

10 Tips for an A+ Parent/Teacher Conference

adapted from an article by: Deanna Wildish, Learning/Rx

According to a 1994 U.S. Department of Education survey, the most significant factor in determining a student's success in school is the amount and extent of parent involvement. So, if you can't make it into the classroom on a regular basis, conferences offer a great way to get involved and ensure you and your child are both doing all you can to guarantee school success.

These 10 tips can help you prepare for a quality conference that continues to be beneficial long after you leave the meeting.

1. Start the process with an open mind and good attitude. Don't let bad experiences with school, conferences, or even this teacher force you into a defensive role.
2. Talk to your child. Asking direct questions about his day of learning. You may uncover worries you didn't know about before. Ask about social issues. According to a 2002 survey by the Families and Work Institute, nearly one-third of youth are bullied at least once a month.
3. Take information about tests, diagnoses and treatments that may affect how your child does in school. Don't try to hide a learning disability or diagnosis fearing your child may be labeled. The teacher should be aware of tests and grades from previous years, and should have copies of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). If a child has fallen behind, these plans are used to map his individual progress, needs and provided services.
4. Do your homework before you go. Conference time is limited, averaging 20 minutes in elementary school and just a few minutes per teacher in high school. Review schoolwork, test results, online grading systems, homework policies and other information already sent home so you don't use valuable time asking questions that you could already have the answers to.
5. Take your child's other parent with you. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, students do better in school if both parents are involved, whether the father lives with the child or not.
6. Write down all questions and concerns beforehand so you remember them. Take notes during the conference and jot down new questions as you go.
7. Be an advocate. Work with the teacher to develop the best plan for your child.
8. Be prepared for open-ended questions, such as "How do you think she's doing?" or "Is there anything I should know about." Be honest! Tell the teacher if you have concerns or if there's something at home that could impact your child, like a divorce, new baby, soccer league or insomnia. If you're near the end of the conference, this is your opportunity to ask key questions if the teacher hasn't already answered them – questions like "How does my child interact with others? Is she working up to her ability?" And most importantly, "What can we do at home to reinforce what you're doing at school?"
9. Make a follow-up plan and set a timeline for updates. Confirm the best time and manner to contact the teacher to check on progress.
10. Finish at home. Even if there are no problems, chances are your child was a little nervous about conferences too, so be sure to share praise, concerns and solutions.

Following these tips can help you have a conference that lays the groundwork for a productive relationship with the teacher and a great school year for your child. If you're still nervous about conferences, or dreading it altogether, remember the payoff: getting involved in your child's education is one of the most important things you can do to guarantee his success in school and beyond.

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