

## ► “Mrs. Smith, your son is a joy to have in class,” Or “How To Survive Parent Conferences”

A parent-teacher conference can be one of the most effective tools in your teaching tool kit when it comes to communicating with parents. To keep the conference from becoming a discouraging waste of time for everyone or an unpleasant confrontation, you need to do some preparation. The first place to start is by checking with your mentor, colleagues and the association for their suggestions and to learn if there are any district policies in place. After that, try some of these strategies to make conferences a celebration—not a catastrophe.

- Invite both parents whenever possible. You can sometimes gauge the kind of parental support a student has if both parents are able to come.
- Make contact early with a letter or memo telling parents when the conferences will be held. Don't rely on the district to do that. Be aware of parents' work schedules.
- Plan ahead. Be ready to answer specific questions parents may have. You should have your grade book, samples of the child's work and any other important data you may need right at your fingertips.
- Greet parents at the door and be sure to get their names right.
- Try to arrange comfortable, informal seating for you and the parents. Don't sit behind your desk and have parents sit in student desks. It may bring up unpleasant school memories for them.
- Set out the agenda of the conference right away. You have very little time, so make sure everyone is clear on why you're meeting. Remember, parents may have their own agenda. Be flexible.
- Start on a positive note no matter how difficult that may be. Every child has some redeeming qualities and you don't want parents on the defensive immediately.
- Don't do all the talking. Listen to what parents have to say. Ask for their advice and opinions.
- Be specific in your comments. “He doesn't accept responsibility,” doesn't translate well to parents. Give examples.
- Stress collaboration. You both are talking about the same child. Explain clearly how parents can help you with their child's education.
- Summarize the discussion you have had and decide what you and the parents will do next.
- Schedule another time to meet if you need to. If the conference is not going well, a cooling-off period may be needed.
- Try to end up on a positive note. Save at least one final encouraging comment for parents about their child. Be sure to thank parents for their interest and support.
- Keep a record of the conference. Try to take notes as you meet with parents. Highlight specific things you and the parents have agreed to do so that you can follow up on them.
- Whether you think the conference went well or not, review the experience with your mentor. This isn't brain surgery. No one will die if you make a mistake. You'll have another chance in the spring.