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ABSTRACT

Suggestions on planning methods for successful parent-teacher conferences are given. Emphasis on clear communication between educators and parents is related to the degree of cooperation possible between the two parties. Practical tips for teachers confronted with angry or dissatisfied parents are included. (LH)

FASTBACK

132

How Parent-Teacher Conferences Build Partnerships

Robert Lynn Canady and John T. Seyfarth

PHI DELTA KAPPA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

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ROBERT LYNN CANADY **JOHN T. SEYFARTH**

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Canady has served as a consultant on such topics as flexible scheduling, parent-teacher conferences, and classroom management. He has appeared on programs for professional organizations at local, district, state, and national levels. Because he has sat at several sides of the conference table, he brings to the topic of parent-teacher conferences the perspective and experience of a teacher, administrator, and parent.

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

How Parent-Teacher Conferences Build Partnerships

By Robert Lynn Canady and John T. Seyfarth

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Introduction

When school districts were smaller, teachers lived and taught in the same community as their students. Parents and teachers saw each other at community functions, and there was little need for formal conferences. Today many parents and teachers are strangers. One parent recently remarked to the authors: "It is by sheer faith that I send my child to school, because I don't know anyone there." Today the formal conference has replaced informal contacts as a means of exchanging information between parents and teachers.

This fastback deals with the teacher's role in planning and carrying out successful parent teacher conferences. Parents may be interested in what we have to say. Indeed, we hope parents will read and profit from the material; however, the responsibility for the success of parent-teacher conferences lies with teachers, and it is primarily for them that we write.

Teachers have mixed feelings about parents. They welcome the interest and support of parents, but often resent those parents who intrude on their authority or question their competence. Teachers may feel that parents hold unreasonable goals for children and that when teachers try to help parents to assess realistically a child's potential, they are accused of being insensitive, uncaring, or uninformed. All things considered, it is not surprising that teachers approach parent conferences with some trepidation and sigh with relief when the conference ends.

Gertrude McPherson has a chapter in her book, *Small Town Teacher*, called "Natural Enemies: Teachers and Parents." In it she argues that differences between teachers and parents arise from fundamentally different ways of viewing the child:

A parent of a first grader complained to me one day that her son's teacher was unfair. Her son, she told me, was in Kindergarten and sensitive, afraid of school and the teacher. "He needs confidence and so he should have an A on his report card." She could not understand why Miss Tuttle refused to change his mark after finding out about his needs. When Miss Tuttle heard about the complaint, she was as sincerely puzzled as the parent: "Doesn't she understand that I have to follow the rules and use standards? I can't give Timmy an A just because he is sensitive." "To wish a child well" does not mean the same thing to parents and teachers, and the fact that both are concerned with socialization, education, and the best interests of the child does not eliminate the fundamental difference between the primary relationship of the teacher and child. The parent has particularistic expectations, the teacher, universalistic expectations.

In spite of the differences that separate parents and teachers, they share a commitment to search for ways of enhancing the child's growth and development. We believe that, given this shared commitment, parents and teachers can learn to work together successfully. This fastback is written to that end.

Recognizing a Successful Conference

Successful conferences don't happen by accident. They result from careful planning and diligent effort. This theme will recur throughout this fastback, but it will be useful at the outset to be more specific about what is meant by the term "successful conference."

Successful conferences are measured by changes in the individuals involved; therefore, success may not always be obvious to a casual observer. In fact, results of successful conferences often are not immediately apparent. There are four outcomes that are important to a successful conference.

1. A conference has been successful when the parents depart with a positive attitude toward the school and a willingness to continue to work cooperatively with the school staff. Although some issues may remain unsettled and some questions unanswered, if parents have committed themselves to a continuing dialogue, the conference has succeeded.

2. A conference has been successful when the parent and the teacher leave the conference trusting one another more than before. This outcome is related to the first outcome but goes beyond it. Parents may be willing to continue to talk, although the level of trust has not changed. Trust is related to questions of control. We trust those whom we believe will allow us the freedom to be ourselves and who will not seek to dictate or control our behavior.

3. A conference has been successful when the parent and the teacher leave the conference knowing more about the child than before. The

teacher may have learned about health problems that contribute to difficulties in learning; about special interests that can be used to motivate a child; or about fears that interfere with and inhibit the child's capacity to learn from new experiences. Parents may have learned that a child's coping style at school is radically different from that with which the parents are familiar; that habits of self criticism are so ingrained that they interfere with learning; or that difficulties in making and keeping friends have eased and that the child is now a popular, accepted person among peers. Whether good or bad, happy or sad, information of this kind is invaluable to parents and teachers seeking to help a child to achieve up to his potential and to make school a satisfying experience.

4. A conference has been successful when the parent and the teacher leave with a better understanding of what each other is trying to do. If the teacher succeeds in explaining to parents what he or she is trying to accomplish and the means employed to do it, and if parents make clear to the teacher their aspirations and hopes for their child, a firm basis for future cooperation has been established.

Understanding the Expectations of Parents

Some parents arrive at a conference with clear expectations of what they want to learn, what they want the teacher to know, and the kind of help they hope to receive. Stephanie's parents are examples.

Stephanie is a blond, blue eyed fifth grader whose parents regularly schedule a conference with her teachers near the beginning of each school year. Their purpose is to get acquainted and to find out what the teacher expects. Stephanie is an able child who, because of shyness, hesitates to ask questions when she doesn't understand. Her parents have learned that her shyness interferes with her learning, and they use the conference to alert teachers to the problem and to agree on ways they can jointly help Stephanie to overcome this handicap.

Stephanie has had a happy and successful school career, due in no small part to her parents' seeking out and conferring with her teachers. Stephanie is the type of child who might easily get lost among 25 or so other fifth graders, because she finds it hard to ask for attention from a teacher. Her parents discovered early in her school career that Stephanie's shyness was a problem that at times contributed to her doing poor quality work. By helping teachers to be aware of the problem, they are helping Stephanie to overcome it.

Stephanie's parents have clear objectives in mind for their conferences with Stephanie's teachers. They want to meet them to find out what they expect of their students and to let them know the types of problems Stephanie may encounter. With such clear objectives, their conferences are usually successful.

Parents of handicapped children often look for specific help from teachers because the parents are unusually sensitive to the particular needs of their children. These parents often request answers to the following questions:

1. How does the child get along with others in the class?
2. Is the child's behavior acceptable?
3. How can parents teach particular skills to the child?
4. What is the child expected to learn?
5. Is the child performing at or near the level of his or her ability?

Parents of a handicapped youngster also appreciate receiving printed information about their child's condition and how it will affect other phases of his or her life, and they occasionally ask for help from the school in their contacts with other professionals and agencies. For example, they may ask a teacher to supply a physician with descriptions of the child's behavior as an aid to diagnosis and treatment.

Lois B. Hart conducted a study among parents and elementary school teachers in Syracuse, New York, to determine what information teachers feel is most important to report to parents and what information parents want most to receive from the school. Six categories of information and related questions were identified, and parents and teachers were asked to rank the categories according to the importance they attached to them.

Parents were most interested in learning about their children's academic progress (what is learned, capacity for learning, and comparative progress); how children learn (use of time, applying learning to new situations, performance in groups and individual study, and use of materials); and ways of helping their children to do better in school.

Teachers agreed on the need for parents to know how their children learn and to have information about children's academic progress. However, they ranked information about academic progress lower in importance than information about children's social adjustment (respecting the rights and property of others, attitudes of other children toward the child, and the ability to work and play with others). Parents attached less importance to information about social adjustment than to any other item except school goals and organization. There was also disagreement concerning reporting information about children's conforming to school stan-

dards. Parents ranked that item fourth in importance; teachers ranked it sixth.

One implication of the Hart study is that parents and teachers differ in the values they attach to various types of information. Parents who rank academic progress above all other types of information in importance are likely to feel disappointed when a teacher discusses a child's social adjustment and ignores academic progress. The problem arises because neither party verbalizes to the other the assumptions it holds about the nature of education and the purpose of parent teacher conferences.

Parents should be able to ask for and receive the information they want about their children's performance in school, and teachers should be able to report a wide range of observations that have significance for the child's total development as a human being. Both things can happen if the conference agenda is made explicit. It is possible to develop the conference agenda before the actual conference by methods such as letters, telephone calls, and group meetings.

Preparing for the Conference

Preparation is critical for a successful parent-teacher conference. The conference may last no more than 20 or 30 minutes, but during that time impressions are made that will facilitate or impede the development of trust between teacher and parent for a long time.

Some schools arrange sessions for teachers and parents to help both groups learn to use conference time more profitably. Helpful training aids are the booklet, *How to Confer Successfully with Your Child's Teacher*, and the sound filmstrip, *Conference Time for Teachers and Parents*, both distributed by the National School Public Relations Association, Box 327, Hyattsville, MD 20781. Inservice training can supplement, but it does not take the place of, careful preplanning.

Deciding in advance what to say to parents during a conference removes some of the spontaneity, but it has the advantage of insuring that important areas are covered. This strategy also helps the teacher to maintain a balance between positive and negative comments. Too many negative comments discourage parents and may hamper future cooperation. Rather than unload everything at once, the teacher may prefer to leave some comments for another time.

A conference planning sheet such as the one on pp. 16-17 helps teachers in preparing for conferences. One of these forms is completed for each child before the parents arrive. On it the teacher notes the areas in which the child is holding his own as well as areas in which improvement is needed. The form also provides space for recording information about test scores and instructional placement. Having this information available at

the start of the meeting will save valuable time searching for it during the conference.

Before the conference, it is a good idea to review the child's record of previous years and check for indications of changes in behavior. Such changes may be indicators of maturing, or they may indicate the child is experiencing increased tension and pressure from events at home or school.

If the teacher identifies areas that need attention, it is important that he or she also be prepared to offer specific suggestions for parents. Too often parents leave a conference disturbed at what they have heard and unclear about what corrective actions they can take.

Other ways of preparing to meet with parents include reviewing services offered by the district for children with special needs. Parents may be referred to one or more of these specialists for further assistance in diagnosing or remediating a problem, or the teacher may make the referral directly, with the knowledge and consent of the parents. A list of some of the more common services offered for children with special needs follows.

Psychologist. Administers and interprets tests of academic achievement, intellectual ability, emotional adjustment, learning disabilities, and psychological functioning. May be asked to readminister tests if parents question the results. Psychological tests are required before a child is recommended for a special classroom.

Counselor. Offers help with career guidance and discussion of personal problems. In some schools the counselor is the person to contact about changing a schedule, reassigning students, or arranging a teacher conference.

Social Worker. Contacts community agencies to arrange medical or psychological treatment, visits the child's home to meet with parents and follow up cases involving extended illness or absence.

Speech Therapist. Works with children on referral to remediate speech problems.

Resource Teacher. Helps individual students whose progress is slow or who have identified learning problems. This process involves intensive help sessions with small groups of children using materials specially selected for them.

Conference Planning Sheet

Student: _____ Grade: _____ Date: _____

Teacher: _____ Parent(s), Guardian: _____

Statements by Teacher:

	Steady Growth	Needs Improvement	Needs Immediate Attention
Social Attitudes and Behaviors:			
1. Accepts responsibilities			
2. Is thoughtful of rights of others			
3. Cooperates in work and play			
4. Receives and gives criticism in a friendly way			
5. Is dependable			
6. Shows self control			
7. Is courteous			
8. Appears to make friends easily			
9. _____			
10. _____			
Work, Play, and Personal Habits:			
1. Alertness: listens attentively and follows directions			
2. Uses time to good advantage			

3. Takes care of materials
4. Completes work neatly
5. Begins and completes work in reasonable length of time
6. Obeys safety rules
7. Is careful of personal appearance
8. Participates in games
9. Shows good sportsmanship
10. _____

Other Observations:

1. Profits from use of individualized instructional materials
2. Uses problem solving techniques
3. Participates in class meetings
4. _____
5. _____

Data From File:

Norm-referenced test data

Test: _____

Composite: _____

Reading: _____

Math: _____

Lang. Arts: _____

Math Group: _____

Text & Level: _____

Other test data: _____

Reading Group: _____

Text & Level: _____

Special Classroom. Indicated when a child is diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, retarded, or learning disabled. These classrooms usually have fewer students, specialized materials, and a teacher trained in special techniques of instruction.

Another way of preparing to meet parents is to anticipate the questions they are likely to ask. Teachers who have a child of their own might imagine themselves conferring with their child's teacher. For those without school aged children and little experience in conferences, the following list will be of help.

Parents often want to know what their children will be studying and what teaching techniques will be employed. Some questions they might ask are:

What material will be covered in the major subjects during the year?

What elective or enrichment offerings are available?

Are special programs offered for the gifted and talented, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, and handicapped children? How are children selected to participate in those programs?

What are the critical tasks that children are expected to accomplish at this grade level?

How much homework will be assigned?

What teaching techniques will be employed in the major subject areas?

How will students' work be evaluated?

How will students be grouped for instruction?

Some parents also like specific information about their children's social and emotional adjustment and learning. Some of the questions they ask in this area are:

How does my child get along with other children in the class? Is he or she shy, outgoing, aggressive, withdrawn; a leader, a follower?

What seem to be my child's academic and interpersonal strengths?

Which tasks are most difficult for my child? Which are easiest?

What behavioral and academic expectations does the teacher hold for children at this age?

What should parents expect of the child at home?

Anticipating the First Parent-Teacher Conference

The first parent-teacher meeting is important, because it establishes a tone that is likely to persist throughout the relationship. The agenda for the first meeting should be simple. It ought to be a time during which parents and teacher get acquainted with one another and share their knowledge and understanding of the child.

The teacher usually comes to the first meeting with some information about the child. That information has been gleaned from a variety of sources – siblings and friends, school records, and other teachers – and it varies in quality. Some of it is accurate, but some is not. One purpose of the meeting is to test the information the teacher has to verify what is true and to reject what is not. Wise teachers approach the first meeting with an open mind, willing to suspend their earlier impressions of the child as new evidence proves their first assumptions wrong. To be able to do this, the teacher must be open and not defensive. Needless to say, there is risk involved in this attitude. The scenario below is a conversation between a parent and a teacher who is attempting to synthesize two discrepant images of the child:

Parent: Jeff's room is stacked with things he's made. He's always assembling models of cars and airplanes or making things from his Lego set.

Teacher: Sounds like he enjoys building things.

Parent: Well, I sometimes get aggravated at him because I can't get him to do anything else. He won't go out and play, and he won't read unless I make him do it. He just wants to build things.

Teacher. I suppose I am a little surprised to hear you describe Jeff in that way.

Parent. What do you mean?

Teacher. Well, in the classroom I haven't seen him become that engrossed in what he was doing. He seems to be interested in what others do but not able to be that involved in his own activities.

Parent. Well, like I said, he doesn't seem to care much for books.

Teacher. No, I wasn't thinking just of books. I have made the same observations in art, for example, when we paint or make things. Jeff holds back and seems to hesitate about getting involved in the activity.

The teacher's comments display an effort to understand behavior that is incompatible with her own observations of the child. It is in the process of assimilating this new information that the teacher develops a more realistic picture of the child and of his capabilities. It isn't a question of right or wrong — both observations are valid descriptions of the child in different settings. What is important is that the teacher is trying to understand why these settings elicit such different behaviors. As the teacher begins to understand, she will be able to help Jeff achieve satisfaction from his activities both at home and at school.

The teacher in the scenario displayed a lack of defensiveness about her feelings, which permitted an exchange of information with the parent. Had the teacher not been aware of her feelings about Jeff, or had she not been willing to risk sharing those feelings with the parent, the exchange could not have occurred.

Beginning teachers often approach the first meeting with parents with considerable trepidation. They may overprepare as an antidote to anxiety, and, thereby, prevent the spontaneity that is likely to give the first meeting its value. One way of preparing for the first meeting that has the advantage of allaying anxieties without destroying spontaneity is to write down in advance a list of questions to ask parents. The questions should be of the type that permit open-ended replies. When a response touches on something of interest to the teacher, it should be pursued. Some examples of the types of questions that might be asked follow.

What is your child interested in? How does he or she use spare time?

What types of experiences has your child had in school?

What special talents or gifts does your child have?

What does he or she need help with most?

How does your child react to disappointment? To frustration? To success?

How willing is your child to try new experiences?

What is his or her preferred learning style — that is, how does he or she learn new material most readily?

It is appropriate during the first meeting to take time to explain the teacher's expectations of the children and something of the classroom routine. This is also an opportunity to inform parents about details of the school's programs and the rationale behind them; however, those objectives should be secondary to the purpose of getting acquainted, at least for the initial conference.

Managing the Conference

The teacher's managerial responsibilities for the conference include locating a meeting room, starting and ending the meeting on time, keeping the discussion on track, insuring that participants understand the purpose of the conference, and clarifying agreements.

Parent-teacher conferences are held for one or more of five purposes: 1) to get acquainted, 2) to report progress, 3) to describe a program, 4) to examine a problem, or 5) to deal with parents' questions or concerns. The purpose of the meeting should be made clear in the invitation and again at the opening of the meeting. If parents initiate the meeting, they will, of course, state the purpose. Identifying a purpose does not prohibit the participants from exploring other issues if they care to, but every effort should be made to see that the agreed-on purpose of the meeting is accomplished. If time permits, other issues may then be discussed, and if not, a second conference can be scheduled.

Parents are interested in their children's progress in school and in any problems they may be having, and meetings dealing with those topics are more likely to attract their interest. Group meetings may be used to describe programs; such meetings are dealt with in another section of this fastback. Get acquainted meetings can be combined with program descriptions or progress-report meetings.

Many teachers prefer to meet parents immediately after their students leave school, but parents who work are often not able to arrange to visit the school during working hours. To accommodate them, some school districts now provide compensatory time to teachers who use evening or Saturday hours to meet with parents. Two three-hour Saturday or evening

sessions are equivalent to one contract day, and arrangements are made for the teacher to take off an equal amount of time. A teacher might be given an inservice day off, for example.

Another plan in use in some schools calls for teachers to remain 30 minutes beyond their normal departure time one or two days a week. That time can be used for extended or late conferences with parents. In return, teachers are permitted to leave thirty minutes earlier than normal on other days.

One of the problems parents have in arranging conferences is contacting teachers who spend most of the day in the classroom. To avoid delays, some schools arrange for the school secretary or receptionist to schedule all conferences. Teachers report to the secretary the days they will be available to meet with parents, and the secretary schedules meetings for those days. To help teachers prepare for the meeting, the secretary may ask the parent to describe the purpose of the conference. Some parents will feel the secretary has no need to know the purpose of the meeting and resent being asked. However, a politely worded inquiry such as, "May I tell Ms. Jones about the nature of the conference?" is less likely to elicit antagonism.

Schools are places with little privacy. Children seldom are alone unless they are ill or are being punished. When teachers are not with their students, they are usually with other teachers. Having adjusted to this lack of privacy, teachers forget that parents expect to talk in private. It is disconcerting to parents to attempt to discuss details of their children's schoolwork while other parents in the same room await their turn to confer with the teacher or students remain to make up missed assignments.

Planning for the conference should include making arrangements to insure privacy and freedom from interruptions. If the teacher is responsible for supervising students after school, arrangements can be made to swap the duty with other teachers. The school administration should be asked to impress on custodians the importance of avoiding interruptions during parent teacher conferences.

Holding a conference in the classroom helps parents to develop a feel for the place where their child spends a good part of each day. The wall displays allow them to see samples of the work of other children as well as current exhibits and collections. Especially in elementary schools, an ef-

fort should be made to locate comfortable adult size chairs before the parents arrive. Other matters that contribute to physical comfort also need attention. For example, classrooms can quickly become unbearably warm when windows are closed on a hot afternoon. Planning ahead for parents' physical comfort may seem like a minor detail, but it is from such care that successful parent teacher partnerships are built.

The atmosphere of the conference should be businesslike without being stiff. When the conversation wanders too far from the topic at hand, a skilled manager will guide the participants back. That can be done unobtrusively and tactfully, as illustrated in the following dialogue.

Parent Anne's hardest subject is math. She always does everything else first and puts math off until the end.

Teacher Does she dislike math?

Parent She probably likes it less than her other subjects, but I don't think she actually dislikes it. I believe she likes all her school subjects. She is especially enjoying physical education, and that surprises me because she is not the athletic type, as you know.

Teacher Hmm.

Parent I think it must be the teacher — Miss Goodwin. She is an excellent instructor. She has been teaching gymnastics for the past couple of weeks, and Anne has really enjoyed it.

Teacher Anne seems to enjoy most school activities, but I'm interested in your comment that she finds math difficult. Do you have any idea why that is?

Parent It seems to take a lot of effort for her to understand mathematics. The thought problems seem to be the most difficult because she doesn't know how to start working them.

The teacher has now brought the conversation back to the topic of interest, Anne's feelings about math, without the necessity of an abrupt shift in the conversation. She did it by listening to what the parent had to say and then at an appropriate time interjecting a transitional comment such as, "Anne seems to enjoy most school activities." A transitional statement acknowledges what the parent has said and relates it to an issue that the teacher desires to explore further.

Ending a conference is occasionally awkward, yet it is important to hold to the schedule if other parents are waiting. To keep track of time, the teacher can sit within view of a clock so that an occasional glance will keep the teacher posted on the time.

If the conference is scheduled to end at a precise time, the parent should be told beforehand. The teacher can establish the time limit by saying, "We'll talk today until four o'clock; if we need more time, we can plan to meet at another time." When that time approaches, the teacher begins to close the conference a few minutes early with a statement such as: "Our time is about up; I want to see if I'm clear about what we've agreed to." The comment is followed by a summary statement that covers highlights of the conversation.

Even though no ending time has been agreed to, a closing strategy may still be needed. No conference should be allowed to drag on simply because neither party knows how to bring it to an end. The teacher can acquire skills that will help terminate conferences gracefully.

Clues from the teacher's body language indicate to parents that the conference is drawing to a close. For example, when the teacher closes a file folder or places papers in a drawer, he or she signals the ending of the conference. The teacher's body posture communicates other messages as well. A teacher who is sitting erect and forward in the chair signals urgency and limited time. Moving to a relaxed position — with the body leaning back in the chair, feet forward and hands folded in the lap or resting on the arms of the chair — may indicate that the business of the conference is about over, but that the teacher is prepared to remain and chat. If time permits, the teacher may ask the parent, "Is there anything else you want to discuss with me?"

Improving Conference Communications

Successful conferences depend first on careful preparation. Once planning is aided and the conference begins, its continued success will depend on the teacher's skill at using techniques that help to maintain open and honest communication.

Listening is one key to successful conferences. Listening is not passive behavior. Active listening involves helping another person to clarify meaning by use of several specific techniques. Good teachers use these techniques in their teaching, yet surprisingly few of them think of applying them to conferences. The techniques are *paraphrasing*, *reflecting*, and *summarizing*.

Paraphrasing involves restating what another person has said in slightly different words. It is helpful to paraphrase as a way of checking whether or not one comprehends another's meaning, as illustrated in the following conversation.

Parent: Mike's father is remarried and has three other children, so of course he can't afford to spend a lot of money on Mike. He's really not in favor of Mike playing in the band.

Teacher: He'd rather not spend the money for the instrument?

Parent: That's right. He thinks it's an impulse and that Mike will lose interest in clarinet after awhile. I'm not sure myself how interested Mike is in music, or if it's just because others are doing it.

Teacher: You think perhaps he wants to join the band because some of his friends are in it?

Parent: That's right.

Just as paraphrasing clarifies the meaning of the speaker's words, reflecting provides feedback on the emotional tone of a message. The emotional tone is most often delivered implicitly rather than explicitly. Facial expressions and body gestures may convey anger, frustration, or impatience, while in words we deny or ignore those feelings. By examining the emotional meaning of a message, we check our perceptions to determine whether we accurately perceive the other person's feelings, and at the same time, we make the feelings an explicit topic for discussion. This is a necessary part of a successful conference, because emotions that are not dealt with can result in one or both parties sabotaging whatever agreement is reached. In the following conversation, the teacher reflects the parent's feelings.

Parent This school has never cooperated with parents. We join the PTA and attend meetings; I come over here one day a week to help out, but we never get any cooperation or help from the school.

Teacher It sounds like you are really annoyed at the school for not cooperating with you.

Parent Right. Ever since Donnie started school, I have tried to find out how he was doing and what we could do to help him at home. Nothing. Now, all of a sudden I am told he needs to be placed in a special classroom.

Teacher You're upset because we're recommending a special classroom for Donnie.

Parent Yes, it's upsetting. I don't know if that's what he needs or not.

When parents are upset or angry, little progress can be made in solving problems until the feelings have been explored. The teacher in this case performed a helpful act by recognizing and accepting the parent's feelings. That is called reflecting, and its value lies in relieving tensions and permitting exploration of vital topics.

The teacher's second statement, "You're upset because we're recommending a special classroom for Donnie," suggests a format that can be adapted to other situations. If parents' words and body actions convey strong feelings, the teacher can recognize those feelings by the statement "You're _____ because _____."

There is an important difference between accepting another person's feelings and agreeing with the causes of the feelings. When a parent says, "I am upset because I think you have been unfair to my daughter," the teacher can accept the feelings without agreeing that he or she has treated the child unfairly. Accepting feelings is a way of bestowing dignity and worth on another person as a fellow human being. We cannot tell others what feelings they should have, but we can tell them whether their perception of the event that evoked those feelings is accurate.

While many teachers are uneasy in dealing with parents' emotions, it is the lack of emotional content in many parent teacher conferences that gives them a ritualistic and superficial quality. Parents leave such conferences feeling like the guest who departs the banquet table hungry but does not understand why he feels so empty.

Summarizing, as the name suggests, is a technique for concisely drawing together what has been said during a discussion. When it is timely, summarizing facilitates a conference. A summary is always appropriate near the end of the meeting, but it may occur anytime there is need for it. Even though two parties may disagree on an issue, summarizing helps each to understand the other's position and the nature and extent of their differences.

Threat reduces openness and honesty and, hence, should be avoided in a conference if possible. Jack Gibb has identified six defense arousing and six supportive behaviors. Teachers who use more supportive behaviors and fewer defense arousing behaviors achieve better results in conference situations. The six pairs of behaviors identified by Gibb are illustrated and discussed below. In each case, the supportive behavior appears first.

Description vs. *Evaluation*

Teacher A: Sam was leaning against a post in front of the school yesterday morning reading a book. Two girls came along and teased him a little and tried to engage him in conversation. Sam ignored them and went back to reading his book. After awhile, they left.

Teacher B: Sam doesn't think about other people's feelings. He seems to be tied up with himself, interested in his own activities but not willing to engage others.

Teacher A's description is vivid and specific but not evaluative. It avoids assumptions about what was on Sam's mind and focuses instead on his behavior. Was Sam feeling bored, embarrassed, pleased, or amused? We're not sure. His parents may know Sam well enough to suspect what he might have felt, but in any case Teacher A's description provides valuable observation data about their son and his relationships with others.

Teacher B has witnessed the same scene but has chosen to draw conclusions – not very flattering ones in this case – about Sam. Those conclusions may grow out of other impressions Teacher B has formed in contacts with Sam, and they may or may not be accurate. The description is not revealing, and it carries with it a judgmental quality that seems not to admit the possibility of change.

Problem Orientation vs. *Control*

Teacher A: Jimmy does well except that he does not complete his homework. As a result, his grades are low. Can you suggest something we can do to help him?

Teacher B: Jimmy doesn't do his homework, and it sets a bad example for the other kids in the class. I'm going to start sending him to the principal every time he comes without it.

Teacher A's approach invites the parents to participate in identifying a solution to a difficult problem. Teacher A avoids reproaching the parents or the child and focuses instead on correcting the unsuitable behavior. Teacher B, however, has decided what action to take and merely informs the parents of the decision. They are not invited to help find a solution. Because this approach is not likely to gain the parents' support and may well intensify the child's resistance, it very likely will fail to produce a satisfactory long range solution.

Spontaneity vs. *Strategy*

Teacher A: I've enjoyed having Carolyn in my class. She is well-liked by her classmates as well as by her teachers. I'm concerned, though, that she may be involved in too many activities, and her grades are suffering as a result. Perhaps it would be a good idea for you to talk with her about

her goals and determine which is more important right now, clubs or studies.

Teacher B: There's no one who doesn't like Carolyn. She is a leader in her class and active in everything that goes on. I don't think you ought to be concerned about her grades, because she's going to be a leader wherever she goes.

Carolyn's parents have expressed concern about her grades. Teacher A's spontaneous response is to express her own pleasure at having had Carolyn as a student and to follow that with a suggestion to the parents to help Carolyn examine and perhaps reorder her priorities. Teacher B attempts to manage the parents' concern by suggesting that Carolyn's leadership qualities will override her deficiencies in scholarship. The answer is strategic because Teacher B is reporting what he or she thinks the parents want to hear, rather than speaking from conviction.

3

Empathy and *Neutrality*

Teacher A: I can understand how Donna feels. When I first started studying violin, I worked for months before I could play a scale that sounded decent. I was very discouraged, and I nearly gave up. I suppose I would have stopped except my brother played violin, and I was determined if he could, I could, too.

Teacher B: Donna is doing well; she doesn't have any reason to feel badly about her progress. The violin is a difficult instrument to master, and many children her age become discouraged when they discover they can't play a sonata after the first week.

Both teachers in these examples provide reassurance to the parents of a girl who is discouraged about her progress on the violin. However, Teacher A's empathic response is more personal and immediate, and it conveys a sense of caring. Teacher B, while reassuring, avoids the personal references that help an anxious parent realize that the teacher understands the intensity of the child's feelings.

Equality vs. *Superiority*

Teacher A: I really was annoyed at Eddie on Friday. I was tired and probably didn't show as much patience as I should have, but after I called

him down three or four times, I sent him to see Mr. Dawson. He looked really shocked when I told him to go to the principal's office.

Teacher B: I have to think of the other kids in the class, and I can't allow one to disrupt instruction for all the others. So I sent Eddie to the principal when he insisted on talking. I think he learned his lesson.

Teacher A's description of the incident involving Eddie evokes a sense of concern for Eddie, "He looked really shocked," and an admission of fallibility, "I was tired and didn't show much patience." Teacher A seems to be saying implicitly that both teacher and child contributed to the confrontation. Teacher B, on the other hand, does not accept any responsibility for the incident and assumes a superior position by attempting to justify the action of sending Eddie to the principal.

Dealing with Disagreements

In any relationship in which participants attempt to communicate honestly and openly, disagreements are inevitable. When they occur, individuals may be threatened, and the relationship strained unless one of the parties has the skills to help resolve the problem. In parent-teacher conflicts, the teacher is expected to have these skills and to initiate action to resolve differences.

There are four basic approaches a teacher may use to resolve conflict. They are: 1) use of authority, 2) appeals to others, 3) compromise, and 4) rational decision making. A discussion of each of these approaches follows:

Use of Authority

In a conference in which the teacher uses authority, the following dialogue might occur:

Parent: I just do not understand why you insist on keeping John in Level K. My sister is a teacher, and she says that she feels certain that John should be placed at grade level for reading.

Teacher: Please understand that I have the responsibility – not your sister – to determine the reading placement for each student in my class. I have taught here 12 years, and I can assure you that I have the skills and experience to know that John is placed correctly. Now what we need is for you to support me in my work with John.

There will be occasions when resort to authority is necessary; however,

it is a technique that should be used sparingly. Citing one's authority creates an adversarial relationship. A win-lose situation emerges, and communication becomes distorted or ceases altogether. When the teacher uses authority, the loss of the parent's support and friendship may be too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of having prevailed.

Appeals to Others

When a teacher appeals to others (such as a colleague, resource teacher, or principal), the teacher extends his or her authority. If handled properly, an appeal can help to alleviate tensions and may lead to a solution to the disagreement. If handled poorly, however, an appeal may exacerbate existing tensions, as in the following example.

Parent: You keep saying that John is "right on target" in his reading placement, but I disagree with you. As I've said before, my sister is a teacher, and she has told me that John could work at least one level higher than you have him. I don't understand why you will not change him!

Teacher: We have discussed this problem for 20 minutes, and apparently you will not accept my judgment regarding John's placement in reading. I suggest that you talk to the principal. Possibly he can have the resource teacher do additional testing. Maybe that will convince you that John is correctly placed.

The teacher in this case would have retained more credibility with the parent if he or she had offered to contact the principal to secure additional information, with assurance that whatever was learned would be honestly considered. A reconsideration of the problem could then take place during another conference at a later date. At that time the teacher and parent could review the information and decide on which parts they both could agree. They could then identify alternatives and, after allowing a few days for contemplation, make a mutually acceptable decision.

To work successfully, appeals should not be made in anger or out of indifference, nor should they be viewed as a means of dumping a problem into the lap of someone else. The appeals process allows time for both parties to reconsider and modify their positions and, thereby, will often lead to resolution of conflict without further action being necessary.

Compromise

Compromise has an honorable history in political affairs, where it permits groups with conflicting interests to achieve at least some of their objectives. In human relations, compromise is not the ideal means of resolving conflict, since neither party can attain all goals. Compromise may not be necessary if sufficient communication takes place between the parties. The following scenario illustrates this point.

Parent: I do not understand why you insist on keeping John in the reading group you have put him. As I have said, my sister is a teacher, and she is certain that he can work at least one level higher.

Teacher: Based on the data I have on John's performance and my observations of him, I do not concur that John should be placed in a higher group. However, I am willing to place him with the higher group for a two-week trial. But I also want him to continue reading with his present group until we make a final decision. He can work with the higher group in place of going to the library or working on independent activities in language arts.

Parent: I guess that might be O.K., but I am concerned about John having to attend two reading groups each day and miss out on the other activities.

The parent and teacher have reached a compromise agreement about which neither is totally happy, although the compromise has the possibility of leading ultimately to a satisfactory solution. If the teacher had permitted the discussion to continue rather than attempting to reach a quick solution through compromise, the following dialogue might have taken place.

Parent: I sometimes think you teachers just place students for your own convenience. Also, you get so concerned with test data that you forget the feelings of students. John has been miserable in his reading group. All of his friends are in the next higher group.

Teacher: Possibly John would prefer to be in Ms. Becker's homeroom because several students in Level L are in that homeroom. That way he

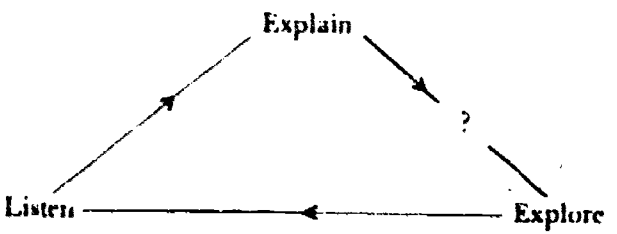
could be with his friends during physical education, art, music, science, and social studies.

In this exchange, the parent's hidden agenda — John's being isolated from his friends — has emerged. Once this concern has been identified, teacher and parent can work to seek a resolution without changing the student's reading placement. By encouraging honest communication and careful listening, teachers and parents can find ways of solving problems that meet the objectives of both parties.

Rational Decision Making

The majority of parental complaints deal with a relatively small number of issues. The most common issues raised by parents who visit teachers are grades, teaching methods, homework, placement, and keeping parents informed. Discipline is another area that generates a number of parental inquiries, although most of those are dealt with by the school administrator.

Teachers who deal with unhappy parents need to remember three steps of the L E E triangle to reach a satisfactory solution to most problems. The triangle looks like this.



The teacher starts by listening. Listening means the teacher actively attends to what the parent is saying and helps the parent to make his or her meaning clear. The teacher can do this by questioning the parent to draw out additional information, by paraphrasing, reflecting, and summarizing, and by using body language that shows interest and understanding. Examples of body language that convey understanding and interest are eye contact and nodding the head.

It is human nature to explain one's actions before truly hearing the other party's complaint. There are at least two reasons why it is important to listen to the parent before starting to explain. First, parents may process their own grievances while they talk. For example, Alice's mother complains that her daughter has too much homework, but as the teacher listens, the mother admits that Alice does not know how to organize and use her time and that homework is one way she can learn to do that. Rodney's father complains that he was not given a warning that his son's grades were slipping in mathematics, but as he talks, he recalls that he did see several papers with low grades.

A second reason for attentive listening is that the true grievance is often not the one the parent first describes. The following scenario shows how the true complaint emerges after the parent has been talking awhile.

Parent: Greg and Jimmy are such good friends. Greg cried when he found out they were not going to be in the same room this year. They've been in the same class ever since they started school.

Teacher: It sounds like they prefer being together.

Parent: Yes. Well, they live just a few doors from one another, and they play together after school, so it's natural they want to be together at school.

Teacher: Of course, they are able to be together on the playground.

Parent: Yes, but that's not the same. They are doing different work in their classes and each thinks he's ahead of the other.

Teacher: It's a concern of theirs who is ahead, then?

Parent: Oh, yes. And mine, too. I don't think Jimmy is that much better than Greg that he should be in a higher group.

As the parent has talked, the true nature of his concern appears. He is unhappy about the separation of his son from a friend – but also for what the separation implies about his son's achievement and ability vis-à-vis that of his friend. The teacher's explanation will deal with Greg's instructional level and how the decision was reached to place him.

Only after the parent has explained what he or she is unhappy about does the teacher explain. An effective explanation should be brief and

clear. The more drawn out or detailed the explanation, the more defensive it sounds and the more likely the parent is to suspect that the teacher is not leveling.

Four examples of explanations follow. Two of the explanations are satisfactory, but the other two can be improved.

A. *Teacher:* I asked Joan to remain in the room during recess so that she could finish her arithmetic assignment. She failed to complete it during study time because she was talking.

B. *Teacher:* I'm sorry, Mrs. Jones, but it is our policy that Mary can't check out another library book until she returns the one she has. We allow children to take only one book at a time. Our collection is small, and more children are able to take books if each one takes only one book at a time.

C. *Teacher:* Jimmy's placement is based on his test scores. I didn't put him in this group, and there is nothing I can do about changing him.

D. *Teacher:* We felt that it would be better if Robin and Nancy were separated. They do better work when they are not in the same room.

In example A, the teacher has given a clear and concise explanation of the reason for her action. The dialogue with the parent can continue now with both parties understanding what action was taken and why. The parent may still object that Joan was singled out for discipline and other guilty parties were not disciplined or that the discipline was harsh. The teacher may then explain how the discipline was determined.

In example B, the teacher cites policy as the basis for a decision not to permit Mary to take out two library books, but she goes on to give a reason for the policy. When rules or policies are cited to justify actions, it is important to explain why the rules or policies exist. Parents who are told simply "it's policy" feel that an action is arbitrary.

Example C shows a teacher's response that is unsatisfactory. Although some information is given (placement is based on test scores), the teacher does not attempt to justify the decision to the parent and refuses to assume

any responsibility for it. The parent is left feeling confused and unsure of what to do next. To change C to a satisfactory explanation, the teacher must explain why test scores are used for placement purposes and show how in Jimmy's case the placement decision is supported by his scores.

Teacher D has explained the reason behind a decision, but additional elaboration is needed. The parent at this point must be wondering why Robin and Nancy do better work when separated. Teacher D also makes an error by using the unattributed "we." It isn't clear who "we" refers to; therefore, it is difficult for the parent to pinpoint who is responsible for the decision to separate the girls. Explanations should be brief and understandable and should help the parent understand why an action was taken.

Between the second and third apexes of the L-E-E triangle a question mark appears. It is there because the teacher needs to pause at that point to ask whether the problem has been resolved satisfactorily – that is, to the satisfaction of both parent and teacher. If the grievances are resolved by listening and explaining, it is not necessary to proceed to the third step, explore.

What if the situation is one that is not under the teacher's control or if there are no viable alternatives? Following is an apparent example of such a problem.

Parent: Angela does her best work in the morning, and by afternoon she is tired. I think she would do much better if she could be scheduled for academic subjects in the morning and take electives and physical activities in the afternoon.

Teacher: I understand how you feel. It seems a shame that it's not possible to reverse Angela's schedule. However, all seventh-graders take math, English, and social studies after lunch. There's no way we could change her schedule without also changing every other child's schedule.

The teacher has closed the conversation without having explored. Although the parent may well accept the teacher's explanation, the problem is not resolved. But suppose the teacher had tried exploring. The conversation might then have gone something like this:

Teacher: I understand how you feel. At present, all seventh graders take math, English, and social studies after lunch. Most of them are pretty groggy by that time, and we don't get the best work out of them. Maybe you can suggest something

Parent: Maybe it would be possible for you to alternate schedules by weeks or even by semester.

Teacher: That's a possibility. I wonder also if a brief fresh air break or even a jog around the building might help liven up the students.

Parent: Angela complains sometimes that the classrooms are stuffy. Maybe the thermostats could be set lower or more windows opened.

Teacher: These are good ideas. At the next faculty meeting, I'll suggest we try them.

The techniques described (use of authority, appeals to others, compromise, and rational decision making) are ways of dealing with conflict that vary in effectiveness depending on the situation and the skill of the person using them. A rational decision making approach (listen-explain-explore) permits more information to be considered and has the most promise of resulting in effective and mutually acceptable solutions to disagreements.

Reporting Test Scores

Children are introduced to standardized tests almost from the day they enter school. The tests are duly scored, results recorded and filed, and decisions made on the basis of those results. Yet parents for the most part have only hazy notions about what tests are given, what they mean, and how they are used. Needless to say, with tests playing the prominent role they do in the lives of their children, parents need to be better informed about them.

Most teachers will at one time or another discuss children's test scores with parents. Before they do, they should be prepared to answer these four questions:

1. What does the test measure?
2. What is the meaning of the score?
3. How accurate is the score?
4. What effect will the test have on the child's schooling?

The questions are discussed below.

Tests have been devised to measure almost any behavioral, attitudinal, or mental characteristic that can be imagined. Tests that are commonly given to schoolchildren measure scholastic achievement (how much the child knows about a subject); mental ability (the child's capacity for learning); and aptitudes or interests. In special cases, tests that measure personality adjustment, emotional maturity, and perceptual skills can be administered.

Test scores are reported by using a number that relates the individual's performance to the performance of some larger group. The larger group

may be the class, the school, the district, or more commonly in the case of standardized tests, the nation. Whichever group is used for comparison, it is called a norm group.

Scores are reported as percentiles, stanines, or grade-level equivalents. These terms are defined below:

Percentile score is based on a scale of 100 units. A point on that scale indicates the percentage of people taking the test who scored below that point. And the point on the scale subtracted from 100 indicates the percentage who scored above the point. A percentile score of 75, for example, indicates that 75% of the norm group made scores that were lower and 25% made scores that were higher.

Stanines divide the test population into nine groups as shown below:

Stanine	
9	4%
8	7%
7	12%
6	17%
5	20%
4	17%
3	12%
2	7%
1	4%

Stanine 9 is high, stanines 7 and 8 are above average, and stanines 4 through 6 are average. Stanines 2 and 3 are below average, and stanine 1 is low.

Grade level equivalent scores equate an individual's performance to that of a comparison group at a particular grade level. A score of 2.3 indicates that the student's performance is similar to what would be expected of a child in the second grade, third month of school. Grade-level equivalent scores are the least accurate of the three ways of reporting test results, although they are one of the most popular. A student in the seventh grade who receives a grade-level score of 3.5 on a subtest probably performs tasks beyond the capability of a third-grader, yet he is equated

with a third-grade child in the scoring. Similarly, a student in grade 7 who receives a score of 10.0 cannot do many things an average student in grade 10 can do. The score does not tell what proportion of the students who were tested scored higher or lower.,

Testmakers distinguish two factors in a test: reliability and validity. Reliability means the test yields a similar score each time it is administered to a person, and validity refers to whether the test measures what it is intended to measure. No test is absolutely reliable or valid, but some tests are considerably more so than others. The choice of test should take into account both factors, as well as how the test will be used.

Many teachers do not have sufficient background to interpret test results to parents, and in those cases, it is better to admit that fact and call on an expert for help. Parents should be reminded that no test is perfectly reliable and that if it were given a second time, some children would score higher and some lower. Although scores in most cases would be close to the score from the first administration, there would be a few cases in which sizable differences would be obtained. If the parents or a teacher feel a score is inaccurate, a retest should be ordered.

Parents have legitimate concerns about placement practices based on results of standardized tests, particularly when the tests in use have a low reliability. The school has a responsibility to explain and justify such placement practices. Placement decisions are most subject to question when a small difference in scores results in two students being placed in different instructional tracks or when the placement results in one child losing out on opportunities that are available to others.

Mike scored a few points lower than Deborah on a standardized achievement test at the end of seventh grade. Mike was assigned to a general mathematics class in the eighth grade, while Deborah went into a pre algebra class. Both are required to take one year of mathematics in high school, but for Mike the option of taking algebra has been effectively foreclosed by his placement in a low mathematics section. Deborah retains the option of taking either general mathematics or algebra in ninth grade, and since algebra is prerequisite for taking other mathematics courses in high school, those possibilities are still open to her. If you were Mike's parents, what would you have to say to the school?

Most parents of a child like Mike would want to be reassured that

Mike's assignment to a lower group was an educationally defensible decision and not merely an expediency to maintain balanced class sizes. Such reassurance would be credible only if the spread of scores on the test warranted different placements and if the test were sufficiently reliable to distinguish genuine differences.

Conducting Group Conferences

The majority of conferences between parents and teachers involve one parent or set of parents and one teacher. On occasion, other types of conferences are held. The most common of these is the three-way conference involving one parent or set of parents and two school people. The school people may be two teachers, but more often they are the teacher and the principal or assistant principal.

Three-way conferences have advantages and disadvantages. If the parent has a request that requires the principal's approval, it can be given on the spot. The principal may also be able to explain details of school policies with which the teacher is unfamiliar. The principal's presence is helpful in cases in which a problem involves other teachers or in which the principal has information about a child or problem that the teacher does not have. For these reasons, including the principal in a parent conference can be useful.

The disadvantage of including the principal is that his or her presence is likely to arouse parental defenses, particularly among parents who hold a view of the principal as a police officer. The defensiveness is likely to be greater if the parent has not been informed that the principal has been invited to participate.

As a matter of common courtesy, parents should be asked before another person is invited to participate in a conference, and the reasons for including that person should be made clear. The scenario below illustrates how one teacher successfully dealt with the issue of including the principal in a conference. The conversation takes place by telephone.

Parent: Alvin's grades have dropped this year, and I don't understand what the problem is. I wonder if I could talk with you about it.

Teacher: I'd be happy to meet with you to discuss Alvin's progress. I feel he hasn't been working up to his ability, and I hope we can find out what the problem is. Is it possible for you to come by school one afternoon this week?

Parent. I work every day, but I think I can arrange to leave early one afternoon. How about Thursday?

Teacher: Thursday would be fine. Would you mind if I ask Mr. Pinson, our principal, to sit in?

Parent: Why? Has Alvin done something wrong?

Teacher: It's not that. I think Mr. Pinson knows our students quite well, and he's good at finding out what's on their minds. I think he might help us identify Alvin's problems.

Parent. That would be fine. I'll look forward to seeing you on Thursday.

The parent's initial reaction to the suggestion that the principal be included was guarded and reveals an assumption that many parents hold — that when the principal is called in, a discipline problem is involved. Had the principal been included without the parent's knowledge the conference might well have failed.

Parents often feel intimidated when confronted with two or more educators, since they assume the educators have previously agreed on a position and will use the weight of greater numbers to overwhelm the parents. In such an atmosphere, parents either behave docilely and say little, or they react militantly and behave in a hostile manner. In either case, genuine problem solving is unlikely to occur.

The arguments just advanced regarding the disadvantages of three-way conferences apply even more strongly to conferences involving larger groups. An acquaintance of one of the authors related an account of a visit to a school to confer with her son's teacher. On arriving at the school, the parent found herself face-to-face with four teachers who composed the boy's instructional team, an aide, a resource teacher, and the principal. The mother commented: "There was no way I could take on that gang, although I did not agree with what they had to say."

Large group meetings are an efficient way to communicate with many people when time doesn't permit individual meetings. Rather than repeat a message 25 times, it is said once to 25 people. The questions all parents want answered can be dealt with in a large group, and the time that is saved can then be used for more intensive discussions with individuals.

To be successful, group conferences require careful planning and adherence to a few simple rules. In planning a group conference, consider these four questions.

1. Who will participate? The participants should be people with similar interests. They may be parents whose children have the same teacher, or they may be parents of all first- or third-grade children. In any case, the participants should be clearly identified in advance so that everyone knows who is included.

2. How many will participate? Generally, the more successful group conferences involve fewer people. Twenty-five is the upper limit. If it is necessary to exceed that number, break the meeting into several short segments.

3. What will be the format of the meeting? Decide before the meeting who will speak and when. Make sure speakers know what they are expected to cover and how much time they will be allowed. A moderator who can keep the meeting moving without alienating people is a valuable resource person for group meetings. Assist the moderator by providing an order of events that shows who will speak, on what topic, and for how long. Question-and-answer times should also be planned. One long session is usually more easily managed than several short ones, which frequently run longer than intended. It is permissible to depart from a preplanned schedule if audience interest merits, but the decision should be one the audience is aware of and concurs with.

4. How will follow-up be handled? Group meetings of necessity deal only with topics of general interest, and they do not permit individuals to discuss matters of concern only to themselves. It is wise to plan to give parents the opportunity to discuss their questions in greater length at another time. This can be done by means of small group seminars or, if the questions parents want to ask are personal, in individual sessions.

Reaching Disinterested Parents

A common complaint of teachers is about parents who are too busy or too disinterested to come to school for a conference. These parents have a generous supply of excuses for refusing repeated invitations to conferences, and after a while teachers give up trying to get them to school. Telephone conversations and unanswered letters will be the school's only link with many of these parents, but it is possible to attract some of them to school if teachers are willing to make the effort.

Some of these parents have unpleasant memories of their own school years and are unnerved by the prospect of talking face-to-face with a teacher about their children; but they are no less interested than other parents in their children's success, and careful, patient effort with them will pay off. Teachers can initiate contact by means of brief written or telephone messages praising commendable achievements of the children, and by following up those messages with requests for information about the children. Telephone discussions of the children's interests and achievements may also help. After some trust has developed, an invitation to visit the school to eat lunch with the children and to view a display of classwork can be extended. Some parents are more likely to come if other parents also are invited.

An approach such as this takes time, and the school year may be nearly over before the parents finally enter the building. Once started, these contacts should be continued from year to year, passing from one teacher to the next as the children move through the school. In working with these parents, it is important that teachers project an image of helper rather than of critic or judge.

Not a few parents feel a sense of inadequacy in coping with the behavior of their children. They see their children as being out of control. They ignore requests from the school for assistance in dealing with the children's behavior because they believe there is nothing they can do. An effective way to reach some of these parents is to offer a class or discussion group conducted by a qualified psychologist or counselor to help parents understand and change the dynamics of their relationships with their children.

All teachers know parents whose fantasies of their children's abilities far exceed reality. Although a youngster's grades and test scores indicate nothing more than average ability, these parents insist that the child has enormous talent waiting to be tapped. They suggest that if teachers were more competent they would have brought out the child's latent genius. The harm in such fantasizing is that the child learns not to be content with what he or she is able to do and instead sets unrealistic and unattainable goals. The frustration resulting from the failure to reach those objectives may turn the child against learning and destroy his or her ability to appreciate and accept self.

Unfortunately, teachers have little luck dissuading such parents from their opinions. Nevertheless, for the child's sake, the effort must be made. It is done by calmly pointing out what the child is capable of doing and in what areas improvements might reasonably be expected. The parents can be reassured that they are not alone in holding dreams of great accomplishments for their children but should be reminded that it is important they praise the child for what he or she is capable of doing at present. It is equally important to stress to these parents that children should be encouraged to explore many interests and to select a vocation based on their own, rather than on the parents', interests.

Evaluating the Conference

When the conference is over, it will be worthwhile to reflect on what happened and to review the conference for clues to help improve future performances. The questions in the following checklist, which is divided into positive and negative considerations, may be helpful in an evaluation of parent teacher conferences.

Positive Considerations

(A "yes" answer to these questions is desirable.)

1. Was the conference "opening" designed to help all persons feel comfortable?
2. Could the conference be described as a problem-solving session?
3. Were any commitments made during the conference? Were they adequately communicated and reinforced?
4. Was there an equal distribution of power among all persons present during the conference?
5. Were appropriate principles of conflict management employed during the conference?
6. Did the professional(s) remain professional throughout the conference?
7. Was the emotional climate of the conference positive?
8. Was the tone of the conference constructive?
9. Was there a balance between positive and negative remarks?
10. Were any personal remarks made by the professional(s) to the parent(s)? Did they seem genuine?

11. Were the goals of the conference understood by all persons present? Were the goals met?

12. Were facts and all information related to the conference adequately handled?

13. Was the closure of the conference appropriate?

Negative Considerations

(A "no" answer to these questions is preferred.)

1. Was the mood of the conference defensive?
2. Was educational jargon used during the conference?
3. Did the conference turn into an argument?
4. Did the conference become a win lose situation?
5. Did hidden agendas interfere with an honest examination of issues?
6. If differences in values were apparent, were they examined?
7. Were the parents talked down to?

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