

## Parent –Teacher Interviews

**Parent-teacher interviews can sometimes become a cause for concern for everyone involved. Children just beginning their school experience may be wary of the idea of parents and teachers talking about them behind closed doors. Parents may feel apprehensive about the whole thing and teachers, especially in their first years of teaching, may be uncertain about how to handle unhappy or critical parents. They may also feel uneasy telling anxious parents about their children's problems.**

Regardless about how you feel about the classroom teacher, or teachers in general, it is important to remember that you both have a mutual interest – the welfare and education of your child. So it is beneficial to see and to relate to the teacher in a positive way and try to consider him/her as a partner in the development of your child.

A good way to begin is by entering the room with a positive attitude and by being open to comments and suggestions from the teacher. The teacher is there to explain to you how your child is progressing at school. S/he may show you examples of your child's work and demonstrate how your child has developed since the beginning of the year. The teacher may also show you which area your child is strongest in and which area needs a bit more support. At this point you may like to ask how you can help you child.

Remember throughout the interview that if you are unsure about what a teacher means, ask for clarification and more specific information.

## When There Are No Concerns: Questions for parents to ask teachers

In some cases, parent-teacher interviews may not be very informative, especially if the teacher reports that the child has no problems. Some parents may repeatedly hear that they "have nothing to worry about". While this may sound reassuring, these parents may come away without the necessary information to help their children continue to make steady progress at school. When parents anticipate such an outcome from an interview, they may want to be prepared to ask some of the following questions:

**What does my child do that surprises you?** Often this question can reveal what expectations the teacher has for the child. Sometimes a child behaves quite differently at school than at home.

**What is my child reluctant to do?** This question can reveal more about the child's interests and dislikes than parents would ordinarily know. The question may encourage the teacher to talk to the parent about the child's academic and social preferences.

**What is the goal you would like to see my child achieve?** This question can serve as a springboard for parents and teachers to develop a plan to work together to help a child set and reach specific outcomes. Even well behaved and high achieving children may benefit from setting goals in areas that need

improvement or in which they might excel.

**What can I do to support what is being done at school?** This question is always appreciated. Teachers may have suggestions for parents but may be afraid to offer unsolicited advice. This question helps create a team feeling.

If a child is experiencing problems at school, it is important for parents and teachers to share the responsibility for creating a working relationship that fosters the child's learning and development.

Open and frequent communication between parents and teachers helps to ensure that the issues raised in parent-teacher conferences do not catch anyone by surprise. Teachers can encourage open communication by letting parents know when they are available and how they may be contacted, inviting parents to participate in classroom activities and eliciting parents' concerns and interests prior to a scheduled conference. Parents can introduce themselves early in the school year, letting the teacher know when and how they can be reached and asking how they can begin to become involved in classroom activities.

Both parents and teacher benefit from being well prepared in advance of the parent-teacher interview, so that the meeting is less emotionally charged and takes place in a trusting atmosphere.

Assuring parents of confidentiality also helps maintain trust. It may be helpful for both teachers and parents to keep in mind that for many parents, it is a fundamental part of the parenting role to be their child's strongest advocate.

## Addressing Learning Problems

When discussing learning problems with the teacher, parents can try the following strategies:

**Consider the context:** Ask the teacher to be specific about the problem and the context in which the problem occurs. A child who experiences difficulty in learning may do so for many reasons (e.g. frustrations with peers, family arrangements or specific subjects or learning situations).

**Identify what helps:** Ask the teacher what is being done to help the child overcome the learning problem. Ideally the teacher has tried several strategies to help the child. Often children find it difficult to let the teacher know that they do not understand what is expected of them. It may be helpful to have the teacher talk to the child about his or her problem along with the parent.

**Make a plan:** Ask the teacher what you can specifically do to help the child at home. With the teacher, list three or four concrete actions to do every day. It may be as simple as a change in the evening schedule so that the child has 15 to 20 minutes of the parent's time to read together or work on maths homework.

**Schedule a follow-up interview:** Before leaving the interview, it is a good idea to agree with the teacher on what is expected of the child, what the teacher will do to help and what the parent will do. Sometimes it is helpful to involve the child in these decisions so that he or she can see that the teacher

and parents are working together to help alleviate the problem. A follow-up interview can be used to review the effectiveness of the plan and to formulate a new plan, if necessary.

## Addressing Behaviour Problems

When addressing their child's behaviour problems, parents can try the following strategies:

**Specify the behaviour.** Ask the teacher to be specific about the type of misbehaviour in which the child engages. Aggressive behaviour may be a child's way of getting something from a peer rather than intentionally harming another person. Inability to follow directions may be a result of a hearing or language problem rather than evidence of direct defiance of the teacher. It is helpful to consider many possibilities when pinpointing the behaviour in question.

**Examine the context.** Ask the teacher to help determine when, where and why the misbehaviour is occurring. Try to identify with the teacher any events that may have contributed to a specific incident of misconduct. Try to take into consideration anything that might be contributing to the situation: the influence of peers, time of day, family problems, illness or fatigue, or changes in schedule or after-school activities.

**Examine the teacher's expectations.** Ask the teacher to be as specific as possible about what a child does that is different from what the teacher expects in a particular situation. Sometimes, if the teacher assumes that a child is being intentionally aggressive, the teacher's expectation of aggressive acts can become part of the problem and can lead to a "recursive cycle" in which children come to fulfill the expectations set for them. Try to determine with the teacher if the child is capable of meeting the teacher's positive expectations.

Effective parent-teacher interviews take place in an atmosphere of trust, where confidentiality is ensured and parents and teachers treat each other with respect.

The parent-teacher interview is an opportunity for parents to get an objective insight into the learning approach their child adopts at school, how their child responds in social situations (without you nearby) and how s/he is progressing academically.

Interviews also bring across the message to children that the teacher and his/her parents are working together to ensure the best outcomes for him/her.

Remember, parent-teacher interviews are not designed to intimidate you but, rather, enlighten you.

Extracts from this article were taken from **Ann-Marie Clarke's** article: *Parent-Teacher Conferences: Suggestions for Parents* and **Susan Witt's** article *Parent/Teacher Interviews*.

