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Parent Conference Considerations

Professionally conducted parent-teacher conferences can prove a most valuable strategy for improving student classroom behavior as well as enhancing learning. Here are some ideas used by successful teachers to reap the maximum benefit from parent-teacher conferences.

- Before the conference, plan what you hope to accomplish. What information do you want to share with the parent? What problems need solving? Do not overwhelm the parent. Settle on no more than two or three concerns to be addressed. A laundry list of complaints will only discourage or alienate them.
- If you are requesting the conference in response to a specific problem with the child, allow some time to cool off before meeting with the parent. You'll be less emotionally charged and more objective after a couple of days. Remember, you are a professional educator.
- When a student begins to misbehave in class, begin to keep an index card recording specific disturbances noted. Include the name, date, description of problem behavior, and action taken. Make your notes as soon after an incident as possible. It helps you to identify patterns and gives more credibility to your complaint when talking with the child's parent.
- If possible, clarify ahead of time who will be attending the conference and their relationship to the child. Is this the child's mother, father, guardian? Also verify from the school records the person's name. Do not assume their surname will be the same as the student's. Don't make a big point of it in front of the parent, but a bit of advance checking can help avoid potentially embarrassing gaffes during the conference. Some teachers have mistakenly assumed that an older parent was the student's grandparent.
- Within reason, try to accommodate the parent's schedule. Many parents cannot readily take off work to attend school conferences. If parents have more than one child, attempt to coordinate their appointments so they only have to come to school once. Such small considerations can reap significant cooperation.
- Consider sending a reminder of the time, date, and place to the parent a couple of days before the scheduled conference. If special directions are needed for parking or for finding your room, include those as well. If you are seeing several parents back-to-back, inform them how much time is allotted for their appointment.
- Put your name on the door to make it easier for parents to locate your room.
- Create an inviting room atmosphere. Displays of students' work, projects in progress, bulletin board displays, posters or learning centers, and "Welcome Parents" signs can all help create a warm atmosphere.
- Arrange the room setting to minimize potential distractions or interruptions during the conference. Close the door if necessary.
- Assemble samples of the student's work and a list of his or her grades before the conference. It will save you the time of having to look them up during the conference. Some teachers have their students assemble a work portfolio in a folder. This might include a greeting from their child. You might also include a page where the parent can return a positive note to their child about their schoolwork.
- Many teachers keep a note card for each student, recording points to discuss at the parent-teacher conference. Try to anticipate any questions a parent might ask and note your thoughts related to that issue.
- Greet parents cordially when they arrive, again being sure to verify their names immediately. Ideally, try to greet them at the door. Thank them for coming to see you.
- Be the gracious host. Some teachers set up coffee, juice, or snacks for parents, especially if they might have to wait in the hallway while you finish a prior conference. If they must wait in the hall, provide some chairs and perhaps copies of your textbooks or other materials to scan while waiting.
- Practice the very best of manners, treating each parent with full respect and dignity. Whatever their occupation or socio-economic status, treat all parents as you would the president of a corporation or a physician. Strive to make them feel as welcome and comfortable as possible.
- Address all parents by their last names preceded by the appropriate Mr., Mrs., or Ms. until you are invited by them to use their first name.
- Don't hide behind your desk. It can be a barrier to developing a working relationship. If possible, sit beside the parent at a table. Also avoid seating parents in small children's chairs.
- Begin the conference on a positive note. Think of two or three positive descriptors for each student (e.g., "Michelle is so eager to help" or "Brandon seems well liked by his classmates"). You might jot these down on each student's card or file to stimulate your memory. It is important to find something to praise with each student.
- Establish rapport with the parent. This need not take long, but try to establish a personal connection and create an inviting atmosphere. If you know about the parent's job, hobby, or special interest, make a brief inquiry (e.g., "Matt tells me you've been working on your family genealogy"). Help put the parent at ease.

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- Do question the parent about the student's special talents, interests, or accomplishments. Express a genuine interest to better understand their child's successes and strengths as well as challenges.
- Be specific when discussing difficulties the student is experiencing. It is generally better to be candid, yet non-blaming. It is unwise to mislead the parent into thinking all is well if there is a problem with their child. Stick to the facts, giving concrete examples, rather than broad generalities.
- Don't dwell on any student's attributes that are unlikely to change or over which the parents have little control.
- It is best to avoid getting emotional in discussing problems you may be having with the student. Remember, your goal is to enlist the parent's cooperation in resolving any difficulties the student may be experiencing in your class.
- Actively listen to the parent. Respond empathically to feelings expressed by the parent (e.g., "You are disappointed Laurie isn't getting more individual attention in class"). This communicates that you really are trying to understand the parents' perspective; it does not imply you necessarily agree with their view. Such active listening is an especially effective way to handle the angry parent.
- Encourage parents to ask questions and respond fully yet tactfully. Avoid jargon, "educationese," or psychological labels. Allow parents time to talk.
- Inquire about home routines (responsibilities, homework habits, play, etc.). Seek information that might help you gain a better understanding of the student's talents, interests, and challenges.
- Try to offer two or three specific suggestions for the parent to implement at home that might help the student. Offer them not as commands, but as ideas that have worked with other students.
- Invite the parents to contact you with any future concerns about their child's classroom progress.
- Some traps to avoid: discussing family problems, discussing other teachers' classroom treatment of the student, comparing the student with siblings, arguing with the parent, attempting to psychoanalyze the student, blaming the parent for the student's misbehavior.
- End the conference in a hopeful tone. Summarize the main points discussed and any steps to be taken to resolve identified problems. Again commend them for coming to the conference.
- Do follow up with notes or a phone call, especially if a particular problem has been identified for attention.
- If other parents are waiting, be sure to end the meeting at the scheduled time. Ideally, allow yourself a few minutes between sessions to permit time to note any major points discussed during the conference. If necessary, offer to schedule another conference with the parent.

Excerpted from *Classroom Teacher's Survival Guide*.

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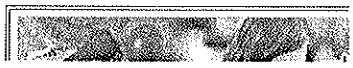

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Parent-Teacher Conferences: Before, During, and After

Jabberwocky

A **parent-teacher conference** is a face-to-face meeting between one teacher and one or both parents (or guardians) of a student. It is an opportunity to discuss a student's academic progress and social behavior. Many schools schedule these in both the fall and spring.

If there's one part of the school year that strikes fear into the heart of any teacher—it's parent-teacher conference time. Teachers who have been around a while will be more than willing to share some memorable stories about strange parents and even stranger conversations with those parents. Nevertheless, parent-teacher conferences are a wonderful opportunity to extend lines of communication between home and school, keep parents informed about their children's progress—both academic and social—and for developing cooperative strategies that can ultimately benefit every student.

You may be nervous about the thought of parent-teacher conferences. However, here's something important to remember—most parents are just as nervous as you are. Your first and primary goal should be to help make them feel comfortable.

A friend of mine once said, "It's important to remember that children are ego extensions of their parents." If you tell a mother that her son is failing three subjects, you are, in effect, telling the parent that she, too, is a failure. On the other hand, if you tell Mr. Velasquez that his daughter is the most outstanding science student in the school, Mr. Velasquez will be mentally patting himself on the back all evening long.

Productive and successful conferences take careful planning. You should think about three stages: before, during, and after.

Before the Conference

Send a personal letter to each parent to confirm the day, time, and place of the conference. Inform parents ahead of time about the purpose of the conference. Gather file folders or portfolios of each student's work. Be sure your schedule is coordinated with other teachers in the school. Many parents will have more than one child in school and need sufficient time with each teacher.

If necessary, make arrangements for an interpreter for non-English-speaking parents. Review notes on each student's behavior, academic progress, and interactions with peers. Establish no more than two or three concerns or issues. More than that will discourage most parents. Clarify ahead of time who, exactly, will be attending each conference. Is it the child's biological parents, a relative, a guardian, a grandparent, a foster parent, or who? Check and double-check names.

Invite parents to bring a list of questions, issues, or concerns. Have sample textbooks readily available. Establish a waiting area outside your classroom. For reasons of confidentiality, you only want to meet with one set of parents at a time.

Don't conduct a parent-teacher conference from behind your desk. A teacher's desk is sometimes referred to as "power furniture," and it tends to inhibit conversation and makes many parents uncomfortable (perhaps a throwback to their days as a student). Instead, conduct your conferences at a table. Don't sit across from parents; instead, sit on the same side of the table as your guests. You will discover heightened levels of conversation and "comfortableness" on the part of parents this way.

During the Conference

Greet parents in a positive manner with a smile and a handshake. Keep in mind that a well-run parent-teacher conference focuses in on the following "must do's" every time:

- Provide parents with specific academic information.
- Invite and obtain additional information from parents.
- Listen carefully to parents. If you're nervous, you will tend to "take over" the conversation—by as much as 90 percent. Try for a 50-50 balance.
- Combine your perceptions and their observations into a workable plan of action. Ask for parent ideas, and use those ideas in addressing challenging situations.
- Let parents know that you are always available for follow-up (phone calls, personal meetings, etc.).

When talking to parents, always remember: show, don't tell. Provide specific examples of a student's work or behavior rather than labels or adjectives. Instead of saying, "Frankie is poor in math," paint a clear picture for Frankie's parents: "Last week Frankie struggled when we were learning to add two-digit numbers, and he didn't finish his assignment." Always provide parents with concrete examples rather than very broad generalities.

If you are sharing some negative information with parents, be sure you "sandwich" it. Begin with some positive information, then share the negative information, and conclude with another piece of positive information.

Always look for common solutions ("I understand your concern with Carmelita. Let's see if we can work on this together"). Have some duplicated resource sheets available for parents. These may include (but aren't limited to) the following: a list of community social service agencies, a homework help line, a list of private tutors in the community, websites for homework help, etc.

Always use "active listening" skills. If a parent says something about the child, try to use some of the parent's words in your response. For example, if Mr. Brown says, "Yeah, Tommie always seems to be shy whenever he's around other people." You say, "I understand that Tommie is hesitant to talk with other people—that sometimes happens in class. Perhaps I could put him in a smaller group so he will be less inhibited." By using active listening, you help build positive bridges of communication essential in any good conference.

Fire Alarm

Be careful of conversational traps. Experienced teachers will tell you that some topics should *never* be part of parent-teacher conferences, including the following:

- Comparing one child with another
- Focusing on family problems
- Psychoanalyzing a child
- Blaming the parent for the child's problems
- Psychoanalyzing a parent
- Talking about other teachers
- Arguing with a parent

Don't be afraid to ask for parent input or feedback ("By the way, Mr. Wilson, how have you handled Bobbie's silliness at home?"). By the same token, never give parents commands ("You should ..." "You must ...") Rather, offer concrete and specific suggestions in the form of an invitation ("Mrs. Harper, based on our conversation this evening, I'm wondering if you and Michelle could spend an additional 10 minutes a night on her spelling words?"). It is far better to "invite" parents to become part of the solution than "tell" them what they should or should not do.

Summarize some of the major points, and clarify any action that will be taken. Most important, always end a conference on a positive note! Don't just dismiss parents from the table. Stand up with them and personally escort them to the door with a smile, a handshake, and a "Thank you for coming."

After the Conference

Save a few minutes after each conference to jot down a couple notes. Don't take notes during the conference—it tends to inhibit many parents and makes eye-to-eye conversation difficult. Record your observations, perceptions, and suggestions on a 3×5 index card with the student's name at the top. File these in a recipe box for later reference.

Plan for some "decompression time" between conferences. You need time to gather your thoughts, regroup, and get ready for the next conference. A long string of back-to-back conferences will only add to your stress and increase your anxiety.

Be sure to follow up (as necessary) with phone calls, notes, messages, or letters to every parent, including those who didn't attend ("I'm sorry I missed you at the parent-teacher conferences last week. May I call you for a personal meeting?"). Immediate feedback is necessary to ensure parent cooperation and participation in any shared solutions.

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Tips for a Successful Parent-Teacher Conference

General Hints

Parent-teacher conferences are an excellent opportunity to find out how your child is adjusting to the new school year and to get to know her teachers. Here are some general hints on how to have a successful conference:

- Ask your child if there is anything that he would like you to discuss with the teacher.
- Jot down everything that you want to talk about at the conference. (See Helpful Questions, below.)
- Arrive promptly or a few minutes early.
- Begin with positive comments about the teacher or classroom.
- Avoid lengthy discussions of topics that are not related to the purpose of the conference.
- Be open to suggestions from the teacher.
- Keep your emotions under control.
- Take notes about what has been discussed and share them with your child.
- Express appreciation for the conference.
- Do not stay beyond your allotted time.

Helpful Questions

In order to help your kids have a successful school year, you need to know what will be expected of them academically from now until June. You can find out by asking some questions. Take this list with you to your next parent-teacher conference. And don't forget to take notes.

1. What skills and knowledge will my child be expected to master this year?
   - What will my child learn this year in key subjects like math, science, history, and English?
   - Are there challenging academic standards in place at this school? How do they compare with those at other school districts? May I see them?
   - How do you inform students about the academic standards they're expected to meet? What kind of projects and assignments have you planned that will help my child meet higher academic standards?

2. How will my child be evaluated?
   - What kind of information do you use to evaluate students?
   - How do you know if a child is academically ready to move on to the next grade?
   - How are grades determined in your classroom?

3. What can I do to stay more involved in my child's academic progress?
   - What can I do at home to complement what is happening in the classroom?
   - How can I know on a daily basis what homework has been assigned?
   - How can I support teachers' efforts in implementing higher academic standards?

4. How do you accommodate differences in learning?
   - What if my child is a slow learner and falls behind, or is a fast learner and is bored?
   - Are summer school, tutoring, or other programs available for students who need more help?

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5. How are older students prepared for further learning after high school?
   - Are children encouraged to think about a wide variety of career interests?
   - Are all students encouraged to take algebra by the end of eighth grade?

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Parent-Teacher Conferences: Five Important Questions

Prepare yourself for parent-teacher conferences by thinking about what information parents really should have.

Here are some examples.

1. **What skills and knowledge will your students be expected to master this year?**
   - What will your students learn this year in key subjects like math, science, history, and English?
   - Are there challenging academic standards in place at your school, and how do they compare with those at other school districts? Show these standards to parents.
   - How will you inform students about the academic standards they're expected to meet? What kinds of projects and assignments have you planned that will help your students meet higher academic standards?

2. **How will your students be evaluated?**
   - What kind of information do you use to evaluate students? How do you know if they're academically ready to move on to the next grade?
   - How are grades determined in your classroom?

3. **What can parents do to stay more involved in their child's academic progress?**
   - What can they do at home to complement what is happening in the classroom?
   - How can they know on a daily basis what homework has been assigned?
   - How can they support your efforts in implementing higher academic standards?

4. **How do you accommodate differences in learning?**
   - What if their child is a slow learner and falls behind, or is a fast learner and is bored?
   - Are summer school, tutoring, or other programs available for students who need more help?

5. **How are older students prepared for further learning after high school?**
   - Are children encouraged to think about a wide variety of career interests?
   - Are all students encouraged to take algebra by the end of eighth grade?

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25 Tips for Successful Parent Conferences

Working for a Common Goal: Academic Success

Communicating with parents is one of the most important things we do as teachers. When we can work together with a child's parents toward common goals, we improve the atmosphere for learning.

Most successful teacher-parent "teams" begin with a conference, usually one conducted before there's a real need to meet.

Of course, while parent conferences can be one of the most helpful techniques in a teacher's "bag of tricks," we also know that sometimes they can be a discouraging waste of time - or even turn into ugly confrontations.

Here are some tips to help make your parent conferences productive and successful:

1. Invite both parents
Encourage both parents to attend conferences when possible. Misunderstandings are less common if both parents hear what you have to say, and you'll be able to gauge the kind of support both parents give the child. Remember that both mother and father may not be available. Increasing numbers of Kansas children live in single-parent homes. Even with two parents, both parents often work outside the home.

2. Make contact early
You'll get your relationship with parents off to a good start if you contact them early in the year, perhaps with a memo or newsletter sent home to all pupils. Give parents an outline of what their children will be studying, and let them know you'll be happy to meet with them, and how and when they may contact you for conferences.

3. Allow enough time
Schedule plenty of time for the meeting. Twenty to 30 minutes is usually adequate. If you're scheduling back-to-back conferences, be sure to allow enough time between them (10 minutes or so) so you can make necessary notes on the just-conducted conferences and prepare for the upcoming one.

4. Be ready for questions
Parents may have specific questions. They're likely to ask:

- What is my child's ability level?
- Is my child working up to his/her ability level?
- How is my child doing in specific subjects?
- Does my child cause any trouble?
- Does my child have any specific skills or abilities in schoolwork?

5. Plan — Get your papers organized in advance
Assemble your grade book, test papers, samples of the student's work, attendance records and other pertinent data ahead of time. Have in mind a general but flexible outline of what you're going to say, including a survey of student progress, a review of his or her strengths and needs, and proposed plan of action.

6. Greet parents near the entrance they'll use
You'll alleviate anxiety and frustration and make parents feel more welcome.

7. Get the name right
Don't assume that Jennifer Peabody's mother is Mrs. Peabody. She could well have been married again since Jennifer was born. Check your record ahead of time to make sure you've got the parents' names right.

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And don't assume that the wrinkled gray-haired gentleman coming in with Johnny is his grandfather. It could be his father or an uncle. Politely ask. Double check names so you don't talk to the Smiths about their son "Stan" when their son's name is "Steve."

7. Avoid physical barriers
Don't sit behind your desk or force the parents to squeeze into the children's desks on the front row. Arrange conference table seating, if possible, so you'll all be equals together.

8. Open on a positive note
Begin conferences on a warm, positive note to keep everyone relaxed. Start with a positive statement about the child's abilities, work or interests.

9. 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, of course, that parents often come with their own agendas or questions they want answered, so you'll have to be flexible.)

10. Be specific in your comments
Parents may flounder if you deal only in generalities. Instead of saying "She doesn't accept responsibility," pin down the problem by pointing out "Amanda had a whole week to finish up her book report, but she only wrote two paragraphs."

11. Offer a suggested course of action
Parents appreciate being given some specific direction. If Jane is immature, it might be helpful to suggest that her parents give her a list of weekly chores, allow her to take care of a pet or give her a notebook to write down assignments. (Of course, when you offer advice, let parents know you're only making a suggestion.)

12. Forget the jargon
Education jargon phrases like "criterion referenced testing," "perceptual skills" and "least restrictive environment" may be just too much double-talk to many parents.

13. Turn the other cheek
It is 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 the situation is threatening or you begin to feel uncomfortable, end the conference immediately or call for assistance.

14. Ask for parents' opinions
Let parents know you're interested in their opinions, are eager to answer their questions and want to work with them throughout the year to help make their child's education the best. Confirm that you want to work together in the best interests of the child.

15. Focus on strengths
It's very easy for parents to feel defensive, since many of them see themselves in their children. You'll help if you review the child's strengths, solutions and areas of need, rather than dwelling on criticism or stressing weaknesses.

16. Use body language
Nonverbal cues set the mood of the conference. Smile, nod, make eye contact and lean forward slightly. You'll be using your body's language to let parents know you're interested and approving.

17. Listen to what parents say
Despite the fact we spend nearly a third of our lives listening, most adults are poor listeners. We concentrate on what we're going to say next, or 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.

18. Ask about the child
You don't want to pry, of course, but remember to ask parents if there is anything they think you should know about (such as study habits, relationships with siblings, any important events in his or her life) which may affect his or her schoolwork.

19. Don't judge
It may not always be possible to react neutrally to what parents say -- their values may be very different from yours. Your judgment of parents' attitudes or behaviors can be a roadblock to a productive relationship with them.

20. Summarize
Before the conference ends, summarize the discussion and what actions you and the parents have decided to take.

21. 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.

22. 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 kids get back from art class.

23. 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 improvement were made and so forth. Make notes as soon as possible after the conference while details are fresh.

24. Keep confidences
Parents will tell you information they would not share with anyone else. Do not share "amusing" stories about the student's family with family or colleagues. Your funny story could cause pain to those you have tried most to encourage.

25. Know Kansas law
If you learn anything from a parent that might cause you to suspect child abuse, know your "duty to report" under Kansas law.

Parent Teacher Conference Dos and Don'ts

Survival Guide: What Every New Member Should Know

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1. DO always greet parents warmly at the door. Plan and create an inviting environment. Accompany parents to a place where you can sit together and converse comfortably. Some teachers opt to group chairs in a semi-circle near a table or other surface where they can share student work. (And make sure the chairs are big enough!)

DON'T summon parents into the classroom and direct them to sit in front of your desk. Parents may be anxious or fearful about meeting with you, a key authority figure in their child's life. If you distance yourself, put them in a subservient position, or appear to condescend, you're undercutting the chances of a successful meeting.

2. DO start the meeting by showing that you care and know something positive about their child. Summarize the student's strengths before raising problems. Of course, if you have a heavy student load, it can be hard to get to know each child well by early fall conferences.

Three hints:

- Keep an index card on each child and jot down observations that you can later share. For example: "Alex told us in class the other day about his winning home run." "Tamira has a wonderful way of making friends with children who are new or feeling shy."
- If you have access to a camera, take photos of your students to use on a seating chart or to jog your memory before parent-teacher conferences.
- As a getting-to-know-you assignment, ask students to write about their interests, both academically and outside of school.

DON'T begin by focusing on the student's problems.

An Albany-area teacher recalled a parent-teacher conference when she was on the receiving end as the mother of a second-grader. "The teacher's first words to me were: 'Well, she's very messy.' She went on in detail about my daughter's messy desk, her writing — even her hair — until I wanted to cry. There was nothing about my daughter's wonderful sense of humor or her creativity. I wondered if she even liked my daughter." The students in your class are all somebody's beloved child, and parents come in hopes that you can see their child's best.

3. DO dress in a way that reflects the meeting's importance and your respect for the parents and their child.

DON'T dress too casually for the occasion. Some people think casual attire will make the parent feel more comfortable, but experts say that can backfire. You are a professional, and professional attire communicates that message.

4. DO rehearse what you want to say. Practice warm-up introductions, prepare an outline, and prepare a checklist of areas to cover. Plan how you will keep track of time.

DON'T wing it.

5. DO use materials from the student's work folder. It is much easier to demonstrate progress or show parents concretely what a student needs to do to improve if you utilize these materials.

DON'T rely on verbal descriptions of the student's work and progress. Avoid subjective statements such as "His conduct is bad." Instead, cite specifics such as: "She talks out of turn," or, "He won't sit in his seat."

6. DO use positive, nonverbal behavior. Listen reflectively. Maintain good eye contact. Lean in when you speak or make suggestions. In your suggestions, acknowledge the stresses of parenting: "I know it can be difficult to find the time to read with your child every night. Try asking your child to read aloud while you're preparing dinner."

DON'T point a finger at parents or place blame.

7. DO engage parents in planning best ways to help their child. Seek their suggestions first.

DON'T dominate a meeting so that parents can't ask questions or make suggestions. There's so much you want to tell them, but think hard about how much information parents need. Parents are most interested in specifics related to their child and will almost always have concerns or questions of their own. Allow for occasional silences, which give the parent an opportunity to ask a question or voice a concern.

8. DO give parents something to take home with them.They can review material more completely at home and refer back to it during the year. This can also save time at the conference. If you offer a handout on curriculum, for example, you won't need to go over it verbally in exhaustive detail.

DON'T send them home empty handed.

9. DO use clear and descriptive terms. Adjust to the parents' needs and levels of understanding. If you must use a buzzword, get in the habit of using parenthetical definitions: "This year we will use math manipulatives, which are objects, like this set of marbles, that let kids touch and experience what is meant by mathematical symbols."

DON'T use education jargon or acronyms. This can have a chilling effect on parent communications. Some common buzzwords that you know but parents might not include whole language, math manipulatives, SATs, ACTs, IEPs, paradigm, inclusion and cooperative learning.

10. DO end positively, with a proactive message of hope. Set goals. Review how parents can help. Mention plans for follow through. Let parents know their support is needed and appreciated. If appropriate, send a follow-up letter.

DON'T end the meeting on a negative note by recounting the problem.