

Getting the Most out of Parent-Teacher Conferences

**By
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Parent-teacher conferences are the most formal means of contact between parents and teachers and a great opportunity to build communication and understanding between the home and school.

While this may be one of the most important avenues of information exchange between parents and teachers, these conferences can also be quite stressful for many parents. Working moms or dads may have to rush to a conference early in the morning before work, at lunchtime or at the end of a long day to meet with teachers. Other parents may be anxious about meeting with their child's teacher because of their own school-related experiences as a child. Some parents may be worried about what they might learn about their child's performance, development or behavior.

This stress and anxiety can lead to strained or shortened conversations or put the parent or teacher on the defensive, undoubtedly defeating the purpose of the meeting – to discuss the needs of the child.

To reduce this tension and stress and to get the most out of every parent-teacher conference, it is important for you, as a parent, to come to the meeting well-prepared so you can spend the short time you have efficiently and productively.

First of all, remember that these conferences are typically short for a reason. They are designed to be a formal information-sharing forum, not a time for decision-making. If there are decisions that need to be made about your child's education, schedule a separate meeting.

Remember that parents and teachers are partners in a child's development and growth. You are the expert on your child's personality – what makes her anxious, motivates her, or makes her happy or proud. You have critical information about your child's strengths, talents, hobbies and interests that can help the teacher so don't be afraid to share it.

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Conversely, your child's teacher sees her in an entirely new light – how she interacts with peers, how she learns, how she may be trying out her independence and asserting her developing personality away from home. You may hear some things that surprise you. Embrace this opportunity to see your child through the eyes of another adult who cares about her well being.

It is important that your child feel that her teacher and parent(s) are working together on her behalf. When you get home, share what you learned with your child - both the positive and negative. If there are areas in which your child can be improving, come up with a plan together to work on those items.

Remember to make a distinction between home and school. Let the teacher be the expert in educating children and expect him to respect your expertise in parenting your child. If you feel the teacher is crossing boundaries into parenting issues, nicely remind him that this is your area and then move on to another topic. Show the same respect to your child's teacher. But if you feel the teacher is incompetent or you are unhappy with his methods, schedule an appointment with the principal to discuss your concerns. And never bad-mouth the teacher in front of your child. Until the issue is resolved, he and your child still need to work together.

While parent-teacher conferences are invaluable forums, don't wait until this time to bring up questions or concerns. Today, one of the best tools for communication with teachers is email. Take advantage of this and use the parent-teacher time for face-to-face updates on issues you've been working on together.

Many parents go into parent-teacher conferences expecting the teacher to lead the conversation. Take time prior to the meeting to think about what you'd like to get out of the meeting. Here are some guidelines for questions to ask to get the conversation started:

For preschool-aged children:

- How is my child progressing developmentally?
- Does my child do really well in some areas that I can reinforce at home?
- Does my child need special help with anything?
- Does my child make friends easily?
- Does my child participate in group activities?
- What is my child like during the day?
- What can I do to continue the learning process at home?

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For older children:

- What is my child studying this year?
- What aspects of school does my child appear to enjoy the most?
- What are my child's best/worst subjects?
- How well does my child get along with classmates?
- Has my child completed assignments regularly?
- Does my child willingly participate in class activities?
- Does my child follow directions?
- Have you noticed any changes in my child's behavior during the year?
- What tests has my child had or will my child have this year?
- What do the test scores tell me about my child's progress?
- How does my child handle taking tests?
- Does my child need help in any academic area or need to be referred to school specialists?
- How much learning do you require be done independently?
- What expectations do you have for children in your classroom?

Don't allow parent-teacher conferences to stress you out. If you go into the meeting with the right attitude and expectations and feel prepared with questions, you will go a long way in strengthening the parent-teacher team responsible for the educational needs of your child.

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