



ClassroomLeadership

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Differentiating Instruction

Stage by Stage

For More Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences

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A parent-teacher conference is one of the most important relationship-building events in the school year, offering the great benefits of face-to-face communication. Conferences are the main occasion for exchanging specific information and perspectives about an individual student's learning and achievement. Yet conferences often cause consternation on the part of parents or caregivers, teachers, and students alike. Everyone has a reason to feel defensive or apprehensive, especially when conduct or learning or study habits are not what they should be.



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Avoid stress at conference time by thinking about the stages in a typical conference. Also remember that, as a teacher, you possess the social skills needed for each stage.

Stage 1: Before the Conference

Preparing the Lesson Plan. Before the conference, prepare a "lesson plan" just as you would for a tutoring session with an individual students. Identify the major topics for discussion, including a general overview of the student's performance and conduct, information about the curriculum, and any other pertinent topics. Collect samples of the student's work that you will present during the conference, and prepare the setting. An informal setting, with chairs side by side at a table, usually puts people at ease—at least more so than when the teacher stays behind the desk and asks the parent to sit on the other side. Make a list of questions or concerns you want to address, and organize any newsletter or announcements prepared for all families for distribution at the time. You'll feel more comfortable and get better results from the conference if your planning is complete.

Skills: Planning the session; arranging an informal setting.

Stage 2: Curtain Up

Forecasting Parental Concerns. Before the conference, pretend you're a fortuneteller, and hypothesize what the family's concerns may be. Consider what the student has conveyed about home and family to you and about you to the family. Look for clues about the parent's values, interests, concerns, and so forth. Put yourself in the parent's shoes. Recognize that school may be a hostile place to some parents, that they may feel very shy or very arrogant, or may be anxious, apathetic, or in between. Prepare to maintain a calm, reassuring demeanor when the parent arrives.

Skills: Empathizing with another person; reserving judgement; interpreting nonverbal cues and hidden meanings; inferring values from limited evidence; predicting attitude from experiences.

Stage 3: The Welcome

Playing Host or Hostess. Now pretend you're the host or hostess at a social event. Smile. Try to put the parent at ease. Set the stage for a friendly exchange and an ongoing relationship. And check your earlier forecast: compare the person's actual appearance with your collection of information about him. Be open-minded about the new information you're likely to learn.

Skills: Empathizing; smiling warmly and sincerely; arranging conference area for easy communications; checking your assessments from Stage 2.

Stage 4: Getting Started

Calling the Meeting to Order. Quickly you become the chairperson of the meeting. It's up to you to get the conference under way with some kind of opening remark. It may be a statement, general or specific, or a question. You may refer to the reason you or the parent requested the conference, and you should inquire about any concerns the parent or student has. Be sure to incorporate these into your "lesson plan" by jotting them down so the parent can see that you are taking them seriously.

Skills: Taking initiative; setting a purpose; expanding the agenda.

Stage 5: Showing and Telling

Teaching the Lesson. Now you're back in the role of teacher. You may share, converse, commiserate, explain, listen, and so on—but the key word is describe. You are trying to convey to the parent and the student what the student's work is like. Show the samples of the student's work. Tell about the student's study habits, comments, looks, actions, words, likes, and dislikes. Use simple, direct language. Be descriptive, not judgemental. Do not criticize or become negative — in tone; instead, remain calm, reassuring, and factual. Convey the impression that you have succeeded with many similar situations and that you are likely to succeed with this student, too. Smile.

Skills: Using descriptive language; avoiding labels; evaluative terms, and absolutes.

Stage 6: Getting It Right

Leading the Discussion. Take time to be a discussion leader. You may find it natural to clarify and confirm various points all along, but if you don't, take time to do so at this stage. Find out what the parent or caregiver thinks about the student's work and attitudes. Ask whether your descriptions are making sense to her, and ask for stories or anecdotes about the student's behavior at home. Ask for clarification or anything that is unclear, or restate a concern in your own words, and ask whether you've grasped the idea correctly. Determine areas in which you and the parent have similar perceptions and areas in which you do not. You have presented the evidence of the student's performance, you have described the student's behavior and attitudes, and you have arrived at some level of agreement with the parent—where do you go from here?

Skills: Paraphrasing; active listening; summarizing; asking for clarification; recognizing differences and likenesses.

Stage 7: Setting Goals

Looking to the Future. Now you're the teacher again. Review the points of agreement, and state your conclusions and recommendations. You may outline options and discuss possible outcomes and examples. As you state (or restate) your recommendations, try to arrive at agreement for your role, the parent's role, and the student's role in carrying out the recommendations. Under no circumstances should you promise benefits that may not materialize. You, the parent, and the student should leave the conference with common understandings about

the recommendations. These should represent goals for improvement that all of you support. Writing them down, even in an abbreviated form, is a good idea; or you can develop formal contracts, if that is necessary. Then set the first checkpoint for getting back together, usually done by phone in two weeks, to see whether the strategies you've agreed upon are having the desired results.

Skills: Diagnosing student characteristics; prescribing strategies for improvement (if needed); maintaining communication with the parent and the student; taking the initiative; avoiding use of sales pitches and propaganda.

Stage 8: Concluding the Conference

Keeping the Relationship Warm and Friendly. You're back to the host or hostess role. It's time for warm thanks, a handshake, a nod, and more smiles. Stand up, if you must, to indicate the end of the conference, especially if you have another conference scheduled immediately. Briefly repeat the date of the first checkpoint, and express your sincere desire to make school a successful experience for the student and the family.

Skills: Staying on Schedule.

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