

Helping Your Child Succeed – Part II

Working with Teachers and Schools

Q: How do I get the most out of parent-teacher conferences?

Be prepared to listen as well as to talk. It helps to write out questions before you leave home. Also jot down what you want to tell the teacher. Be prepared to take notes during the conference and ask for an explanation if you don't understand something.

Be prepared to take notes during the conference and ask for an explanation if you don't understand something.

In conferences, the teacher should offer specific details about your child's work and progress. If your child has already received some grades, ask how your child is being evaluated.

Talk about your child's talents, skills, hobbies, study habits and any special sensitivities such as concern about weight or speech difficulties.

Tell the teacher if you think your child needs special help and about any special family situation or event that might affect your child's ability to learn. Mention such things as a new baby, an illness or a recent or an upcoming move.

Ask about specific ways to help your child at home. Try to have an open mind.

At home, think about what the teacher has said and then follow up. If the teacher has told you that your child needs to improve in certain areas, check back in a few weeks to see how things are going.

Q: What if I don't agree with a school rule or with a teacher's assignments?

First, don't argue with the teacher in front of your child. Set up a meeting to talk about the issue. Before the meeting, plan what you are going to say—why you think a rule is unfair or what exactly you don't like about an assignment. Get your facts straight and don't rely on anger to win your argument. Try to be positive and remain calm. Listen carefully.

If the teacher's explanation doesn't satisfy you, arrange to talk with the principal or even the school superintendent. Do not feel intimidated by titles or personalities. An educator's primary responsibility is to ensure the success of each and every student in his classroom, school or district.

Q: What's the best way for me to stay involved in my child's school activities?

Attend school events. Go to sports events and concerts, attend back-to-school night, parent-teacher meetings and awards events, such as a "perfect attendance" breakfast.

Volunteer in your school. If your schedule permits, look for ways to help out at your child's school. Schools often send home lists of ways in which parents can get involved. Chaperones are needed for school trips or dances (and if your child thinks it's just too embarrassing to have you on the dance floor, sell soft drinks down the hall from the dance). School committees need members and the school newsletter may need an editor. The school may have councils or advisory committees that need parent representatives. If work or other commitments make it impossible for you to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home. For example, you can make phone calls to other parents to tell them about school-related activities or maybe help translate a school newsletter from English into another language.

Q: What if I don't have time to volunteer as much as I would like?

If work or other commitments make it impossible for you to volunteer in the school, look for ways to help at home.

Even if you can't volunteer to do work at the school building, you can help your child learn when you're at home. The key question is, "What can I do at home, easily and in a few minutes a day, to reinforce and extend what the school is doing?" This is the involvement that every family can and must provide.

The schools also need to take steps so that parents feel good about what they're doing at home and know they're helping.

You can be a great help to your child if you will observe these do's and don'ts about tests and testing:

- Do talk to your child about testing. It's helpful for children to understand why schools give tests and to know the different kinds of tests they will take.
- Explain that tests are yardsticks that teachers, schools, school districts and even states use to measure what and how they teach and how well students are learning what is taught. Most tests are designed and given by teachers to measure students' progress in a course. These tests are associated with the grades on report cards. The results tell the teacher and students whether they are keeping up with the class, need extra help or are ahead of other students.
- The results of some tests tell schools that they need to strengthen courses or change teaching methods. Still other tests compare students by schools, school districts or cities. All tests determine how well a child is doing in the areas measured by the tests.

NASET's Parent Teacher Conference Handouts

- Tell your child that occasionally, he will take "standardized" tests. Explain that these tests use the same standards to measure student performance across the state or even across the country. Every student takes the same test according to the same rules. This makes it possible to measure each student's performance against that of others.
- Do encourage your child. Praise her for the things that she does well. If your child feels good about herself, she will do her best on a test. Children who are afraid of failing are more likely to become anxious when taking tests and more likely to make mistakes.
- Do meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss his progress. Ask the teacher to suggest activities for you and your child to do at home to help prepare for tests and to improve your child's understanding of schoolwork.
- Do make sure that your child attends school regularly. Remember, tests reflect children's overall achievement. The more effort and energy your child puts into learning, the more likely it is that he will do well on tests.
- Do provide a quiet, comfortable place for studying at home and make sure that your child is well rested on school days and especially on the day of a test. Children who are tired are less able to pay attention in class or to handle the demands of a test.
- Do provide books and magazines for your child to read at home. By reading new materials, a child will learn new words that might appear on a test. Ask your child's teacher for lists of books for outside reading or get suggestions from your local library.
- Don't get upset because of a single test score. Many things can influence how your child does on a test. She might not have felt well on test day or she might have been too nervous to concentrate. She might have had an argument with a friend before the test or she might have been late to school because the school bus got caught in traffic. Remember, one test is simply one test.
- Don't place so much emphasis on your child's test scores that you lose sight of her well being. Too much pressure can affect her test performance. In addition, she may come to think that you will only love her if she does well on tests.
- Do help your child avoid test anxiety. It's good for your child to be concerned about taking a test. It's not good for him to develop "test anxiety." Test anxiety is worrying too much about doing well on a test. It can mean disaster for your child. Students with test anxiety can worry about success in school and about their future success. They can become very self-critical and lose confidence in their abilities. Instead of feeling challenged by the prospect of success, they become afraid of failure. If your child worries too much about taking tests, you can help to reduce the anxiety by encouraging the child to do the following things.
 - o Plan ahead. Start studying for the test well in advance. Make sure that you understand what material the test will cover. Try to make connections about what will be on the test and what you already know. Review the material more than once.
 - o Don't "cram" the night before. This will likely increase your anxiety, which will interfere with clear thinking. Get a good night's sleep.
 - o When you get the test, read the directions carefully before you begin work. If you don't understand how to do something, ask the teacher to explain.

NASET's Parent Teacher Conference Handouts

- o Look quickly at the entire text to see what types of questions are on it (multiple choice, matching, true/false, essay). See if different questions are worth different numbers of points. This will help you to determine how much time to spend on each part of the test.
- o If you don't know the answer to a question, skip it and go on. Don't waste time worrying about one question. Mark it and, if you have time at the end of the test, return to it and try again.

After the Test

Your child can learn a great deal from reviewing a graded exam paper. Reviewing will show him where he had difficulty and, perhaps, why. This is especially important for classes in which the material builds from one section to the next, as in math. Students who have not mastered the basics of math are not likely to be able to work with fractions, square roots, beginning algebra and so on.

Discuss the wrong answers with your child and find out why he chose the answers. Sometimes a child didn't understand or misread a question. Or, he may have known the correct answer but failed to make his answer clear.

You and your child should read and discuss all comments that the teacher writes on a returned test. If any comments aren't clear, tell your child to ask the teacher to explain them.