



MEA

CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Families as Partners - How they can be your best allies

Educators know what an important difference family involvement can make in a child's education. But what can you do to show family members the role they play and make them a strong and lasting school ally? The National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (NFIE) asked educators involved in successful dropout prevention programs nationwide how they enlist and energize families as partners.

Here's what they had to say:

- Take the initiative to involve families. They want to be active in their child's education.
- Schedule one-to-one conferences and ask parents what they want to know. Then share your knowledge, guidance, and support.
- Schedule home visits. Families are apt to be more open and at ease in their own homes. Check policy on this.
- Encourage families to spend time at school.
- Give families a chance to share their talents and experiences in the classroom or on field trips.
- Remember to say "thank you" to families for their efforts with a call or a note.
- When parents are not available, reach out to grandparents, foster parents, or community volunteers who are serving as mentors to your students.
- Publish a newsletter to keep families informed.
- Share positive as well as negative feedback.

- Give families a hands-on role by requiring a signature on homework and permission slips for activities.
- Turn “Back-to-School night” into “family night” and invite students and families to come together to discuss what will be expected of students, families, and teachers.
- Encourage families to provide their children with a quiet study area, a good breakfast, a time to read together, and supervision over television viewing.
- Send a letter to families to begin the year. The sample letter below was drafted by a fifth grade teacher. Her colleagues found it useful and adapted from it in drafting their own letters. You may as well. The example letter outlines classroom policies. While that is important, you could also use the letter as an opportunity to open communication by asking parents to respond to some questions about their child (How does the child learn best? What hobbies/interests does the child have? What are parents’ goals for the year?) Always proofread carefully anything you are sending home. One word of caution: Some building principals will expect to see a copy of any letter before sending it home with students.

Dear Parents:

I am your child's 5th grade teacher, and I am delighted to have your child in my class this year.

I'm looking forward to a very successful year, and I know you are too. I have high expectations for your child, and I will be doing all that I can to help your child achieve those expectations.

You can help. I will be expecting all work assigned in class to be completed. Of course, all children do not work at the same pace. Some children will get their work done in class and some will not. Whether or not a child gets his or her work done in class has no effect on his or her grade. If your child does not complete an assignment in class, he or she will be required to complete it at home.

The way you can help is ask your child every school day if school work needs to be done and, if so, make sure your child completes the assignment.

I want you to be aware of the following policies:

- Work may be turned in one day late; however, an assignment turned in one day late will receive an automatic penalty of minus-20 grade points.
- If assigned work is not turned in, or turned in after the one-day late period, the grade for that assignment will be recorded as "zero".
- Within each six-week period, the single lowest grade (just one) will not be averaged.
- Work is due at the time the teacher asks for it on the assigned day. If the student is not prepared at that time, but finishes the assignment later in the day, the assignment will still be considered late.

In addition, I will be assigning projects in various subjects throughout the school year. Projects are to be completed at home. Your help and support will not only make your child more successful in school this year, but will instill good study habits that will last a lifetime.

Finally, I want you to know that one of my most important goals this year is to keep the lines of communication open with you. Please do not hesitate to call me at school. I am available to talk to you every day between 9:00 a.m. and 9:45 a.m. and between 3:00 p.m. and 3:40 p.m. Your child's daily schedule and the class expectations are attached. Please review these together with your child.

Sincerely,
Your Name

Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-Teacher Conferences can be intimidating but are an important part of connecting with families. Follow some of these tips to make the most of parent-teacher conferences.

- **Contact parents early in the year.** Outline your curriculum and expectations, and let parents know how they can reach you.
- **Invite both parents.** But, be sure to find out first if a student comes from a single-parent home and if both parents should be invited or if the appropriate guardian is someone other than a parent. You will also want to be aware of any joint custody arrangements which require dual notification.
- **Allow enough time in the conference.** If you are scheduling back-to-back conferences, give yourself a “cushion” of time in between.
- **Prepare in advance to answer specific questions** parents may have about their child’s ability, skill levels, and achievements. Sending a simple questionnaire home prior to the conference asking parents if there’s a specific concern can help you to be prepared and not caught off guard.
- **Get organized before the conference.** Assemble your grade book, test scores, student work samples, and attendance records.
- **Plan ahead.** Have in mind a general—but flexible—outline of what you’re going to say, including a snapshot of student progress, review of his or her strengths and needs and proposed plan of action.
- **Greet parents at the door.** Also, you’ll help parents feel welcome and relieve their anxiety if you greet them by name. Check records in advance to make sure you have names correct. For secondary conferences where you don’t schedule the parents, stand and shake hands with parents.
- **Avoid physical barriers.** Don’t sit behind your desk or ask parents to perch on uncomfortable chairs, if possible.
- **Open on a positive note.** Begin conferences on a warm, positive note to relax everyone. Start with a positive statement about the child’s abilities, school work, or interests. Show some of the child’s work.
- **Structure the session.** As soon as the parents arrive, review the structure of the conference—the why, what, how, and when—so you’ll both have an “agenda.” (Remember that parents often come with their own agendas or questions they want answered, so you’ll need to be

flexible.)

- **Be specific** in your comments and suggested course of action.
- **Offer a suggested course of action.** Parents appreciate being given some specific direction. If a student is demonstrating immature behaviors, it might be helpful to suggest that the parents give her a list of weekly chores, allow them to take care of a pet or give them a notebook to write down assignments to build responsibility. (When you offer advice, ask parents if they've noticed the same behavior at home and for any suggestions they may have.)
- **Forget the jargon.** Try not to use “edubabble” and acronyms because it sounds like doubletalk to most parents.
- **Hear parents out.** In routine parent conferences, it's unusual to run into parents who are abusive and hostile. But it can happen. Try not to be rude, whatever the provocation. Hear out the parents in as pleasant a manner as possible, without getting defensive. If you anticipate an issue, notify a colleague or administrator and ask him/her to sit in on the conference. You should not be abused. End the conference/meeting if things devolve too much or you feel unsafe.
- **Ask for parents' opinions even if the comments are hostile or negative.** Thank them for offering input and feedback.
- **Focus on strengths.** It's very easy for parents to feel defensive, since many of them see themselves in their children. It is helpful if you review the child's strengths and areas of need, rather than dwelling on criticism or stressing weaknesses.
- **Use body language.** Non-verbal cues set the mood of the conference. Smile, nod, make eye contact, and lean forward slightly. You'll be using your body language to let parents know you're interested and approachable.
- **Stress collaboration.** Let the parent know you want to work together in the best interest of the child. A statement like “you need to see me as soon as possible to discuss Johnny's poor study habits” only arouses hostility, while “I'd like to discuss with you how we might work together to improve Johnny's study habits” gets the relationship off on the right foot.
- **Listen to what the parents say.** Despite the fact that we spend nearly a third of our lives listening, most adults are poor listeners. We

concentrate on what we're going to say next, we let our minds drift off to other concerns or we hear only part of what a speaker is saying. You'll get more out of a parent conference if you really listen to what parents are saying to you. Ask parents if you can take notes if there is something you will need to follow-up on.

- **Ask about the child.** You don't want to pry, of course, but remember to ask parents if there's anything they think you should know about the child (such as study habits, relationship with siblings, any important events in their life) which may affect their school work. Ask about hobbies or interests that can be connected to throughout the school year (writing topics, etc.). This is something that is good to ask in the beginning of the year.
- **Focus on solutions.** Ideally, all parent conferences would focus only positive events. Realistically, many conferences are held because there's an issue or concern somewhere. Things will go more smoothly if you focus on solutions, rather than on challenges. Discuss what you and the parents can do to help improve the situation. Plan together a course of action.
- **Don't judge.** It may not always be possible to react neutrally to what parents say—their values may be very different from your own—but communicating any judgments of parents' attitudes or behaviors can be a roadblock to a productive relationship with them.
- **Summarize.** Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what action you and the parents have decided to take to support the student.
- **Wind up on a positive note.** When you can, save at least one encouraging comment or positive statement about the student for the end of the conference.
- **Meet again if you need to.** If you feel you need more time, arrange another meeting later, rather than trying to rush everything before the conference time concludes.
- **Keep a record of the conference.** You may find it helpful later to have a brief record of what was said at the conference, what suggestions for improvements were made and so forth. If you don't do it during the conference/meeting, make notes as soon as possible after the conference, while details are fresh.