

Parent Involvement and Awareness:

Advice to Parents on Parent/Teacher Conferences

by Paul Giganti, Jr., Albany
pgiganti@berkeley.edu



Parent/teacher conferences are valuable to your child's education. They are meant to inform you about your child's strengths, weaknesses, and progress in school. In your conference, you can learn how you as a parent or guardian can take an active role and best support your child in school and at home.

Take an active, not a passive role

Many conferences are one way only; the teacher talks and the parent listens. It is the teacher's job to inform you about your child's progress, but that does not mean you have to take a passive role during this meeting. The two most important people responsible for your child's education are the teacher and yourself—if you take an active role in the conversation, you may be able to give the teacher some insights into how best to work with your child, and you may learn information about your child that the teacher might not have thought to tell you.

Prepare yourself for the conference

A parent/teacher conference can be a bit intimidating for many parents. If you spend a little time preparing before the conference (just as the teacher has), you can then work as a team to get the best results for your child from the conference experience. Take some time before you arrive at the school to collect your thoughts about the conference. What do you want to know? What would you like to share with the teacher? Do you have any specific concerns? A bit of thought before-hand will make you feel more comfortable with the conference experience.

Make a list of questions beforehand

Did you ever leave a conference, only to think of questions you wished you had asked the teacher? One way to get the most out of a parent/teacher conference is to write out, beforehand, some questions to ask. I cannot suggest what questions to ask since what

you ask your child's teacher will be unique to the needs of your child. Your questions should address your greatest concerns based upon what you have observed at home or in the past. You need not make a long list of questions; three or four will focus your discussions. Often teachers will focus their comments after hearing your questions.

Would you like your child to attend?

Some teachers want students to attend a parent/teacher conference, some do not, and some will do so at a parent's request. Think ahead of time if you would like your child to be part of the conference. Decide if there are personal or painful issues to be discussed that you do not want your child to hear, or if instead there are things you want your child to hear straight from the teacher. If you wish your child to attend, ask the teacher in advance; do not just show up with your child.

Don't be afraid to ask for clarity

The teacher will do the best he or she can to explain your child's progress; however education is full of jargon that may not be clear or meaningful to you as a parent. If the teacher says something you do not understand, be prepared to say, "I don't quite understand; could you explain that in another way?" For example, if the teacher is talking about STAR or AYP, you may not understand as a parent and non-educator and miss an important point the teacher is trying to make. Don't be afraid to take notes, especially if the teacher is suggesting ways you might help your child at home.

Ask to see samples of your child's work

One means of understanding your child's progress is to view actual samples of your child's work when the teacher explains something important about your child's learning. Many teachers will have your child's student work ready to show you just for this purpose, but if the teacher does not, do not

be afraid to ask to see some of your child's work as an example of what the teacher is saying. Since your child's desk should be fairly accessible, it is really not too much to ask. Sometimes you may want to ask to see samples of "good" student work, so you know what the teacher's expectations are. And do not forget: it is a two-way street—you can bring in a sample of your child's work from home if it will help you explain your question or concern.

Ask what you can specifically do to help

A parent/teacher conference is a report of your child's progress and an excellent opportunity for you and the teacher to make a plan. Walk away from the meeting with a list of how you can specifically help your child after the conference. A conference is a golden opportunity to learn how you can improve your child's learning by getting directly involved. Ask how you can help!

Take some time to understand your child's grade level Standards

Since Language Arts and Mathematics are the main subjects typically taught and tested in most classrooms, be prepared to talk about these subjects. The best way to be prepared is to find out ahead of time what your child is supposed to learn in these subjects at his or her grade level. This task is easier than you might think. The California Content Standards in reading and mathematics are lists of topics and skills, by grade level, that are required curriculum in your child's classroom. If you visit the following sites, you will be able to go directly to your child's grade level and scan the Standards that are the focus of the language arts and mathematics curriculum in that grade:

- www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/mathstandard.pdf
- www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/elacontentstnds.pdf

The skills listed in these Standards are likely to be the focus of some of the teacher's comments. You need not memorize your child's grade-level Standards, but if you have a question about any Standards, add it to your list.

Find out how you can check your child's progress

Some schools only have one parent/teacher

conference a year, in the fall. Other schools have conferences twice a year. That leaves a long period in between—too long to cross your fingers and hope that all is well. One of the questions you should ask the teacher is how you can periodically check on your child's progress. Many teachers have elaborate systems to keep track of student progress. There may be a way you can occasionally tap into that information to gauge your child's progress. As we all know, asking your child how he or she is doing in school is not the best way to stay informed!

Find out the best way to communicate with the teacher

We live in a marvelous age in which there are many ways to communicate and access information. You are no longer limited to hand-carried notes and phone messages to the teacher. Ask if he or she will answer questions via e-mail (many will), and if the teacher or school has a web site where you can view homework assignments, due dates, and progress reports. Often these new forms of communication are better than phone calls and notes; notes can get lost and "phone tag" can take days to get an answer. Learn how to get the quickest answers to your questions.

Develop a working relationship with your child's teacher

Your child may be a good student who needs little help from you as a parent as he or she progresses through a grade. If so, count yourself lucky—for now. However, if your child's learning requires your assistance, then you and your child's teacher must work as a team. Do whatever you can to develop a working relationship early in the year with your child's teacher; then work to keep that relationship positive and productive. After all, you and your child's teacher both have the same goal in mind for your child. The conversations, questions, suggestions, and assistance should not end with the parent/teacher conference. 📦

Permission is granted to reproduce and share this article for instructional use by parents, guardians, teachers, and families—provided it is duplicated with full credit given to the author, the California Mathematics Council, and its Journal, the ComMuniCator.