

Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences

Dr. James Delisle explains the components of successful communication between parents and teachers of gifted children and how to achieve successful parent-teacher conferences. This article provides a unique perspective from both the parent's and teachers' points of view.

A parent from Seattle, Washington, writes: "All I hear from my daughter, Jenny, is 'I'm bored.' She is starting to dislike school, and that worries me. So, I met with Jenny's teacher. She was very nice, really, but I'm not sure what we accomplished. I was told that Jenny wasn't really bored, she just says that to get out of doing her assignments. So, I said I'd talk to Jenny about her attitude; but when I did, she still claimed to be bored in school. I'm not sure what the next step is, or how to get through to the teacher."

During the past two decades, the home-school link has been strengthened, as parents have become active participants in their child's education. This bond has enhanced educators' accountability and improved instructional services for students.

However, frustrations still exist for both teachers and parents who sometimes find themselves at odds about what works best for a particular child. Following are suggestions for building a strong home-school bond from both the teacher's and parent's points of view.

From the Teacher's Side: Hints to Parents for Successful Conferences

- ***Come in with specifics.*** In too many conferences, teachers hear only vague statements about a child's abilities or attitudes. Thus, if a parent states, "my child is bored," or "he just doesn't like school," there is little that a teacher can do to change the situation -- the problem, as stated, is just too general.

Instead, statements like "John doesn't understand why he has to do multiplication tables when he mastered them two years ago," or "Dawn especially likes science lessons that include hands-on experiments," help the teacher to understand the specific activities that excite your child about learning.

- ***Provide support through resources, information and time.*** Frequently, gifted children are involved in free-time activities that their teachers don't know about. Share these activities with your child's teacher, and ask if it is okay for your child to bring in some project ideas, books, or software programs that have captured his or her out-of-school interest.

Then, when your child has a spare few minutes between school subjects, or completes an assignment earlier than others, there is something available to do that will make "waiting time" more enjoyable and productive.

Also, keep tabs on in-school projects that can use some at-home assistance. A brief note stating "let us know how we can help" opens the door for positive home-school communication.

- ***Understand the constraints of today's public schools.*** In the past decade, two trends have added sizable responsibilities for the so-called "regular classroom" teacher: the mainstreaming of handicapped and learning disabled children and the back-to-basics movement. Though many educators applaud these changes, there is no doubt that today teachers are expected to juggle and adapt curriculum as never before.

The common complaint, "How can I individualize for one gifted child when I have twenty-six other students, too?" is seldom as much a teacher "cop out" as it is a cry of frustration. Very few teachers will knowingly hurt a child or inhibit a student's progress on purpose.

Understanding the constraints, providing specifics, and giving support can show teachers you are an ally, not an antagonist, in fostering your child's education.

From the Parent's Side: Hints to Teachers for Successful Conferences

- ***"Listen to me; I know my child."*** Parents are their child's first teachers, acting as educators long before Sesame Street and preschool come on the scene. So, it is very frustrating when professional educators address parents as if they were ignorant of their child's abilities, needs or interests.

The common myth that "all parents think their kids are gifted" is exactly that -- a myth. Parents are often "expert witnesses" in testifying to their youngster's strengths and weaknesses, and they can provide valuable data about their child that is unavailable through test scores, report card grades, or anecdotal notes in the cumulative file.

A wise teacher knows this and seeks out information from parents that may have an impact on a child's school performance.

- ***Communicate early and often.*** In my first year of teaching, I sent a note home with David, a fifth grade student of mine about whose behavior I had been forewarned. The note read: "David has had a great week in school. He finished most of his seatwork, and his attitude has been very positive. You can be proud of your son's accomplishments!"

David reported to me the next day that the note had been read aloud at the dinner table, and later framed and placed on the hallway wall.

At conference time, Dave's mom said, her eyes glistening, "All we ever hear about David is bad. That note meant so much." Five minutes of my time brought a year full of success to David, and a whole new perception of David to his family: David the success, not the failure; David the behavior, not the troublemaker.

- ***"Please understand that my child's not perfect."*** It is an unfortunate reality that practically no college programs in teacher education require a course in "Understanding Gifted Children." Thus, many good classroom teachers may be unaware of both the characteristics and the needs of gifted youngsters. What sometimes happens, then, is that teachers begin to believe that gifted children are gifted in all areas.

Expectations may rise, and a grade of "B" or "C" may be seen by some educators (and parents) as a failure. As one gifted youngster wrote, "If I had a dime for every time someone told me 'I could do better if only I'd try,' I'd be a millionaire by high school!"

Set expectations for each student realistically, and consider the fact that achievement often goes hand-in-hand with interest. If your science-oriented student is getting "only a B" in language arts, that's okay. Are you -- are any of us -- across the board perfect? No.

Understanding this reality, and communicating to your gifted pupils (and their parents) that it is acceptable to make mistakes, paves the way for a successful school experience.

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