

MAKING THE MOST OUT OF FAMILY-SCHOOL CONFERENCES

The school year is beginning to wind down and thoughts turn to summer vacations, promotions to the next grade, transition to middle and high schools, and future planning for entrance into institutions of higher learning. Parents are receiving academic and behavioral progress reports, state testing reports, and achievement test profiles. As you begin to review information from your child's school, you may feel encouraged, confused, or concerned for the future of your child. It is never too late to contact the school for a family-school conference to ensure your child's success, to clarify information, or to help get your child back on track.

Parents need to be well informed regarding all aspects of their child's education. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), states research *has proven that when parents and teachers work together, everyone benefits: Students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, attend school more regularly, have better behavior, show more positive attitudes towards themselves and towards school. School programs that include strong parent involvement are more effective.*

The following information should help you to get the most out of your family-school conference.

Step One – Prepare for the Conference

- ❖ Be Informed! Assemble all relevant materials including records from previous schools and previous years, such as report cards, student assessment profiles, health and medical records, any outside assessments reports, and past and current home-school correspondence. This is a good time to begin a binder or file of each child's educational, medical and related records.
- ❖ Review All Materials. Make sure you are familiar with the materials you have gathered and organized. The time you spend organizing for this conference will pay off in the end, so take whatever time you need.
- ❖ Involve your child. Children should know that the conference is taking place and that you are there to support and learn ways to help him succeed in school. Ask him if there are any specific concerns regarding schoolwork or relationships with peers. Older students in middle school or high school may be involved in the conference at the discretion of the school and parents.
- ❖ Be prepared to discuss homework assignments. Know when and how much homework he has in each subject for each week. Make notes to yourself about homework patterns you have observed in the past. Is the homework too difficult or does it take your child an abnormally long time to complete? Is the homework completed within the time given and turned in on time?
- ❖ Re-read your school's handbook for students. Pay particular attention to policies regarding attendance, behavior, and grading so that you might anticipate any questions in these particular areas.
- ❖ Prepare a list of questions to address during the conference.
 - What is my child like during the day? What are his best and least favorite subjects?

- How is he meeting expectations for learning and behavior? What are the standards for my child's grade level?
- Can you help me understand how my child's assessment profile relates to his current and future school performance?
- Can you tell me how my child is performing on daily class work, tests, and homework assignments?
- How does my child interact with other children and adults?
- If my child is struggling in any area academically or behaviorally, what has been tried to improve his performance?
- Does my child pay attention in all classes?
- Are there any concerns regarding my child's health or adjustment?
- Are there any resources you could recommend?
- How can I help him improve in his areas of challenge?

Step 2 – The Conference

- ❖ Listen attentively. It may be helpful to take notes, especially if the other parent or relative cannot attend. A written record will assist you to remember details in case you need to ask additional questions or need to reference these notes at a later time.
- ❖ Model trust and respect. Teachers and administrators want to stay positive even when discussing difficult situations with parents. They are not trying to place blame on the parent or child. Often well meaning explanations will come off as negative and put parents on the defensive. Assume the teacher or administrator has your child's best interests in mind, and respond tactfully and respectfully, rather than with anger. Indicate that you are most concerned with the issues at hand and want to work with the school to come up with a workable solution.
- ❖ Speak up! Your input is invaluable! Don't be afraid to offer your perspective on the topic. Most teachers will discuss your child's strengths and ask about activities at home. Even if you are not asked, speak up and provide your own observations and any concerns. Remember you are prepared with information gathered prior to the meeting.
- ❖ Turn negatives into positives. Teachers forget that some parents only hear negative things about their children, and likewise, some parents only contact teachers when a problem arises. If the teacher does not offer any positive statements, ask "What does my child do well?" Also, try to offer a compliment to the teacher to let them know you appreciate their efforts, even if what they are doing is not working for your child.
- ❖ Ask questions. You came prepared with a list of possible questions; don't forget to refer to your list. If something comes up in the conference that you do not understand, ask for clarification. Parents are not expected to be familiar with all that educational jargon, and teachers often forget to slow down and translate for parents. Make sure you know what is being done, what has been tried in the past, and what possible solutions are being considered.
- ❖ Use consensus building to formulate a plan of action. Make sure everyone understands the problem by checking for understanding. Brainstorm all solutions and determine which plan has the most chance of success. Agree to implement the plan at home and at school for a period of time.
- ❖ Leave with a written plan of action. The plan of action should include who-what-where-when. You will want to know who will be responsible for each step and when to report back. Follow up may be in a subsequent meeting, through a phone conference, e-mail, or written notes between home and school.
- ❖ Feel free to contact the school at any time you have questions or concerns. Don't wait for small problems to become so out of control that the solutions become limited.
- ❖ Be sure to thank the participants in the conference. A written thank you note will go a long way to let the school know how much you appreciate their efforts on behalf of your child.

References: National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) www.naspcenter.org