

## Productive Parent– Teacher Conferences



Allow the faith that God has given you, your child, and your child's teacher to lead your decision-making process: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).

IT SEEMS LIKE THE SCHOOL YEAR JUST BEGAN, AND YET, PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES LOOM JUST AROUND THE CORNER. WHEN YOU READ IN THE SCHOOL NEWSLETTER THAT IT IS TIME TO SIGN UP FOR CONFERENCES, WHAT KIND OF FEELINGS COME TO THE FOREFRONT?

Are you excited to meet with your child's teacher and hear how well he is doing, or do you dread finding out what his current "issues" are? Whether you expect conferences to give you something to brag or worry about, they are important and useful tools to insure that your child gets the most from his or her learning experience.

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6).

The key thing to remember during conferences is that a team is formed. In the verse above, each team member has his own job and expertise. And while each member is important to the team, the team is useless without the work of God.

Your child's team includes the parents (who know the most about their child and what is happening at home), the teacher (who knows the most about how children learn and what's happening in the classroom), and your child (who knows what is happening from his or her own perspective.) Because your child is attend-

ing a Christ-centered school, the team also includes God. Even though each team member has a different perspective, all members work toward the same goal—what is best for the child. With God as the leader, this is a team that can and will succeed.

The first item to decide when planning for your child's conference is to determine the attendees. You and the teacher will determine whether or not your child attends, unless school policy addresses this issue otherwise. The older the child, the more important it is for that child to take part in self-evaluation. If your child does not attend the conference, be sure to share the conference's discussions. Ideally, both parents should attend, but this is not always possible. Scheduling conferences with separated parents and blended families can get complicated. As a teacher, I have done separate conferences, but I don't recommend it. Quite often, a consensus must be reached regarding the child, and this happens most effectively if all the caregivers are involved in decision-making together. Please keep in mind that while these conferences

involve the family, the concern is what is best for the child.

Conferences are short, usually 10 to 20 minutes of highly productive time. Prepare and come ready to ask and listen. Start your preparations by talking to your child. “What will your teacher have to tell me at conferences?” is a good open-ended question. You may need to prompt your child with more specific questions, so don’t settle for “I dunno.” Ask your child to contribute to the list of questions to ask and issues to discuss. However, instead of merely creating a laundry list, pay attention to your child’s words to gain insights into his or her perspective of what happens in the classroom. Your child’s teacher can give you the “rest of the story,” which will give you a more complete perspective.

Parent-teacher conferences have long agendas to be accomplished in a short time. Your child’s teacher should share information regarding your child’s academic performance and classroom behavior. The teacher should be ready to address your concerns and to share concerns with you. Here are some guidelines of what to watch for be wary of:

☛ Assessing academic performance should involve two different types of assessment. When teachers share grades, homework, classroom tests, or achievement tests, they are sharing *product evaluation*. This gives you an idea of what your child knows and how well he or she performs in comparison to her peers. There is another type of evaluation that is just as important as product evaluation and that is *process evaluation*. It is important to know how much your child has progressed over time.

For instance, a straight “A” student who scores in the 90th percentile on standardized tests is doing very well in comparison to peers, but is he learning anything new?



Likewise, a struggling student may have made excellent progress in learning new skills, but, because she doesn’t test well, she still can have poor grades. Ask your teacher to tell you what new things your child has learned and find out what the teacher’s plan is for future learning. A third area of evaluation has to do with how your child is learning to evaluate

her own work. Does the teacher use *self-evaluation* tools? Is your child being encouraged to edit his work?

☛ Classroom behavior and social skills development

is an important part of the parent-teacher teamwork. If your child is doing well in this area, be sure to question further. Good classroom behavior may mean that your child is simply not speaking up. This is when your pre-interview with your child comes in handy. Social skill development can be hard to understand. You will want to make sure that your child feels comfortable working in groups, but does not dominate the group; that your child can speak up for himself with friends without manipulating or bullying.

Basically, you want to know how well your child cooperates and initiates in groups, and how well your child compromises and negotiates with peers. It is good to ask “Is my child generally happy at school?” and “How does my child handle stress?” These questions give a good picture of your child’s emotional development.

☛ The most difficult part of parent-teacher conferences can be the handling of parent or teacher concerns regarding the student. This is when it’s most important to remember the team aspect and to work from the mind-set that all involved bring their own expertise to the table and have the best interests of the child at heart. Keep an open mind; just because you have not seen this behavior in your child before does not mean it can’t be happening at school. Give

your opinions gently but assertively to avoid creating a defensive mood. Ask what the teacher thinks you should do, as well as what the teacher plans to do. Make a clear goal of the change in behavior all of you want to see in your child and evaluate whether your plan of action will achieve that goal. Regardless of whether it is a homework, learning, attitude, or social skill issue, it is important to know the motivation behind the behavior you want to change.

☛ The teacher may suggest that your child may benefit from help outside the regular classroom or home. Sometimes this is a natural step in the learning process, and sometimes this news comes as a shock. A need for a referral to a special education program, a reading support program, or a therapist does not need to reflect poorly on the parents, the teacher, or the student. The team needs to do what is best for the child. Every child needs help in some area, and classroom teachers cannot always provide help in every area.

☛ If the team creates a plan to change behavior, improve learning, or seek extra help, it is a good idea to set up a second meeting to evaluate how the plan is unfolding. At a second meeting, you can decide if a course of action is working, and if not, decide if it needs more time or some adjustment. If the plan is not working, it may be time to re-evaluate the motive behind the behavior or to seek help from an expert.

It all boils down to a few things: taking an active part in your child’s education, willingness to create a team, putting the best interests of the child before other considerations, and allowing the faith that God has given you, your child, and your child’s teacher to lead your decision-making process. Remember this promise of God: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).