



by Karen Stephens

Make the Most of Parent-Teacher Conferences

Whether your child attends child care, school — or both, good communication between parents and teachers is critically important. Children are best served when teachers and parents combine knowledge and avoid working in isolation. And both parents and teachers do a better job when they build upon each other's insights. The parent-teacher conference is a fundamental way of promoting good communication.

Today it's widely recognized that no one knows children better than a parent. And it's accepted that a parent's job is to be an advocate for and guardian of children's overall well-being. Open, back and forth communication, among parents, caregivers and teachers is vital if children's developmental needs are to be met.

During conferences, teachers should share children's strengths, achievements, and challenges, but also listen to parents' input. In fact, the best teachers use parent feedback to reflect upon and hone their guidance and teaching skills with children.

For preschoolers and older, parent-teacher conferences should occur at least twice a year and more often as needed. Parents with infants through age two will want to discuss children's development even more frequently.

Following are ways to make the most of your parent-teacher conferences. I'm sure the partnership you build will translate into better experiences for your child.

Prepare for Success:

- Arrive on time and keep to the schedule. If needed, set up another appointment for continued dialogue.
- Create a courteous atmosphere free of distractions. Turn off your cell phone and avoid bringing along younger children who will distract you. If you do bring younger siblings, have play items or snacks on hand to occupy them.
- Whenever possible, all parents should attend conferences together, and this can include step-parents. This facilitates communication among all who affect your child's life. If parent relationships aren't civil, by all means ask the teacher to give individual conferences.
- Build children's trust by letting them know of your upcoming meeting; clarify they aren't "in trouble." Explain that you'll be talking about their experiences. Ask if there is anything your child would like you to bring up. Depending on age, encourage them to comment on how they get along with others and learn.

Prepare to Listen:

- As much as possible, maintain an open mind. Remember, teachers have feelings just like the rest of us. Most often they are parents facing the same childrearing delights and challenges you face. Assume teachers are on your side rather than *against* you or your child.
- Take brief notes for memory or to share with others who interact with your child regularly. Write down referral suggestions, such as community services a teacher may recommend.
- Use non-verbal body language that conveys respect and interest. Avoid defensive posturing such as eye-rolling or avoiding eye contact.
- It's harder than you realize for teachers to share concerns with parents. Avoid interrupting someone talking, especially with argumentative language. Focus on generating solutions rather than blame, threats, or accusations.

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Prepare to Share:

- Details about your child's unique temperament, learning style, and leisure interests.
- Goals for your child's character, behavior, and success and how you perceive your child's abilities and progress.
- Positive, and if needed, negative comments your child shares at home about child care or school. Bringing those concerns out into the open allows teachers to confirm, clarify, or comment on circumstances.
- Family-life issues that affect children's ability to cooperate or learn, such as family death, new home, or sibling and parent discord or divorce.
- Concerns about your child's development or adjustment, such as peer conflict or inability to do homework assignments.
- Questions about program expectations, policies, and procedures or teacher-child interactions.
- How you'd like to be involved in your child's experiences, such as participating as a musical guest in the classroom, computer tutor, or field trip chaperone.

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Prepare to Ask About:

- Your child's strengths in the classroom and in active play.
- How your child's time is spent and activities he/she enthusiastically enjoys.
- Who your child plays with and what social skills need to be developed to enhance peer friendships and relationships with adults.
- Your child's frustration tolerance and emotional maturity. How does your child handle everyday mistakes, accidents, or conflicts?
- The status and pace of your child's development including intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical/moral growth. In which ways is your child very skilled or challenged?
- Signs of problems, such as in hearing or vision. Does he/she ignore questions, squint, or hold books very close to the face? Is your child able to follow directions, concentrate, and cooperate?
- Attendance concerns or chronic late arrival.
- Recommendations for helping your child at home, such as in development for preschoolers or homework for school-agers.

Commit to a Plan of Action

- Close the meeting on a positive note. Even if challenges need to be addressed, leave with a list of positive strategies.
- Many times a plan of action is just to continue what you're already doing. But if needed, write down a plan of action and a timeline for assessing progress, such as weekly or monthly.
- If your child has a diagnosed special need, laws ensure his or her right to an individualized plan for care and education. Be sure to ask about it.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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