

Family/child conferences: Connecting with families (Part 1)

The following is part 1 of a two part series on family/child conferences. Part 2 can be found online at <http://bit.ly/1M6N011>

Family/child conferences are a time to connect with families to discuss children's overall progress and well-being. As one teacher shared, "Conferences are a time to sit down together with families and talk, hope, and plan strategies that will foster growth. And it allows time to celebrate how truly special the child is!"

Connecting with families

An intentional goal of family/child conferences is to not only plan for the child, but to also build partnerships with families. Connections between parents and teachers form a shared responsibility to work together, and actively support the child's overall learning and healthy development.

According to the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, when parents are engaged and partner with their child's learning program, everyone wins: "Students do better in school and in life. Parents become empowered. Teacher morale improves. Schools get better. Communities grow stronger."

"Children's cognitive and behavioral skills, while important, are not enough to ensure school success. Of equal or greater importance are the support and involvement of the child's family and positive relationship between home and school." — Amy Schulting

Conferences can be an excellent way to connect with families, but conferences can also be anxious events for families. Families may see the conference as a rating of their child or a comparison of their child to other children, focusing on weaknesses instead of strengths. Families may be especially reluctant to participate in conferences if they have questions about their child's development, there have been some difficult situations, or the family feels insecure in the formal setting of a conference.

Conferences are easier for both families and teachers if they build on everyday interactions with families, and if the conferences are designed to engage families in conversation and planning, reflecting the perspectives and expectations of both the teacher and the families.

Creating conferences that make the connection

Begin at the beginning

Setting the stage for effective conferences starts when the child enrolls in your program. Finding out what the family expectations are and what features of child care they value, plus sharing connections to their child's learning, are helpful for conference planning. By establishing individual relationships with families and involving them in your program, you can develop strong partnerships with families. Conferences are then another way to extend and strengthen the connection with families. Ideas for involving families are highlighted in tip sheet Engaging Families Part 2: Rethinking family involvement (12-02).



Encourage participation

Let families know you value their participation and ideas. To encourage participation, send home a list of questions for the families to think about before the conference. Ask them to think about their goals for their child, any new skills, behaviors, or interests they have noticed in their child, and any questions they have about the learning program.

Plan intentionally

Intentions for the conference should be clearly outlined and shared well in advance with families; that way, families know what to expect. It's important to give families time to arrange their schedules and also time to communicate their ideas. A few weeks before conferences, send home a confirmation note with the date and time. Ask the families what they would like to have addressed in the conference. As you receive their information, it can be added to the agenda and you can prepare any resources or information that may be helpful.



Focus on the child

Be sure the parent(s) understand that their child is being looked at as a unique individual and is in no way being compared to other children. In approaching the conference think of the informal conversations you've had with families to see if there are any repeating questions or concerns that you could address in the conference.

It is a teacher's professional responsibility to share with parents the activities, materials, projects, and experiences that connect to learning (cognitive thinking skills, language skills, large and small muscle skills, and social/emotional skills). You can support this by sending home child development information before the conference to help in understanding what is developmentally appropriate and what this might look like in the classroom.

Create a welcoming atmosphere

Take time to add special touches to the conference environment. First be sure there are comfortable chairs and space that encourages communication, such as chairs set across from each other. Consider displaying special projects the children have worked on and be sure the room is neat and organized. Think about putting flowers or a tablecloth on the table, and have water available.

Include the child

Some programs incorporate child participation during conferences, especially for school-age children. In a child led conference, the child typically chooses a few work samples ahead of time (with the teacher) to share with their family. Children are encouraged to reflect on their accomplishments and skills, and also to plan future interests and goals (with guidance from the adults). Adults can adjust the conference to the child's developmental abilities and provide appropriate choices to keep them engaged.

Planning with families for their family/child conferences and building on what you know about the families can create the opportunity to cultivate conversations, connections, and bring everyone—children, families, teachers, programs—together in the learning process.

References:

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education. <http://www.ncpie.org/>

Schulting, Amy. "Promoting Parent-School Relationships during the Transition to Kindergarten." Harvard Family Research Project.