

HOW TO RUN SUCCESSFUL PARENT-TEAM CONFERENCES

TIPS BY THE DOZEN FOR MIDDLE-LEVEL EDUCATORS

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While there is much evidence of the value of increased parental involvement in schools (Holland 1997, National PTA 1997), the relationships among middle school parents, teachers, and students too often resemble those of a dysfunctional family. Early adolescents are notorious for failing to communicate with their parents about what they are doing in school. They also have been known to play teacher against parent and parent against teacher as they engage in selective recall and “spin” about their missing assignments or questionable behavior.

Only by forming an alliance can parents and teachers effectively work together to help students negotiate the treacherous path through the middle school years. One potent tool for creating parent-teacher bonds at the middle level is the parent-team conference. In middle schools that hold conferences this way, parents no longer have to wander from room to room, waiting in the halls to meet with individual teachers, repeating their questions and concerns over and over, and trying to put together a picture of their child’s progress by looking at various fragmented (and sometimes contradictory) pieces of the puzzle. Instead, the entire process is far more relaxed and efficient, with multiple teachers giving parents a full picture of their child’s functioning in school.

At Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Jefferson City, Missouri, where I formerly taught, we experimented with parent-team conferences and learned a number of ways to make them successful. The following 12 tips are culled from those experiences:

- 1.** Be in touch long before the conference. Plan parent-team conferences in the context of a larger plan for involving parents. The meeting should not be teachers’ first contact with parents. They should have been communicating all along, making team phone calls during the opening days of school, using the homework hotline or teacher voice mail, and sending home newsletters, assignments, and other important information.
- 2.** Be direct and personal in arranging the conference. At Jefferson, team teachers were responsible for personally contacting parents of the students in their homerooms to set conference dates and times. We called parents during our team planning time.

3. Be accommodating—and try not to take “no” for an answer. We had two formal times for parent-team conferences during the year, and for each conference, we set aside an evening and a morning to accommodate parents’ schedules. We asked parents when they would prefer to come, and set appointments using a master schedule. For those parents who said they couldn’t come at any of the set times, we offered to meet before school, after school, or during our team planning time.
4. Be on time. Allow 10 minutes per conference, with an additional five minutes between meetings to provide some flexibility. Try to stick to the schedule.
5. Be prepared with handouts and work samples. You’ve only got 10 minutes. What is it that you want the parents to know? We had handouts, copies of assignments, grading criteria, information about our homework hotline, and other general materials ready to give out, as well as gradebooks and student work samples laid out and ready to go. Because we knew in advance who was coming at which time, we could move efficiently from conference to conference.
6. Be specific about any problems. If you have a concern about a student, you must be prepared to share it with parents. Discuss it with your teammates beforehand and be ready to provide information that is descriptive, direct, and clear. Be specific, too, about grades, assignments, missing work, ongoing projects; and anything else you want the parents to know about their child. Because this meeting is short, it must be focused.
7. Be knowledgeable as a team about each student. If teachers are truly working as a team, they should be prepared to speak as a team. All team members should know the students well enough so that there are no surprises. This means each should have a pretty good idea of what is going on in all the classes, as well as the students’ strengths and weaknesses.
8. Be welcoming. Serve refreshments. Have displays of students’ work available for their parents to examine while waiting to visit with the team.
9. Be in charge. Remember who arranged the meeting, and make sure it’s the team’s agenda that is placed on the table. Take advantage of having the entire team of teachers on hand by helping each other to keep the meeting moving and on track.
10. Be supportive. Listen to the parents’ concerns and questions. Take notes. You must choose words carefully to communicate that you are genuinely interested in the well-being of each child. Keep in mind that when all the teachers are reinforcing each other’s perceptions about the child, they send a powerful message to the parents.

11. Consider student-led conferences. Although a little more time-consuming to prepare, these can be very effective tools for positive home-school relations. During the week prior to the conference, have students organize samples of their work to show what they are doing, what they have accomplished, and how they have grown over time. Student portfolios lend themselves well to such presentations. Give the students time in class to practice their “state of the union” speeches so that when the parents come, everyone is ready for them.
12. Follow up. Check your notes. If there is anything you promised to do to follow up on what was discussed at the conference, do it right away. Holding a team meeting after conferences allows you to benefit from your collective recollections.

What parents want most of all is to leave school conferences with the assurance that their child is not being lost in the shuffle and that the team of teachers is truly acting with the best interests of their child at heart. If the teachers on the team are well prepared for these conferences, that is precisely the message they will convey.

References

Holland, H. “Studies Examine the Crucial Links between Parent Involvement and Middle School Success.” *High Strides* 9:5 (1997): 14-15.

National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. Chicago: National PTA, 1997.