

Tips for Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences at Your Child's School

During the academic year, most schools in the U.S. invite parents to come in for regular parent-teacher conferences. If you have received a note advising you that your child's teacher wants to schedule a meeting with you, don't panic. This is a standard part of the school's efforts to build a strong partnership between parents and teachers. Whether your child is having a positive or negative experience in school, parent-teacher conferences will help you and your child's teacher find ways to work together to ensure your child's success.

Knowing that you have to go to your child's school may make you feel nervous, intimidated, or frustrated as you consider the language and cultural differences that you face here in the U.S. You may wonder what to expect, and what is expected of you. That's why Colorín Colorado is here to help! In this article you will find:

- Answers to your questions about parent-teacher conferences
- Tips about how you can prepare for the conference
- Suggested questions and topics to discuss
- Tips about how to make the most of the conference

This information can be applied to students in elementary, middle, and high schools. Your child's school may also provide information about parent-teacher conferences in your language.

Frequently asked questions

What is a parent-teacher conference?

A parent-teacher conference is a meeting between you and your child's teacher to discuss your child's progress in school. Parent-teacher conferences happen in elementary, middle, and high schools. This meeting may take place as part of the regularly-scheduled conferences held by the school each year, or your child's teacher may contact you to schedule a meeting at other times during the school year.

You can also request a conference with your child's teacher if you have questions or concerns about your child by contacting the teacher to set up a meeting.

How will I know when to go to the conference?

Usually, your child's teacher will contact you to schedule a meeting time. If you work during the day and can only go to conferences after working hours, be sure to let your child's teacher know that so you can schedule a meeting time that is convenient for both of you.

What if I don't speak English?

If you do not feel comfortable speaking with your child's teacher in English, you have the right to request that an interpreter attend the conference, or to bring an interpreter that you trust to the conference. If you request an interpreter from the school, make the request at least 24 hours before the conference. Your child's school also may have

a bilingual parent liaison who can help you find an interpreter. It's important to find a way to overcome the language barrier in order to meet with your child's teacher.

Why does my child's teacher want to meet with me?

In the U.S. educational system, teachers believe that a strong partnership between the home and school will help children succeed in school. If your child's teacher schedules a meeting with you, it does not necessarily mean that your child is in trouble. Teachers welcome input from the parents about their children, such as information about what the child likes to do or what they are good at. Teachers also understand that each student is different and learns differently, and that no one knows your child better than you do. You may provide some insight that will help the teacher work more effectively with your child at school.

It is also helpful for teachers to know if a child is experiencing a difficult situation outside of school, such as a divorce, the death of a relative, a medical problem, or anything else that may affect the child's mood or behavior. Knowing of such changes will help the teacher provide the child with the necessary support in the classroom.

What information will my child's teacher give me?

Your child's teacher will probably show you some samples of your child's work, and may discuss your child's progress, grades, homework, and behavior. The teacher may also ask you about any concerns that she has about your child, as well as questions about his study habits. These questions are intended to help the teacher provide your child with any additional support needed in the classroom, and are not intended to make you feel uncomfortable or defensive.

Why is it important to go to a parent-teacher conference?

Going to the parent-teacher conference provides you and the teacher an opportunity to work together as a team in order to help your child. You each have an important perspective to share — as the parent, you know your child's personality, habits, strengths, and weaknesses. The teacher, on the other hand, has been trained professionally in the best methods of teaching, meeting individual student's needs, how to control classroom behavior, and how to help your child succeed in school. Working together you will be able to find ways that each of you can provide the appropriate and necessary support for your child.

The conference is also an opportunity for you to ask questions about your child's progress, to learn more about the class and what the students are studying, and to find out if your child is having difficulty with anything in particular.

In addition, the more you know about your children's school and classes, the more likely they will be to talk about daily experiences with you. They will appreciate your concern and involvement, and they will be more likely to approach you when they have problems.

Before the conference

The conference with your child's teacher will be more efficient and productive if you do some preparation beforehand. To prepare for the conference:

Talk with your child

Ask your child what his/her strongest and weakest subjects are, and which subjects he/she likes most and least. Ask your child if he/she would like you to speak about anything particular with the teacher. Make sure that your child understands that you and the teacher are meeting to help him, so that he doesn't worry about the conference.

Prepare a list of notes

Make a list of topics that you want to discuss with the teacher and that you think the teacher should know, such as your concerns about the school, the child's home life, any major changes in your family, habits, hobbies, part-time jobs, religious holidays, or anything that is worrying your child. Be sure to ask for input from your spouse or other adults that are caring for your child as well.

Prepare a list of questions

Preparing a list of questions will help you have a productive conversation with your child's teacher. Prioritize the questions in case you run out of time during the conference.

The following questions are examples that will help you learn more about your child's progress in school:

1. What is my child expected to learn this year?
2. How will this be evaluated?
3. What are my child's strongest and weakest subjects?
4. What are some examples of these strengths and weaknesses?
5. Does my child hand homework in on time?
6. What types of tests and evaluations will my child have to take this year?
7. How are my child's test-taking skills?
8. Is my child participating in class discussions and activities?
9. How are my child's social skills?
10. Does my child seem happy at school?
11. Have you noticed any unusual behaviors?
12. Has my child missed any classes other than his/her excused absences?
13. Do you think my child is reaching his/her potential?
14. What can I do at home to help support his/her academic progress?

If your child receives special services (gifted programs, special education, English classes, speech or occupational therapy, or support for a learning disability), ask about the frequency of these services and about your child's progress with them.

During the conference

Be on time

Get off to the right start: come to the conference on time. Remember that other parents may also have conferences scheduled for that day; if you arrive late, you have may missed your conference altogether. You should also plan on ending the conference at the scheduled time so that other parents can start their conference on time.

Be yourself

Relax and be yourself. Remember that you and the teacher both want the same thing: the very best for your child.

Stay calm

Stay calm during the conference. Respectful communication will be the most effective way to work together with your child's teacher. Getting angry or upset during the conference will make it very difficult to have a positive conversation.

Ask for explanations of anything you don't understand

Listen carefully to what the teacher says. If you don't understand something that the teacher talks about (such as an educational term or an explanation of a school policy), don't be afraid to ask for clarification. It is important for you to understand what your child's teacher is telling you.

Ask the most important questions early in the conference

Ask the most important questions first as you may run out of time, especially if other parents are waiting to have their conference after yours. You can always schedule another meeting with the teacher to cover any points you didn't cover.

Respectfully discuss differences of opinion

If you disagree with the teacher, respectfully explain why you disagree. If you don't let the teacher know about your differences of opinion, the teacher may think that you agree and will move on to the next topic. Discussing your differences with the teacher may help both of you find a more effective way to help your child.

Create an action plan

Ask your child's teacher for specific suggestions of ways that you can help your child at home with homework, reading, organization, routines, behavioral issues, etc. Make sure you understand the teacher's suggestions, and ask for clarification if you don't. This list of suggestions will become the action plan. Establish a way to keep track of the child's progress, as well as the best way to stay in touch with your child's teacher — through phone calls, emails, notes, or meetings. Review the action plan with the teacher as you end the conference to make sure that you both have the same expectations.

Thank the teacher for meeting with you

Thank the teacher for her time and support of your child, as well as for anything specific that she has done to help your child.

After the conference

Talk with your child

Talk about the conference with your child. Emphasize the positive points, and be direct about problems that were discussed. If you and the teacher created an action plan, explain it to your child. Make sure that your child understands that you and the teacher created this plan to help him.

Start working on the action plan

Set the action plan in motion. To ensure that it is working, check your child's behavior and schoolwork on a regular basis. Ask your child how he feels about school and his schoolwork.

Keep in touch with the teacher

Stay in touch with your child's teachers. This will help you strengthen the parent-teacher partnership, and will be an important part of the child's success in school. When a child sees that parents and teachers are working together, the child will understand that his/her education is a top priority at school and at home.

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Tips for Parents on Parent-Teacher Conferences

How Should Parents Navigate This All-Important Meeting? Educators Show the Way!

A key ingredient for educational achievement is the parent-teacher conference, and to make sure they're successful for both parents and teachers, we've come up with a list of what educators would like parents to know.

The first on the list: Show up, please!

"We know parents are busy, but it is important to carve out time to invest in your child's education and ensure success at school," said National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel. "To get the most out of parent-teacher conferences, parents need to take an active role in their child's education year-round and come prepared to discuss how their child can reach their full potential."

Here are the rest of our tips for parents:

Get Ready. Do your homework prior to parent-teacher conferences. Prepare by writing notes to yourself concerning:

- Any questions about the school's programs or policies.
- Things you can share with the teacher about your child and his life at home.
- Questions about your child's progress.

Ask Important Questions

Don't be afraid to engage in a frank conversation with your child's teacher. Your goal is to develop an action plan for your child's success at school. Good questions to ask the teacher include:

- What are my child's strengths and weaknesses?
- How does my child get along with classmates?
- Is my child working up to her ability? Where could she use improvement?
- What can we do at home to support what you are doing in the classroom?

Initiate the Action Plan

Start immediately on the action plan you and the teacher put together. Discuss the plan with your child and track his progress. Stay in touch with your child's teacher throughout the year with regularly scheduled "report card" conferences that can keep the communication lines open.

"Parents are the best resource for a child to make the grade," said Van Roekel. "When teachers and parents work together, we can help a child have a successful school year."

Tips for Parents: Parent-Teacher Conferences

You consult with your doctor about your child's physical health. It's just as important to consult with your child's teacher about academic subjects, social skills and emotional development. Remember, you and the teacher are a team—working together.

- **A conference should not be a confrontation.** A parent-teacher conference is not an opportunity to list all the deficiencies you see in the teacher, the classroom, and the school system. Nor should it be a time when the teacher lists your failings as a parent and your child's failings as a student.
- **The conference is an information exchange.** You bring to the conference information about your child's interaction with people outside of school, his home life, and previous experiences that might affect confidence or interest in school. The teacher brings information about your child's interaction with others in school, performance on tests, and knowledge of learning strategies. Pooling your information gives you both a better picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses, and lets you develop an effective plan for helping your child succeed.
- **Conferences help you become a more effective parent.** If your child is really learning "nothing" and never has any homework, you need to know why. Your child may not understand the class work, she may have vision or hearing problems, or she may be "tuning out" subjects that don't interest her. The "no homework" syndrome may be the result of work that is too easy and quickly done; something more challenging may be called for. Perhaps your child doesn't understand the importance of homework or is avoiding the responsibility of completing it.
- **You may initiate a conference with the teacher.** You don't have to wait for an invitation. If the standard answer to "What did you learn in school today?" is "Nothing", then it's time for a meeting. If your child is fearful of school or is frequently sick, get together with the teacher to find out why.
- **The conference makes the teacher more effective.** Knowing that "my child is fascinated by stars" may give the teacher the means to excite interest in reading. The more the teacher knows about your child, the better the child's needs will be addressed.
- **Parent-teacher conferences let you take part in your child's education.** Knowing what is being taught at school lets you direct the conversation in your family to issues being studied in school. Such reinforcement of school work at home makes a big difference in your child's understanding, motivation, and school performance.