

## CREATING TRUSTING AND PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

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### Types of Parent Meetings

1. Information Gathering – An initial meeting to discuss a problem or potential problem. At this stage, parents and teachers are working together as a team to collect information and observations. An “Planning Meeting” is then set up once adequate information is collected.
2. Planning Meeting – At this meeting the parents and teachers collaborate to implement a plan, created by the teacher (with input from parents if appropriate).
3. Check-in – A phone call or short, planned, after-school meeting to review a specific issue, and to see how things are going.
4. Parent Conferences – This is a big picture discussion. Conferences are intended to give overview of the student’s progress. If issues have come up, there should be a review of the implemented plan at this meeting as it is part of the overall progress.

### Effective Parent Meetings

1. Proactive communication – There is nothing that works better in insuring parent trust than being pro-active in your communication. As a general rule, get to the parents before they get to you. If you see that a parent is having a problem, don’t wait for them to bring it up, as you are then in a position to defend vs. seeking solutions. If you see a child having specific issues in the classroom, be sure to call the first meeting. Parents will appreciate your attentiveness and be in a more open position to work on solutions vs. blame.
2. Have a Plan: It is vital in establishing trust and confidence with the parents of your class that you work with them to establish a plan for their child and take the lead in doing so. Whether you’re doing a parent conference or discussing a specific issue with a parent, be sure to explain what you’re doing in the classroom to address the concern and what, if anything, you would like to ask the parent to do to support your efforts. If a parent hears about a concern, without a plan to address it, they often feel as though their child is being pointed out as the problem. Be sure to establish goals and roles!
3. Talk About Potential Road-Blocks and What To Do if They Crop Up – If you know that something might get in the way of a child’s development, talk about it openly, and explain possible solutions (even if the solution is just that it has to be accepted). For instance, if you know that a family will be having another baby, how might this impact the child’s transition at the beginning of school? If mom and dad are going through a divorce, how might this impact academics? The solution might simply be: “If I see XYZ happening I will let you know immediately and we’ll see what we can do to ease the impact (or address a solution).” Being able to do this effectively comes with experience. The longer you’re in the classroom the more that you realize that very few problems are

new and unique. While they are new and unique to those experiencing them, they may just be a different shade of a problem you've seen before; and thus, your experiences can be beneficial.

4. Establish Expectations - What are the expectations for the plan and for the child? This doesn't mean that you have to know exactly what's going to happen, or that you are expecting the child to "fall into line." Simply, what are you expecting by establishing the plan. How are you going to tell if it's working? What is the plan if it isn't working (e.g. try another solution, get outside help, etc.)? What is the general time-frame for the expectations to be met? What are you looking for, and what are you not looking for? If a child will be "behind" in their development and your expectations are for growth (not that they will be keeping up with their peers) make sure that the parent knows that this is what you're looking for, and try to give some concrete expectations of their progress if you establish the plan.
5. Plan Follow-Up Communication – Follow-up communication is critical. After establishing a plan, or even a "let's watch for \_\_\_\_\_", be sure to **schedule** follow-up communication. This will help in many ways. Often, after a minor concern is discussed (even if it's major to the parent), the issue may disappear because it was temporary. It's important to get that confirmation. On bigger issues, to make sure that everyone knows what comes next and how you will be insuring that the plan is being implemented on all ends, and that it is working.
6. Parent Meeting Sample Agenda
  - a) Discuss classroom observations
  - b) Check in for parent observations
  - c) Identify goals for the child
  - d) Identify your plan to address and meet the goals (be as specific as possible)
  - e) Communicate your expectations for the plan
  - f) Identify what specific support you need from the parent (if they need education on how to support the child, be sure to have written instructions and carve out the time to teach them directly)
  - g) Establish communication protocol
  - h) Set the next meeting (don't wait until later, do it at the meeting)

### **Tips on Efficient Parent Communication if a Parent Brings You a Concern**

1. Wait for cool down if there is high emotion – If a parent comes to you and is visibly upset, try to schedule a meeting for two or three days out, unless it is a true emergency. Be careful not to fall into the trap of trying to handle the problem "on the spot" before the weekend so you can put it to rest. If you have a question on this, check with your Director.
2. Ask for a brief overview of the concern – If a parent calls you with a concern and asks for a conference, ask for a brief overview of their concern. "OK, let's get together on Wednesday after school. Can you give me a brief overview of your concern so that I can

make sure that I'm prepared for our meeting? *They explain.* OK, so you're concerned with Frank's progress in math and his peer interactions with the older children in the class. Terrific, I'll see you on Wednesday."

3. Plan an information gathering meeting (if possible and appropriate): If a parent has a bigger concern, try to have an information gathering meeting first. This way you can address the problem deliberately rather than reacting to emotion.
4. Use Reflective Listening – Just like the Peace Shell/Rose! Often parents come in expecting not to be heard and are nervous because they're worried about their child. **Reflective listening is your greatest tool** to giving the parent what they need so that you can work on solutions together. They need to know you understand! Allow them to talk, open up, and express how they are feeling, and what their fears may be. Probe with open-ended questions and rephrase their concerns. Remember, that parents are seeking to be understood.
5. Wrap-up with clarification and follow-up – At the end of the meeting review what the plan is and set a time and plan for a check-in. For instance, "So, we'll be \_\_\_\_\_ to insure that Frank is \_\_\_\_\_. I'll call you at the end of next week to let you know how things are going in the classroom, and find out how things are going at home. Let's also get back together in three weeks to check-in face to face."

### **Strategies to Facilitate Open and Productive Parent/Teacher Communication**

1. Focus on win-win solution. Use *Positive Discipline* when possible as a "third party" source of information.
2. Listen, listen, listen – not always easy to do. Use reflective listening to check for understanding.
3. Prepare, observe, and know the child/issue.
4. Take some notes before the meeting – what do you want to find out or what do you want to communicate.
5. Be positive – focus on solutions, positive attributes, and avoid getting stuck in the problem.
6. Discuss observations not motives or diagnosis (avoid too much interpretation of observations). When attempting to interpret a behavior, ask questions and share observations using words like: *appears, shows, exhibits, demonstrates, etc.*
7. Check for clarity.
8. Identify parents in your classroom who need more attention, and tend to have more "emergencies" (or drama). Being pro-active and giving them positive attention and ongoing communication will save lots of worry and headache.
9. Keeps communication ongoing throughout the year. Picking up the phone for a quick conversation or letting a parent know something that's gone well will help you build a cooperative relationship with your parents, and they will be much more open to suggestions and problems/issues when they arise.

### **Pitfalls to Open and Productive Communication**

1. "Hallside Conferences" – you can't unsay something!

2. Advice giving.
3. Defending yourself (see reflective listening).
4. Making judgments, even if said kindly (“inappropriate”, “disrespectful”, etc.).
5. Diagnosing or over-interpreting observations.
6. Comparing children to others.
7. Reactive vs. Proactive communication.
8. Discussing a problem without addressing the plan/solution.
9. Assigning motives, “I think she’s doing this because...”
10. Use of language that may convey judgment: *appropriate, inappropriate, good, bad, weak, slow, bright, intelligent, etc* .Implementing a plan without clear expectations and follow-up.
11. Infrequent communication.