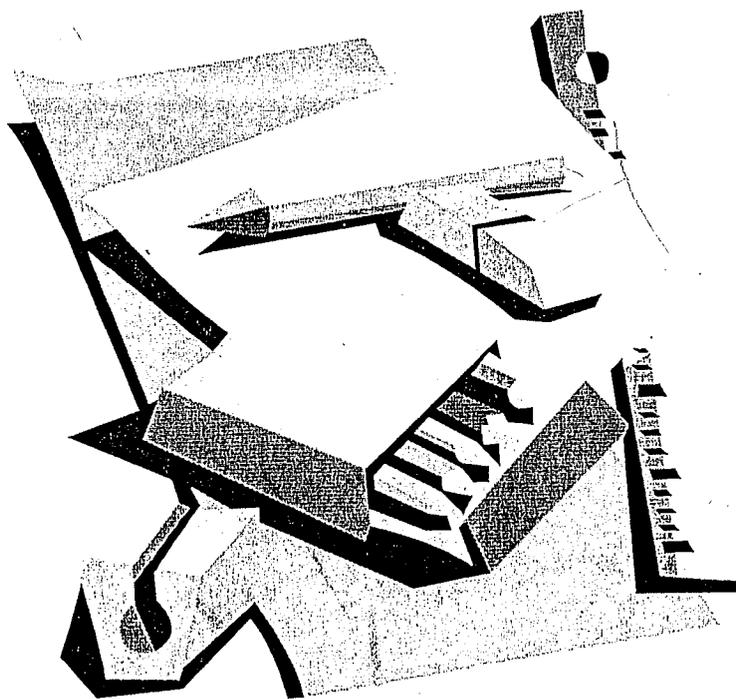


# Tips On Parent Conferences



## Parent Conference Notes

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student strengths observed by the teacher/s:

Student needs observed by the teacher/s:

Suggestions for actions: (Completed during the conference)

At school:

At home:

## Parent Conference Notes

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student strengths observed at home by parent/s:

Student needs observed at home by parent/s :

Suggestions for actions: (Completed during the conference)

At home:

At school:

## Parent Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Does your child like coming to school everyday?
  
3. What do you think your child is good at in school?
  
4. What do you think is hard for your child at school?
  
5. How would you describe your child's reading skills? Does your child understand what he/she read? What strengths does your child have in this area?
  
6. How would you describe your child's math skills? What strengths does your child have in this area?
  
7. Do you help your child with homework?
  
8. How long does your child, on average, spend doing homework?
  
9. What, if any, concerns do you have about your child?
  
10. List any questions you would like answered:





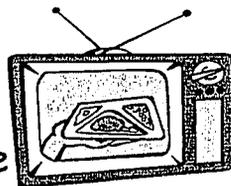
## Helping Your Child at Home

Below are some suggestions for how you can help your child become a better learner and show that you care about his/her success.

- Encourage your child and express your pride in his or her efforts and accomplishments
- Make sure your child gets eight or nine hours of sleep each night
- Keep your child healthy by providing:
  - Regular medical check ups and booster shots
  - A balance diet
  - Regular exercise
  - Clean hair and fresh clothes
- Notify the school of any medical issues
- Make sure your child has a good attendance record. Missing school means children fall behind in their work. They become anxious and frustrated when they can't keep up.
- Establish a time and place for studying. Give your child a quiet corner to read and do homework.
- Discuss homework assignments and discreetly monitor the child's progress. Offer praise or help when appropriate.
- When your child brings home completed papers and assignments take time to go over their work. Ask questions and help them to correct mistakes.
- Read to your child and encourage him or her to read to you. Let your child see you reading. Remember, the best way to communicate the importance and value of reading is to read. Be a reading model.
  - Be an effective reading tutor by asking your child to find specific details in a passage, paraphrase a paragraph, or describe a character.
- Please stay in touch.

I suggest the following enriching books and activities:

## Managing Television Time



Television has become another member of most families; we eat meals near it, learn from it, and most of us spend more time with it than with any single individual. Fortunately or unfortunately, television is central in our children's lives—as tutor, babysitter, teacher, entertainer, and salesperson.

What can you do to keep television "in its proper place"?

- Put the TV in a little-used room. With the TV in an area away from the living room and other places where heavy family activity occurs, children will watch less and plan more what they do watch.
- Plan to have one night a week with the TV off
  - Meet as a family and pick a no-TV night. Decide whether you want to do things together or have time alone.
- Avoid using the TV as a babysitter.
- Plan ahead what to watch. Decide what you and your kids will watch each night. Don't just turn on the set to see what's on.
- Seek out programs made for kids. Help your children plan to watch programs designed for their ages, interests, and maturity.
- Watch TV with your children. View their programs with them and help them evaluate what they're watching in light of your family's values and traditions.
- Help kids distinguish between make-believe and real life on TV. Explain that error and violence on TV shows is only acting and is not like real life violence.
- Discuss TV commercials selling junk food. Help children see that ads are trying to persuade them to spend money by developing buying habits which could be unhealthy. Let your children help select nutritious family foods and snacks.
- Use TV to start family activities. Make a list of TV-advertised products and see how many you have in the house. Watch different news programs the same night and see if all use the same lead stories. Play along with your favorite game shows as a family.
- Find leisure activities besides TV. Watching TV is relaxing, but so is a good game of cards. If you break the TV habit, your child will have a better chance of avoiding an addiction.
- Read to your child.

# Levels of Awareness

## A Closer Look at Communication Between Parents and Professionals

Mary E. Ulrich • Anne M. Bauer



"That mother is still in denial"; "The family is the real problem, they are demanding and unpredictable"; or "If the dad would get over his anger, we would be able to work together better." Teachers or other professionals working with students with disabilities and their parents often say things like these. Denial, anger, and depression are all common reactions to challenges faced by family members of children with disabilities (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"). This article can help professionals and parents learn and grow together as they work together for the children in

their charge. Communication is a big part of the answer.

### Importance of Communication

Communication between parents of children with disabilities and educational professionals is not only mandated but is best practice. Yet parents and professionals do not always agree what would be in the best interest of the family and child. These issues are even more challenging for parents of children with mild disabilities, who may have experienced school failure before identification. The practice of pre-referral interventions and student support teams have certainly decreased the possi-

bility that parents would be surprised that their child is experiencing problems in school, but parents may still be shocked to hear that the school has identified their child as having a disability.

This article discusses an alternative way of addressing families' adaptation to the identification of a child with a disability. This approach is grounded in a new idea about levels of awareness and transformational experiences. It is not our intent to replace one series of stages with another; rather, we suggest that each family shares a similar set of experiences in coming to grips with the challenges of living with a family member

### What Does the Literature Say About Family Acceptance of Disabilities?

Traditionally, educators have applied the stages of mourning identified by Kubler-Ross (1997) to a family's adaptation to the birth or diagnosis of a child with a disability (Batshaw, 1997; Bruce, Schultz, Smyrniotis, & Schultz, 1994; Lin, 2000; O'Shea, O'Shea, Algozzine, & Hammitte, 2001). These stages of denial, anger, depression, and acceptance, however, have not been supported by research (Blacher, 1984) and are considered by many parents to be condescending and patronizing—further hindering real communication (Snow, 2001).

If families and professionals feel that using these stages of adaptation are not valid or useful, then how can we understand the adjustments families make with the identification of disability or the ongoing educational decisions that they need to make? How can parents and professionals communicate better?

Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) wrote that with the introduction of the concept of "disability" as part of the family, the "family life cycle" has been dramatically interrupted. This grieving theory does not explain all that families are going through. Turnbull and Turnbull recommended a "shoes test" for professionals—to put themselves "in the shoes" of the parent. Bauer and Shea (2003) and Allen, Petr, and Brown (1995) also recommended working with the entire family system, not just the child. In the Family-Centered Behavior Scale, Allen et al. recommend changing from a professional-centered model to a family-centered model, which affirms the strengths of the family and reframes a "grief and tragedy" paradigm with "family empowerment."

Self-advocates are beginning to write their own stories (Grandin, 1995; Williams, 1998); and parents and members of parent organizations have written books with titles like *They Just Don't Get It* (Clark et al., 1996) and *Disability Is Natural* (Snow, 2001). Just as writers have discussed the differences in communication between men and women (Gray, 1992; Tanner, 1990), Harry (1992) wrote that because of language and cultural differences, parents and professionals could be speaking different languages. Could there be differences in the ways that parents and professionals construct meaning of a common word like disability? And would these differences give us communication clues?

with a label of disability. This approach might provide a useful tool for much of the communication among families, youth, and professionals—not only to understand the family's construction of disability, but also to understand our own.

In working with families, we must also look at our own levels of awareness and our own transformational experiences. As Senge (1990) suggests, by learning to see the structures within which we operate, we begin to free ourselves from forces we were unable to see earlier and ultimately master our ability to work with them and change—or transform—them. Can we move away from the “stages of grief” paradigm and look at our levels of awareness and transformational experiences?

#### Levels of Awareness

According to Schaeff (1992) we all have our own level of truth or awareness, and often we are unaware of the perspective or attitudes of others. She diagrammed the concept of levels of truth or awareness as a series of steps or stages through which we progress individually. Schaeff explained the levels of truth in a series of assumptions (see box, “Levels of Awareness”).

Van der Klift and Kunc, cited in Lovett, 1996, adapted Schaeff's (1992) levels into the categories of marginalization, reform, tolerance, and diversity. Expanding on this work, Ulrich (1998) found nine categories with transformational experiences, which assist individuals to move to the next category. If we look at working with parents in view of these levels of awareness, then what a parent or professional chooses as “best” depends on the individual's “level of awareness” at that particular moment. Bogdan and Taylor (1994) have suggested that such labels as “mental retardation” and “disability” are socially constructed, so looking at a parent's or professional's “level of awareness” is a way of deconstructing his or her personal communicative intent. The professional and the parents may not be a match in the following types of awareness:

- Their feelings about the issues of disabilities.
- Their personal histories.

- Their transformational experiences, knowledge, and learning about the issues.
- The contextual and systemic framework of their cultures and worlds.

These linguistic and pragmatic differences may create tension and miscommunication.

#### Level 1: The Ostrich Phase

The first level of awareness is actually a lack of awareness. Parents, who typically have very little experience with disability when they were growing up, may have little or no real information about mild disabilities, such as learning disabilities. Parents may not have any useful vocabulary for the difficulties their child is having, and may turn to the media for terms such as *dyslexic* or argue that the issue is one of teacher incompetence. Parents may make statements explaining behavior or achievement such as, “He's so active because he's a little boy—he just doesn't ‘get into’ school” or “She's just like my sister at that age, and she's now an attorney.”

In the “grieving” theory, the professionals would hear these statements and say, “denial.” But the parent may not be denying the presence of a problem. Rather, he or she may be operating out of a lack of information and experience of what a learning disability is, and a fear of the stigma of “disability.” At this level of awareness, the “truth” for the parent is that there is indeed nothing really wrong. They are quite happy in their “uninformed” state and wish to remain there.

At a kindergarten screening, for example, the parent may describe to the teacher how his or her child is just like “Uncle Joe,” who didn't tie his shoes until he was 9-years-old, and he is now an attorney. The teacher is confronted with a parent reassuring himself or herself with a related experience and ignoring the obvious differences. Though parents often retrospectively report that they had a feeling things weren't quite right, their level of awareness is that of an ostrich with its head in the sand.

The movement to a second, deeper level of awareness occurs following a transformational experience. In conversations with parents, they can often

specifically identify this transformation (Ulrich, 1998). For example, a father listened to a younger child reading, and realized that the younger child read far more fluently than his own son, who was several years older. A parent recounts seeing her child walking the perimeter of the playground, suddenly realizing that her child does not know how to play with other children. Parents reflecting on these experiences made statements such as, “Right then, I knew that school was going to be different for Joseph than it was for Darren.”

#### Level 2: Special Designation

In this second stage of awareness, parents have, through some transformational experience, recognized that there is indeed a disability. So, if there is a problem, there are professionals to fix it. If you're sick, you go to a doctor. If you can't read, you must go to some sort of reading specialist. Parents want specific services with specific numbers of minutes on individualized education programs (IEPs). Parents may seek specialists, join parent organizations, and read everything they can on their child's label

#### Levels of Awareness of Truth

- Each issue has levels of truth. As one grows in awareness, his or her levels of truth deepen.
- Each individual operates from a particular level of truth. This level of truth is his or her reality.
- A person must fully embrace a level of truth before moving to another level.
- Moving further along the continuum allows an individual to better understand the concept itself, as well as the level of truth of others concerning that concept.
- Each level is a significant break from the previous level, moving in the opposite direction. When one looks only at two adjacent levels of truth, they may give the appearance of a dualism.
- Understanding these different levels of truth is vital to communication.

Source: Schaeff, 1992.

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**Denial, anger, and depression are all common reactions to challenges faced by family members of children with disabilities.**

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of disability. In this level of awareness, their child becomes a "special" child for whom "special" services are needed. Parents may even be confrontational, wanting to know what the professionals are going to do about the disabilities.

In our conversations with parents, this "identify the problem and solve it" level of awareness of disability usually fades with a transformational experience having to do with the family's quality of life. A parent stated:

Todd was going to tutoring two afternoons a week and seeing an occupational therapist. We had sticker charts on the refrigerator; a babysitter scheduled three nights a week while I was secretary of the local parent association. We drilled flash cards of some sort even in the car. One day my husband and I looked at each other and our other kids, with whom we really spent little time, and said to ourselves, "What the heck are we doing? Do we want to live like this?" We didn't have a minute to ourselves as a couple, Todd was miserable, and his brother and sister were miserable. We decided that quality of life was more important than somehow beating Todd's learning disability.

**Level 3: Normalization**

In the normalization phase, the parents minimize differences between their child and his or her classmates and siblings. They emphasize the need for normalization in their child's life so that it begins to look like that of other children their age. At this stage, a parent may say, "I don't think of Suzanne as having learning disabilities. I just want her to fit in." Here's what another parent said:

On Jan's tenth birthday Jan announced, "All 10-year-olds get braces and go to Disney World." So what else were we to do? The next month we were taking pictures of our child with a sparkling metal smile standing next to Mickey.

Van der Klift and Kunc, cited in Lovett, 1996, suggested that resignation and benevolence characterize this phase. Parents may argue for a reduction of requirements in favor of more typical peer activities.

As parents move through this level, their transformational experience may again occur related to what their child can or cannot do. The transformational experience may also be related to the child's moving from one educational environment to another. Parents may make statements like this:

He was fine in the primary grades. They did everything he needed. But now, we're moving to fourth grade. Long division. Ink pens. I thought to myself, we can't keep pretending that he's going to be fine or outgrow this.

Thinking back on it, it was like before he was identified. The IEP, in the name of inclusion, didn't really have any meat. I don't think he learned anything all year. All of the requirements were reduced, and he was just "one of the kids"—one of the kids who didn't seem to be improving in any of his academic skills.

Here we see a huge transformation, going from denial of disability to not only acknowledging it but asserting that the other students can learn from their child with a disability. Teachers may wonder what happened—almost overnight, parents may be saying contradictory statements.

**Level 4: Self-Actualization**

In this level of awareness, parents recognize that children with disabilities need supports; and not only do they need supports, but they may have their own perspectives on how these needs should be met. Parents and professionals do not perceive that being different is either better or worse, but just differ-

ent. They recognize the value of equal work, and emphasize the mutual benefits that come from celebrating diversity (Van der Klift & Kunc, cited in Lovett, 1996).

In this level, parents and teachers support their children in learning about themselves and their disability. Because the culture still has much stigma associated with "disability," parents and teachers prepare the students to be self-advocates. Information and experience with disability culture and self-determination advocacy teaches individual equilibrium. We hear statements like this from students: "I am Shanisha, and I am smart. I have a learning disability, which means I have to use my Palm Pilot to schedule my day, but I am good in math and want to be a teacher."

Parents stop expressing their dreams and begin to express realities. The young adult who loves stories may never be an English major at Harvard, but may be happy unpacking books at the library.

**Using the Levels of Awareness in Working With Families**

Schaefer (1992) stated that the first step involves "naming." Covey (1989) suggested looking "inside-out." Reflecting on your own individual definition of disability may give you insights into the parent's current "level of awareness" of disability. Is there a current match between the teachers' and parents' semantic definition?

We asked six teacher/parent dyads (T-Teacher, P-Parent of primary school-age child with a disability) from two school districts (E-East, W-West) to fill in a visual display of the first things that came to mind when they heard the word "disability." Although almost all the parents' responses were similar to each other in that they mentioned their child's name, several were quite different from their child's teacher.

---

**We need to be aware that the learning and growth process includes transformational moments.**

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**As educators, we must look  
at our own levels of  
awareness and our own  
transformational  
experiences.**

**Suggestions for Practice**

When miscommunication occurs between the parent and teacher, it could result from a mismatch in the levels of awareness. If the parent is on Level 2: Special Designation, and the teacher is on Level 4, or vice versa, then even though each may be earnestly doing their best to communicate, it may be challenging. We need to be aware that the learning and growth process includes transformational moments. When statements from parents or teachers are inconsistent with what they said previously, they may have experienced a change in their level of awareness. For instance, the parents demand more

therapy (Level 2) on one day and suddenly change their mind and say they just want their child to be included in general physical education (Level 3).

First, we each need to know ourselves. Second, "transformational experiences" will happen and may cause each of us to grow and change. Shared "aha" moments on both sides help us process what is happening and more accurately find shared meaning. Third, we can build trust and communication if both parties make it a priority.

After years in Nazi concentration camps, psychotherapist Viktor Frankel wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1984) that each of us must find our own larger sense of what is happening to us, a "guiding truth" for our attitudes, beliefs, and actions, and then we must be willing to take responsibility for the choices we make. Certainly we must look in retrospect and think about our personal knowledge, our past transformational experiences, and our motivation to really listen and communicate. More important, we must focus on our future and how we can bring real learning, real

community, real inclusion and belonging, and real communication to life.

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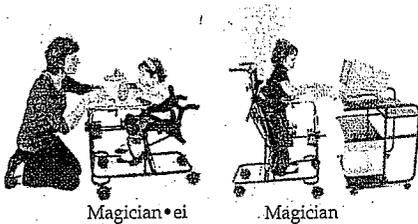
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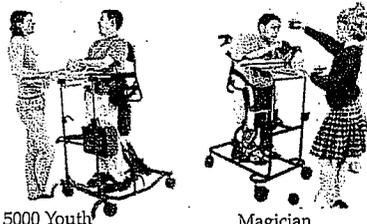
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## In parent-teacher conferences, 'enemies' can be friends

The Boston Globe

By Globe Staff, 9/28/2003

More than 100 million times a year, sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot estimates, parents sit down with their children's teachers to hear how their kids are doing in school. In almost every case, this semiannual rite of the parent-teacher conference could - and should - be more frank and productive, Lawrence-Lightfoot says in her recent book, "The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other." Lawrence-Lightfoot, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of eight books, has much personal experience on which to draw, having two of her own children, a daughter, 22, and a son, 20. She spoke recently with the Globe about lessons learned from her detailed look at parent-teacher meetings.

Q. You describe teachers as society's "professional adults." Does that put teachers in conflict with parents?

A. I talk about parents and teachers being "natural enemies," a phrase used by sociologist Willard Waller. Parents have an intimate, subjective, protective role. Teachers, on the other hand, are there to guide children in learning how to be in a group. When parents say, "I want you to be fair to my son," they are saying, "I want you to give him special attention." When teachers say, "I have to be fair to all the children," they are saying, "I have to share the resources of my energy among all the children."

Q. As a child, you recall your parents seeming "off-balance" meeting with your teacher. As a parent, you describe the "emotional trauma" of parent-teacher conferences. Why do otherwise confident people get jittery when they talk with their children's teacher?

A. When parents go into a classroom, they are thrown back to their own childhoods. They sit facing the teacher in those tiny chairs and feel as they felt then when they were small, powerless. There is something infantilizing and regressive about it. Very often parents get confused about which child they are talking about - their own child or their own childhood experience.

Q. You recommend that parents bring their child to the parent-teacher conference. But might some things, tough truths, be too difficult for children to hear?

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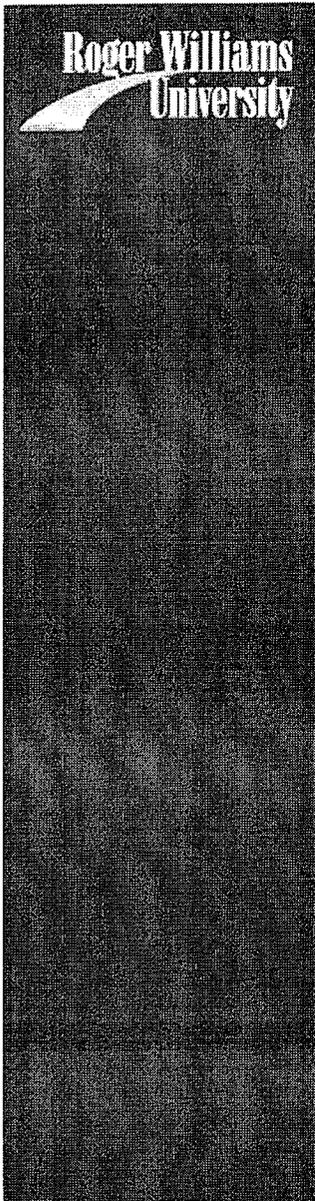
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A. As a rule, this should be a three-way conference - parent, teacher, and child. By excluding the child, we exclude the person who knows the school scene and the home scene. We are also passing up an extraordinary opportunity to help children evaluate their own learning and make really good judgments about what they do well and those things they have trouble with and are challenged by. Certain things are too confusing, scary, or private that children shouldn't be in on. I saw a teacher who met with parents and children who said at the beginning, "Towards the end, your mom and I will want to talk privately." It was a very natural expectation the child would leave. That should be the exception. Even high school kids who appear disinterested and aloof and cool are dying to participate. They would rather hear hard truths than not participate at all.

Q. You note many things that influence parent-teacher interactions, from personal experiences to racial, cultural, social, economic, and historical forces. How can parents and teachers recognize hot buttons and get past them to meaningful talk?

A. We need to recognize ghosts in the classroom. Traumatic childhood experiences have a way of unconsciously intruding on conversations. They should never overwhelm them. Parent teacher conferences are also often very empty rituals. Teachers need to present parents with evidence, illustrations, portfolios, anecdotes from the classroom, so they can get a vivid view of what their child is like in school. It moves the conversation from abstraction to specifics, from pleasantries to substance. No conference should be generic. The discussion with Susan's parents should not sound like the conference with Joshua's parents. Getting past chasms - even chasms of race, class, and culture - has to do with focusing on specifics, the individuality and strengths of each child.

Q.

How frequent should parent-teacher conferences be and are they the best way to communicate?

A. They could be more frequent, maybe three times a year. It is also important to have frequent communication [outside of] parent-teacher conferences, like a newsletter a teacher might send home weekly. E-mails are also good for communicating curricular assignments, events, or performances. Workshops that bring parents together as a group are helpful.

Q. Are you saying that other forms of communication can lessen pressure on the parent-teacher conference?

A. Other forms of communication are a way for parents and teachers to get to know one another. Otherwise during the parent-teacher conference they are stuck in roles and stances and they don't know each other well enough to begin a conversation that is meaningful. We want to replace enmity that might be there with empathy, [and] help parents put themselves in the teacher's shoes and vice versa.

This interview was conducted by Laura Pappano.

*You describe teachers as society's "professional adults." Does that put teachers in conflict with parents? I talk about parents and teachers being "natural enemies," a phrase used by sociologist Willard Waller. Parents have an intimate, subjective, protective role. Teachers, on*

*the other hand, are there to guide children in learning how to be in a group. When parents say, "I want you to be fair to my son," they are saying, "I want you to give him special attention." When teachers say, "I have to be fair to all the children," they are saying, "I have to share the resources of my energy among all the children." As a child, you recall your parents seeming "off-balance" meeting with your teacher. As a parent, you describe the "emotional trauma" of parent-teacher conferences. Why do otherwise confident people get jittery when they talk with their children's teacher? When parents go into a classroom, they are thrown back to their own childhoods. They sit facing the teacher in those tiny chairs and feel as they felt then when they were small, powerless. There is something infantilizing and regressive about it. Very often parents get confused about which child they are talking about -- their own child or their own childhood experience. You recommend that parents bring their child to the parent-teacher conference. But might some things, tough truths, be too difficult for children to hear? As a rule, this should be a three-way conference -- parent, teacher, and child. By excluding the child, we exclude the person who knows the school scene and the home scene. We are also passing up an extraordinary opportunity to help children evaluate their own learning and make really good judgments about what they do well and those things they have trouble with and are challenged by. Certain things are too confusing, scary, or private that children shouldn't be in on. I saw a teacher who met with parents and children who said at the beginning, "Towards the end, your mom and I will want to talk privately." It was a very natural expectation the child would leave. That should be the exception. Even high school kids who appear disinterested and aloof and cool are dying to participate. They would rather hear hard truths than not participate at all. You note many things that influence parent-teacher interactions, from personal experiences to racial, cultural, social, economic, and historical forces. How can parents and teachers recognize hot buttons and get past them to meaningful talk? We need to recognize ghosts in the classroom. Traumatic childhood experiences have a way of unconsciously intruding on conversations. They should never overwhelm them. Parent teacher conferences are also often very empty rituals. Teachers need to present parents with evidence, illustrations, portfolios, anecdotes from the classroom, so they can get a vivid view of what their child is like in school. It moves the conversation from abstraction to specifics, from pleasantries to substance. No conference should be generic. The discussion with Susan's parents should not sound like the conference with Joshua's parents. Getting past chasms -- even chasms of race, class, and culture -- has to do with focusing on specifics, the individuality and strengths of each child. How frequent should parent-teacher conferences be and are they the best way to communicate? They could be more frequent, maybe three times a year. It is also important to have frequent communication [outside of] parent-teacher conferences, like a newsletter a teacher might send home weekly. E-mails are also good for communicating curricular assignments, events, or performances. Workshops that bring parents together as a group are helpful. Are you saying that other forms of communication can lessen pressure on the parent-teacher conference? Other forms of communication are a way for parents and teachers to get to know one another. Otherwise during the parent-teacher conference they are stuck in roles and stances and they don't know each other well enough to begin a conversation that is meaningful. We want to replace enmity that might be there with empathy, [and] help parents put themselves in the teacher's shoes and vice versa. This interview was conducted by Laura Pappano.*

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## Strategies for Successful Parent Conferences

A period of high stress for all educators is Parent-Teacher conferences. There is nothing quite like teaching all day and then facing the parents of kids you've just been in mortal combat with for the past seven hours. Can we all say "splitting headache?"

Most teachers start the meetings feeling tired and try their best to manage for the evening sessions. Some districts are starting to also provide a "day" session for parents because there are an increasing number of 2nd shift workers who are unable to make evening meetings. This has the advantage of letting the kids out of school for the day so teachers can rest up a little before the conferences.

The first advice is a no brainer...get some rest. As simple as this sounds it cannot be overemphasized. How many of us are better at handling difficult situations when we are rested? My guess would be 100%. When you know you've got a difficult couple of days ahead, do yourself a favor and get some extra sleep.

Not only will it make the parent-teacher conferences a lot more enjoyable in general but it will minimize the possibility of losing your cool with parents. When teachers (and people in general) are tired they are much more irritable and must less able to tolerate frustrating circumstances.

### Call for Back-Up?

Another good idea is to ask an administrator or another supportive professional to sit in on the meeting(s) you think might be difficult. My principal has asked me to do this from time to time just to make certain things don't get out of hand. There have been times where I know if I had not been at a meeting to diffuse the situation, it would have been a very bad experience for everyone involved. I try to remain out of the conference unless I'm needed to step in and clarify a point or keep things moving along. The teachers usually just feel good knowing I'm there if needed.

There have also been times where I've gotten the distinct impression that having a male presence at a meeting has helped things go smoothly. Some fathers will think nothing of trying to bully or intimidate a female teacher but are less likely to engage in that kind of behavior with a male in the room.

Perhaps the most important thing is to have a plan for the meeting before you get in the room with the parents. Think about the kinds of issues that may arise and decide how you are going to handle them. Identifying the "hot" issues will probably not be too difficult. These are the problems that keep surfacing with

illustrate how the techniques works first by giving you the "straight" version and then the recommended Dirt Sandwich.

Here's the Straight version. "Mr. and Mrs. Jones, thanks for coming in to meet with me. I've been looking forward to this meeting because I'm concerned about Johnny. He's missing a lot of school and it's going to be hard for him to catch up."

Now, the Sandwich. "Mr. and Mrs. Jones, thanks for coming in to meet with me. I've been looking forward to this meeting. Let me first say that Johnny is a great kid. He's funny and his classmates really enjoy his sense of humor. He's great to have in class (bread). However, I am concerned that he's been missing too much school. It's starting to become difficult for him to make up the work (Dirt). He's such a bright kid I'd hate for him to fall behind (bread)." See how it works?

Which approach is going to bring about the results you'd like? The chances of the parents being an ally rather than an enemy are increased by the latter approach. I realize the example was a wee bit trite but I hope you get the picture.

I can hear some of you thinking, "That's too simple. Parents aren't fools. They'll see through such a simple ploy." This technique does work quite well with a majority of parents. Give it a try and find out for yourself.

### **What Parents Go Through**

Keep in mind what the parents may be experiencing as well. If school hasn't been a successful experience for their child they are more than likely frustrated and sensitive to criticism.

A fair percentage of parents over identify with their children and anything that a teacher says that is not 100% positive will be viewed as a criticism. That's why it is very important to focus on the child's behavior, what the child is doing, rather than any broad strokes about the child. It's much better to say, "Sue doesn't always turn in her work on time" as opposed to "Sue's work ethic could use some improvement." The first refers to the child's behavior and the second calls the child's character into question. They may not like hearing either but they will be much more likely to acknowledge the former than the latter.

During the conference try to remain unemotional if things start to get heated. It's important to keep your wits about you. When you get angry it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to think clearly. Also, some parents try to get a teacher into a confrontation because if they can put the emphasis on the school, it will stay off the child and their parenting. When they can get the teacher, administrator or support professional fuming mad, they have taken control of the meeting. Now they are setting the agenda and the school folks are dancing to their tune. I sincerely hope you don't run into too many of these parents because you will have a very difficult time working constructively with this type.

Finally, keep these meetings short and sweet. With our district we have the

philosophy for spring and fall parent conferences that if a problem can't be handled in the 20 minutes allotted, there needs to be a follow-up meeting scheduled. Parents usually understand that there are another set of parents coming in following their meeting and there is only a certain amount of time. It is a good idea to point this out to some parents at the beginning of the conference to keep things moving along rather than stuck on one issue or problem.

If all else fails, keep in mind these meetings will be over in a few hours. Keeping things in a short term perspective is sometimes the very best advice of all.



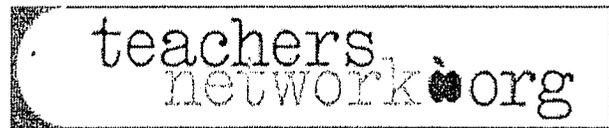
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### ***About this Daily Classroom Special***

*For the New Teacher* was written by Pam Tyrrell, a teacher at Jefferson Montessori Campus, Dayton, Ohio. Designed to aid entry level teachers, topics focus on issues and concerns commonly expressed by the neophyte teacher. For more new teacher oriented articles, make sure to check out New Teachers Online.

### **Conquering the Jitters**

The school year is well established and things are running more or less as you expected. Just when everything is settled, it arrives. Yes, folks, it's Parent-Teacher Conference Time!

As this time approaches, it is not unusual for a teacher with many years of experience to have "jitters." When parents come in, anything can happen, especially when a child is not progressing academically, or has had discipline problems. The wise teacher plans ahead for conferences and has all materials assembled well in advance.

Parent-Teacher conferences usually occur around the time report cards are sent home. Tensions may be high, and tempers may flare when grades do not seem to coincide with what parents expect from their children.

Let's not have any illusions. Fewer teachers are actually talking with 'rents--short for parents--about the work a child is doing, 'rents may not have a clue about how well (or poorly) their children are doing. Students know what their parents want to see, and may destroy work rather than have parents know how poorly they are doing. Even letters sent by US Mail are not guaranteed--they are easily intercepted and destroyed. Sadly, in these busy times, parents may not take the time to focus on their children's education, so 'rent-teacher conferences are often the first time during an academic year that parents really pay attention to how well their children are doing in school.

### **Lights, Camera, Action!**

Prepare for conferences the way you would prepare for an eagerly anticipated event. Gather together student work samples and lace them in a folder. Include the best examples of their work, and also examples of "typical" daily work.

Set up a table, with several chairs, in case more than one family member comes for the conference. Take a moment to decide if you want children present during conferences. Check on school/district policy, and if children are not to be included during conferences, find out how children are accommodated when they come with their parents. Is there a "child care" area set-up, or are children expected to sit in the hallway?

Some teachers want the student to be present during conference, but do not want siblings listening in. Depending on your school's stance, consider setting up an area within the classroom that has a few activities for many ages of children. Colored chalk at the board is usually a hit with children, as are puzzles, big books, building blocks, and classroom pets. I

turn on a "noisemaker" (radio, stereo, cassette player) and also have my classroom computer on. Position the activity center far enough away from the conference table so conversation is not easily monitored, and so that it is within eyesight for safety's sake. Toddlers usually stay with their parents, as most classrooms are not "baby proofed."

On a table outside the door, place a sign-in sheet, and any other information you want parents to have, along with several chairs. Be sure to have a large sign with your name and room number placed by your door. I have a bell on the table, and a note that asks parents to ring it when they get there so I know there is someone waiting.

Many teachers keep their conference table bare, except for a pencil, pen, and a notebook for jotting things down during the conference (use a clean sheet for each student, please!). On a table slightly behind and to one side of them, they put copies of the texts the students are using, their grade book, student folders, and copies of the materials offered outside the door.

Some schools schedule conference times, some just have an "open conference" time. Whatever method your school employs, be sure to meet each parent with a smile and a firm handshake, if it's appropriate. (I tried to shake one father's hand, but he told me it was not his custom to touch any woman, except his wife.) If you do schedule conference times, don't be surprised if parents show up, early, late, or not at all. Do your best to stay on your schedule, even if it means rescheduling a parent who is ten minutes late for a scheduled 15-minute conference.

During your conference, try to keep chit-chat to a minimum. [Cut to the chase: [Go To Pam's 10-minute script](#)] I like to start conferences with a positive statement about the student, then display textbooks as I go over subjects taught in the classroom. I offer parents a copy of district grade level goals, and curriculum to be covered, and then get right to the report card. There are books available at "teacher stores" which offer suggestions on wording for report card comments. I go over each grade, but do not touch the grade book, unless parents challenge me to "prove" a grade. (I keep all grades statistically, which makes it easy to total at the end of each quarter.)

Finally, I tell the parents what I believe are their child's strengths, as well as talk about areas their child has weaknesses in. Before they leave, I go over ways they can help their child at home. These suggestions are rather generic, and they are typed up and given to the parents to take home. Whatever I send home is written as close to a fourth grade vocabulary as I can get, since I want parents of all abilities to understand what I'm trying to communicate with them. In cases where parents are not fluent in English, I've had papers translated, and this year I asked an interpreter for the deaf to be available for one conference.

My part of the conference lasts no more than 10 minutes, the last five are set aside for parent questions, concerns. If no one is waiting, conferences can be lengthened. [What about "problem conference?" [Click here.](#)]

One frustration on conference day is the number of parents who sign up for a conference, and then fail to show up. During "down" time, I work on materials, clean the room, re-do bulletin boards, etc. Prior to conference day, I compose a "[form letter](#)" expressing regret that parents were unable to attend, and ask them to call to reschedule. At the end of the

day, I fill in the blanks, stuff a letter in an envelope, slap a mailing label on it, and put it in the school's outgoing mail. With luck, it will reach the parents the next day, and they will reschedule.

At the end of Parent-Teacher conference day, I go home and soak in a hot tub. I try very hard to do no school work at home, and usually go to bed early. Conferences are rewarding opportunities to get to know more about your students. They are also exhausting. After your conferences, be good to yourself. You've done the best you could, you'll learn from your mistakes, and after all, "tomorrow is another day!"

### 10 minute "script"

"Good morning, Mr. & Mrs. Smith" I'm so happy you could come today. John is a lovely child. He works very hard, and I'm anxious to show you how he has improved in math.

"These are the textbooks we are using this year. As you can see, we have math, reading, English, social studies, science, and spelling books. I've asked the children to take their books home and cover them to protect them. If you notice book covers are torn, would you please help John recover them?....Thank you.

Let's look at John's report card. In his personal development, John is making good progress. He makes friends and gets along well with the boys and girls in our classroom. As you know, I've noticed he has a short temper, and has been known to push in line, but we've been working on this, and it happens less often, now. I'd like to thank you again for talking to him last month, after I called you about this problem. It has helped him to know that you expect him to behave in school.

John's work habits are good. He completes his assignments on time, and they are done neatly. Here are some samples of classroom work. You can see he writes clearly, and his work is easy to follow. This is his social studies project on the Hoover Dam. We researched in the library for this. He put it together very well.

"John has earned a B in reading. He reads well orally, but he is having trouble remembering what he read. I'll have some suggestions for you to help him get over this problem.

"John's spelling grade is a C. He averaged a 74 on his tests.

"English, social studies and science are subjects John enjoys. He got a B in these areas. We have worked on adverbial phrases, studied the southwestern states and gone over the scientific process this quarter.

"Math is John's weakness. He started out very poorly. He had not mastered his multiplication, or division facts, and borrowing and carrying in addition and subtraction were difficult for him. His first test grade was a D. He has been working on the computer to memorize his math facts, and he has a peer tutor who does math with him. His test scores are going up. Here is last week's test, a B! He's doing better on math fact timed tests, too. His grade this quarter is a C-. He may be disappointed, but keep encouraging him to do his best.

"Art, Music and PE teachers have each given him a Satisfactory this quarter, and John's attendance has been good, 41 out of 43 days. He has not been tardy. I'm glad John is in our classroom. He certainly knows a lot about taking care of plants! Did you know he makes sure ours are watered and pruned?"

"Do you have any questions or concerns?..."

"Before you go, here is a list of things you can do to help John at home. I mentioned he is having problems remembering what he has read. You can help by having him read a paragraph out-loud to you and then asking him a question about what he read. If he hesitates, have him re-read the section silently, looking for the answer. Remind him, the answer is in the paragraph!"

"Thank you again for coming. If you have any questions, please call me at the school. You have a lovely child!"

### **What about a "problem" conference?**

If you believe you will have problems with a specific family, ask your administrator to be available to assist you, or see if you can hold that conference near the office. If this is not possible, alert the teacher next door to you to the possibility of trouble, and ask them to listen for signs of distress.

If a conference starts to get "ugly" it is perfectly fine to suggest that everyone needs to take a breath and reschedule. You can also suggest parents go to the office and arrange for a "three-way" conference: parent, teacher and administrator.

Above all else, always try to remain detached, especially if parents become "excited." It is preferable to lower your voice level than to start yelling back. Use "I statements," such as "I understand your concern," "I can see how you might get that impression," "I can see this is bothering you," and offer ways to settle them down. "We can work together to help your child," "Maybe I can say this a better way," "This would bother me, too." Keep the focus on their child, and let them know that you value their concerns and are willing to work with them to help their child.

### **Form Letter**

(Use letterhead if possible, ask for it from the school's secretary)

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I'm so sorry you were unable to attend our \_\_\_\_\_ conference today. It is re-scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_. It is my pleasure to have \_\_\_\_\_ in our classroom. I have lots of information to share with you about \_\_\_\_\_'s work. These are the things which were sent home with parents. I hope you'll look them over, and give me a call at the school. Our number is \_\_\_\_\_. I know we can find a time that is more convenient for you.

Sincerely,

Name

Make sure to check out Kristi Thomas's [Back to School Night](#) for more on this subject.

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## Parent Teacher Conference Dos and Don'ts

*Survival Guide: What Every New Member Should Know*

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:

- o 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."
- o 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.
- o As a getting-to-know-you assignment, ask students to write about their interests, both academically and outside of school.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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."

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

11. 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 student's problem.

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NEXT: [Survival Guide: Student Behavior Management \(for SRPs\)](#)

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