

Series I - Step-by-Step - Guide Part VII

How to Conduct Effective Parent Conferences

Classroom management not only focuses on students' interaction in school but also the interaction with their parents, as well. As an educator, you will most probably hold parent conferences many times during the school year. Having a positive conference will tend to have the parents be more supportive and involved with their child's work and performance in school. Successful parent conferences also send a positive message to the students that the school and home are working together.

An important skill for special educators is their ability to hold positive parent conferences. Many times parents will leave a conference having been "bombarded" with jargon and statistics and understand nothing. According to Pierangelo (2004), effectively reporting results of classroom activities, experiences, performance etc. may be accomplished in the following ways:

- 1.) When setting up the appointment with a parent never allow yourself to begin the explanation of the results over the phone, even if the parent requests a "quick" idea of how his/her child is performing. If the parent does request this, gently say that the type of information that you have is better explained and understood in person. If you sense further anxiety, try to reassure the parent that you will meet as soon as possible. It is important to visually see the parent/s so that you can further explain areas in which they seem confused or uncomfortable. The face to face contact also makes the conference a more human approach. Hearing results from our doctor over the phone may not be as comforting as in person. This is especially true when working with students with learning disabilities, since a great deal of academic anxiety may already exist on the part of the parents.
- 2.) Make the parent/s feel comfortable and at ease by setting up a receptive environment. If possible, hold the meeting in a pleasant setting. Whenever possible, use a round table, or any table instead of your desk, and offer some type of refreshment to ease possible tension of the situation.
- 3.) It may be helpful to refresh the parent's memory about the areas on their student's IEP that have been identified as being in need of attention.
- 4.) Go over strength areas first, no matter how few there may be. You can also report positive classroom comments, and any other information that may help set the tone for acceptance of problem areas.
- 5.) Provide a typed outline of any classroom test scores, grades, and group achievement test results for the parent to take with them. It looks more professional if this information is typed and may help alleviate problems that may occur when parents go home and share the information with their spouses.

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- 6.) If you are discussing test results, explain in simple terms any statistical terms you may be using, e.g., percentiles, stanines, standard scores, etc. In fact, it may be a good idea to define these on the same sheet with the scores so that parents have a key when they go back and review them.
- 7.) Offer parents a pad and pen so that they can write down information, terms or notes during the meeting. Further, let them know that they should feel free to call you with any questions or concerns that they may have.
- 8.) Put aside a sufficient amount of time for conferences that you may foresee as being difficult. Challenging types of conferences are not ones in which you want to run out of time. The parents should leave in a natural manner, rather than feeling rushed.
- 9.) Take time to explain the differences between symptoms and problems. This explanation can go a long way in alleviating a parent's frustration. Parents will need to understand that behaviors like avoidance, procrastination, resistance, difficulty getting started with homework, incomplete assignments etc. may be symptoms of a problem i.e. learning disability, fear of failure, fear of disappointment, fear of criticism.
- 10.) It is helpful for parents to hear how the problems or areas of concern you found were contributing to the symptoms in the classroom and at home. It is reassuring for parents to know that what they were seeing were only symptoms, even though they may have been quite intense, and that the problems have been identified and recommendations are available. Offer them as much realistic hope as possible by giving them a plan of what you will attempt to do to remediate the weaknesses, and what they can do at home to help.
- 11.) Be as practical and specific as possible when offering suggestions on how parents can help at home. Offer them printed sheets with step-by-step procedures for any recommendation that you make. Parents should not be teachers and should never be given general recommendations that require their interpretation. (, e.g., “provide positive reinforcement”). This may aggravate an already tense situation at home. Offer them supportive and educational materials that they can use with their child, providing them insight into helping them create success.

Adapted from the *Special Educator's Survival Guide*/2005)/Pierangelo/Jossey Bass Publishers