachers for the classroom. A brief questionnaire was given to 12 teachers with two or less years of teaching at an elementary school in Oxford (Mississippi). All respondents stated a need for parent-teacher conference training. A review of relevant literature provided the information for writing a staff development program to be implemented at the school during teacher inservice training. The "Parent-Teacher Interaction for Student Success" packet included printed material for each teacher that covered effective strategies for conducting conferences. There were also different scenarios to be used by participants in role playing to reinforce the strategies presented during training. This paper presents the suggested strategies for planning the conference, which focus on: choosing a setting for the conference; conducting the conference; holding postconference followup; avoiding potential pitfalls; handling hard-to-please parents; and conducting group conferences. It also offers a list of "do's and don't's" for conducting conferences. (Contains 8 references.) (SM)

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# PARENT-TEACHER INTERACTION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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## PARENT-TEACHER INTERACTION FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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The purpose of the study was to investigate what, if anything, was lacking in training teachers for the classroom. A brief questionnaire was given to 12 teachers with two or less years of teaching at Bramlett Elementary School in Oxford, Mississippi. The responses to the question, "If I had more/some training in \_\_\_\_\_, I would have been better prepared for teaching" resulted in all respondents stating a need for parent-teacher conference training. A review of the literature provided information to write a staff development program. Information by Harlan, Shalaway, and others provided the material. The program will be implemented in the fall of 1997 at Bramlett Elementary School during teacher inservice training. The authors prepared a packet of information and designed activities involving the participants taking part in the staff development program. The "Parent-Teacher Interaction for Student Success" packet includes printed material for each teacher covering effective strategies for conducting conferences and different scenarios planned for role playing by participants to reinforce the strategies presented during the training. First year teachers and preservice teachers have expressed a specific interest in parent-teacher conference techniques, as well as experienced teachers. The material will be valuable to higher education faculties, directors, classroom teachers, and other educators. Feedback will be obtained in order to evaluate the appropriateness and usefulness to the teachers.

## EFFECTIVE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

Communicating with parents is one of the most effective thing we do as teachers. Research has proven that when teachers and parents work together toward common goals the atmosphere for learning improves. Parental involvement affects student learning. Most parents want to help their child succeed in school. They want to establish a home-school relationship where they can depend on the school for guidance. The school must establish an effective program that welcomes parent participation (*27 Tips for Parent Conferences*).

Parent-teacher conferences demand that the teacher play many roles, yet remain professional at all times. Conferences are to inform parents of progress and school performance of their children. They need to be solution-oriented, productive, and informative. To be effective, the conference focuses on problem solving and helping parents and students to realize that along with school personnel, everyone is a member of the team with common goals.

Canter and Canter (1976) in *Learning to Teach* remind teachers to refrain from the following nonassertive behaviors:

- \* They apologize for bothering the parents.
- \* They downgrade the problems.
- \* They belittle themselves.
- \* They do not clearly state their needs.
- \* They downgrade the consequences of the child's behavior.

Parent conferences can be one of the most helpful techniques in a teacher's bag of tricks. An organized conference requires planning, preparation, and patience.

### **Planning the Conference**

- \* Contact parents early in the school year.
- \* Prepare and send home an invitation to both parents to meet with you, the purpose of the conference, and a list of potential times.
- \* Set goals for the conference such as your general impression of the child, progress of the child, goals for the child, and strategies to meet those goals.
- \* Write down questions to ask, points to make, and suggestions for the parents to help their child.
- \* Be prepared to answer questions.
- \* Have samples of the student's work to show parents.
- \* Be prepared to explain your goals and teaching strategies.
- \* Schedule enough time for the conference, especially an important one.
- \* Avoid before-school conferences because they could ruin your day.
- \* Have ready materials such as daily classroom schedules and activities, checklists of skill areas, notes on student progress, sample work, test scores, and reports from other school personnel, where appropriate.
- \* Review the student's cumulative records.
- \* Mentally rehearse and review what you are planning to say at the conference.

### **The Setting for the Conference**

- \* Make your setting comfortable with adult-size chairs and a table. Avoid physical barriers. Arrange conference-style seating, if possible.
- \* Soft music may be played in the background to put parents at ease.
- \* Greet your parents at the door.
- \* Provide paper and pencils for the parents to jot down suggestions and ideas.
- \* If possible, provide simple refreshments.
- \* Hang a sign on the door, "Conference in Progress," to avoid interruptions.
- \* If possible, provide a table with take-home materials for the parents: curriculum plans, homework and grading policies, newsletters, suggestions for how parents can help—either at home or school, a directory of school personnel, and any other materials you feel are pertinent for the parent.

### **Conducting the Conference**

- \* First and foremost, get the name of the parents correct.
- \* Develop rapport by allowing parents to talk informally before starting and express appreciation for the parents coming.
- \* Review the agenda you planned.
- \* Begin with something positive about the child. This will help to relax everyone.
- \* Be specific about the child.
- \* Do not use educational jargon.
- \* Use body language in positive ways.
- \* Listen to parents' responses carefully and answer their questions.

- \* Ask the parents for their opinions.
- \* Confirm your impressions with the parents and set goals for their child.
- \* Build up to telling parents news that is not good.
- \* Focus on the child's strengths instead of weaknesses.
- \* Ask open-ended questions and clarification from parents when needed.
- \* End the conference on a positive note.
- \* Recommend specific steps parents can take to help their child.
- \* Summarize the conference before ending it.
- \* Always thank the parents for attending the conference and showing interest in the education of their child.
- \* If more time is needed, schedule another conference instead of rushing.
- \* Do not judge parent's behavior or what they say.
- \* Turn the other cheek if parents become hostile or abusive during the conference.

## The Conference:

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### Do:

1. Select one or two major goals for the conference.
2. Be on time.
3. Prepare in advance.
4. Remember that you are talking to another adult, not a child.
5. Keep the discussion simple and straightforward.
6. Watch body language and voice tone
7. Provide support when appropriate.
8. Abandon the situation and yell for help when necessary (use p. 224 for suggestions on dealing with parents who think you're wrong).
9. Share information with the child in advance, when possible.
10. Share some positive information with all parents.
11. Keep information confidential.
12. Give parents time to share their perceptions.
13. Keep a notepad handy to jot down questions you'll need to address.
14. Keep a small clock in sight so you can stay on task and on time.

### Don't:

1. Minimize problems.
2. Use jargon.
3. Make promises that can't be kept.
4. Be afraid to interrupt.
5. Share personal experiences.
6. Say anything you wouldn't want the child to know.
7. Argue.
8. Take things personally.
9. Cover too much information.
10. Drag the conference out too long (15-30 minutes is usually sufficient).
11. Write things on the conference form that you might not want placed in a cumulative folder.

In addition to the above suggestions compiled by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, *do* start the conference on a positive note (that is, with a positive comment about the child) and *don't* ever compare students.

(Shalaway, 1989, p. 220)



### **Postconference Follow-Up**

- \* After the conference, jot down notes on what was discussed and any commitments made by you or the parents.
- \* Finally, take time to evaluate your own performance:
  1. Were you well-prepared?
  2. Was the atmosphere informal and friendly?
  3. Did you use time well?
  4. Did you begin on a positive note?
  5. Did you encourage parents to talk and offer suggestions?
  6. How could the conference have been improved?
- \* When it's all over, ask yourself what you have learned that will help you teach the child.

### **Parent Conference Advice**

Potential pitfalls are abundant during conferences. To avoid them:

- \* Be sympathetic.
- \* Realize that your evaluations and impressions of their children affect the parents' own sense of self-worth.
- \* Think carefully about inviting children to conferences with their parents.
- \* Conferences are not the time for surprises.
- \* Time your conferences to accommodate parents' work schedules.
- \* Recognize the pervasive changes in family structure.
- \* Interpreting test scores can be a delicate situation.
- \* Proceed cautiously with reports gathered by others.
- \* Help parents understand achievement test results.

- ✳ Explain to parents how policies help you determine grades. (Shalaway, 1989, pp. 223-224)

Every teacher needs to develop special skills for interacting with parents. Good listening techniques, tact, kindness, consideration, empathy, enthusiasm, and an understanding of parent/child relationships are important in communicating effectively. Learning about relationship skills can help—not only in conferences, but in all aspects of life.

The first step to good relations is developing the proper attitude and approach. Keep the following guidelines in mind as you communicate with parents:

- ✳ Learning to communicate a genuine caring for people is a skill you can cultivate and refine. You can demonstrate genuine caring by monitoring your reactions to parents (Perl, 1995).
- ✳ Recognize that schools and homes have shared goals. Both teachers and parents are committed to the nurturing, developing, and education of children.
- ✳ Building rapport. Always remember to try to put the parent at ease. Beginning the meeting with some pleasant, informal conversation—"small talk"—can help everyone relax.
- ✳ Respect parents and communicate that respect. Tone of voice, word choice, facial expressions, expectations, how long we make people wait—all these communicate respect, or lack of it.
- ✳ Empathy requires carefully attending to speakers' words and nonverbal cues.
- ✳ Reflecting affect. When you reflect parents' feelings, you communicate your empathy to the parents.
- ✳ Tailor communications to your audience. All communications should be clear and expressed in plain language.

- ✳ Be sure to check written material for spelling and grammar.

Parent conferences are usually pleasant, productive encounters. But on those few occasions when they're not, try to learn from your experiences.

### **Handling the Hard-to-Please Parent**

- ✳ Understand the behavior because parents bring their own memories of school and teachers which may led to irrational feelings and reactions.
- ✳ Ways to defuse an explosive situation and respond to the parents are:
  1. Include the principal when you expect parents to be hostile.
  2. Remain as calm and unemotional as possible.
  3. Ask parents to be seated.
  4. Ask them to tell you specifically what the problem is and then address each specific complaint with ideas about what can be done.
  5. Listen to each other. Be open-minded.
  6. When they are finished, give your side of the story.
  7. Focus on the child, not yourself or the parent, during the conversation.
  8. The real issue could be over turf.
  9. Put yourself in the parents' shoes.
  10. Usually you and the parents will agree when all the facts are known.
  11. Admit it when you are wrong.
  12. Continuously repeat: "I care about your child, and I think we can work together to help him."
  13. Remind parents of the vivid imaginations and tendency to exaggerate by children.
  14. The tone of the conference should be one of cooperation between teacher and parents.

15. If you don't agree, remind the parents that the best interests of the child are the foremost consideration.
16. Make sure parents understand your position so there will be no surprises in the future.
17. Everyone deserves respect—parents and teachers—are you showing respect through your body language, greetings, etc.?
18. Invite several parents if the problem is affecting several children.
19. Always maintain your professionalism and call for backup if needed.
20. Remember that everyone will not agree with you about the outcome of a conference.

### **Group Conferences**

- \* Group conferences can save time.
- \* Group conferences may help reluctant parents feel more at ease in school.
- \* Group conferences are a good time to encourage parents to help in the school.

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### Inventory and Description

Bramlett School is located in a small northeast Mississippi town with a University within the city limits. The school enrollment is 732—grades pre-school through second grade. The racial and ethnic composition of the students are:

American Indian	1
Asian	24
Black	351
Hispanic	7
White	<u>349</u>
Total	732

There are 41 teachers employed with the school. Ninety-two percent of the teachers have advanced degrees in Elementary Education. Ninety-four percent of the teachers have been working in the district for 8 years or more.

Our district is committed to helping teachers grow professionally to their fullest potential. A survey was given to teachers with two or less years of teaching experience to respond.

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PLEASE TAKE A FEW MINUTES AND RESPOND TO THIS:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade & Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If I had more/some training in \_\_\_\_\_

I would have been better prepared for teaching.



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