

BANANAS HANDOUT

Parent-Teacher Conferences – To The Teacher

A routine parent-teacher conference can strike terror into a parent's heart; so teachers and child care providers need to be sensitive to the fact that a parent's ego may be closely involved with any report on a child's progress. Perhaps you are a parent, yourself, and you have felt this way, too. Here are some suggestions for making a parent comfortable and the situation productive:

1. Be on time – keeping a parent waiting may make him/her anxious. Try to set a positive and supportive tone for the conference. Always begin with some “pluses” about the child. Ask the parent to tell you at the beginning of the conference, if s/he has any special concerns; then incorporate your answers into the conference. (In scheduling conferences make sure to set aside enough time to avoid “rushing” parents through. If one parent is monopolizing the time you have scheduled for other parents, make a second appointment with that parent rather than keeping everyone else waiting.)
2. Try very hard not to let your personal biases intrude into the conference – whether it's with a child you adore or a child you clash with frequently. Always try to assess your role in any behavior problems. Parents respond better to being treated as partners rather than to being given edicts from an “expert.”
3. If a child needs work in an academic area, be very specific about what needs improvement. “John needs help in math” doesn't tell a parent as much as “John needs to work on his addition and subtraction skills.” Many parents are willing to work with their children at home, but aren't sure what to do. Give specific suggestions of what a parent can do to improve a child's skills and show the parent samples of the exercises. Keep in mind, however, that most parents work, so their time may be limited.
4. If behavior is a problem, try to outline the specific behavior in a neutral way that doesn't antagonize the parent. “Jennie's got a big mouth” probably won't go over too well – “Jennie likes to talk a lot and it is interfering with her work” may get a better response. In this area the parent may be the “expert.” Parents

may have some good ideas why a child is acting a certain way and they may have some suggestions about how to handle a specific problem. This can be frustrating for parents, while they can talk to the child at home, they can't come to school to supervise. Sometimes a three-way parent-teacher-child conference works better for behavior problems.

5. Don't tackle too much at once. If a child has both an academic and a behavior problem, maybe what is needed is two conferences. If you overwhelm a parent with problems, you may not get the home support you really need.
6. Don't mention minor problems unless they require a parent to get involved. Saying “Susan is having trouble sitting still for a long time, but there's nothing you can do about it at home” only causes a parent concern without offering a way to remedy the situation.
7. Never positively or negatively compare a child to a sibling or to another child in the class and discourage parents from comparing one of their children to another. Never praise one child's academic or social progress in front of other parents: it's bound to upset someone.
8. Follow-up on any conference promises by sending home extra work sheets or special homework. If you have a parent all set to work with their child, don't let the momentum slow.
9. If you can see that home support is helping, LET THE PARENT KNOW. And, remember to praise the child.

Parents want their children to succeed in school so they expect a lot from teachers – sometimes too much. If a problem persists, don't hesitate to seek outside advice from another teacher or professional. If you feel that a child needs to be tested, discuss it with the parent and help the parent arrange an appointment. Always remember that to every parent, their child is special. If parents leave conferences feeling like they have failed in some way, better they had never come. However, if they feel confident that they have your support in resolving problems – the conference was a success!

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Parent-Teacher Conferences – To The Parent

Parent-teacher conferences are downright scary to some parents. Other parents feel fine about them. This Handout is intended for those of us who do feel anxious. Often we go expecting the worst and are too emotionally involved to get the best out of them. Conferences should work both ways – the teacher sharing information with you and you sharing information with the teacher. Here are a few suggestions for making the situation a little less stressful:

1. Be on time and try to go with an open mind. Don't assume that you are going to hear something "negative" about your child. On the other hand, don't be disappointed if the teacher doesn't see all of your child's good points.
2. Take the time beforehand to write down any and all questions you have about the curriculum, your child's progress, etc. It is easy to forget even a very important question when you are nervous. Ask your child if s/he has any concerns you should discuss with the teacher.
3. At the conference, don't hesitate to ask the teacher to be more specific if you are unclear about what s/he is telling you. "John is having trouble adjusting to school" could mean John is quiet and shy or John is constantly picking fights – two very different situations. Remember to raise all your child's concerns.
4. Try to separate clearly any problems into two types:

Academic: In these cases, find out exactly which academic skills your child needs to work on and get the teacher's specific suggestions for what you can do at home (for example: if your child needs to work on reading, find out if listening to him/her read aloud would be more useful than working on pre-reading skills). You might want to make another appointment when the teacher will have more time to show you some additional ways you can work with your child.

Behavioral: Again, find out exactly what your child is doing (talking too much, daydreaming, fighting, crying, etc.) that is interfering with his or her progress. Don't hesitate to give the teacher your suggestions for handling the behavior problem (remember, you know your child best). If there are things going on in your

child's life which might explain some behavior, say so. You don't have to be too personal. Just letting a teacher know that your family is going through a divorce or that a favorite pet recently died may put your child's behavior in better perspective.

5. If a conference really upsets you, take the time afterward to evaluate it – either by yourself or with another person. Teachers are humans, too ... and if you strongly feel that a criticism is unwarranted or petty, test your feelings with someone else who knows your child well. Take the time to schedule another conference with the teacher to try to clear the air. Maybe some miscommunication has occurred. It's important to let the teacher know the extent of your concern.
6. Talk honestly with your child about the conference. Be supportive. If academic skills need to be sharpened, set aside time to do so. (Remember, however, that the more fun one has while learning, the more one learns.) Also, remember that learning specific skills doesn't happen overnight, for instance, you really can't teach Jennie the entire alphabet the day after the conference! Praise any progress and minimize the criticism when working with your child at home. If you end up in a fight every time you try to work with your child, you need either a new approach or someone else to do the tutoring.
7. If behavior is the problem, ask your child what s/he thinks is going on. Children can be very insightful, especially if the query is put in a low-key way. You can't accompany your child to school everyday. But you can let your child know clearly what you expect. Sometimes a three-way conference – parent-teacher-child – may be helpful.

Persistent Problems:

Any problem, academic or behavioral, which persists may need an outside opinion. If either you or your child's teacher suspect some type of learning disability, you have the right by federal law to a free, professional evaluation. Contact your school principal and the director of your school district's special education program. Some school districts are more helpful in this area than others. If you have any questions about your rights to an evaluation, contact BANANAS for referrals to advocacy groups that can assist you.

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