



NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might be facing the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of children’s potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

Topic for this issue: “The Parent/Teacher Conference”

A Teacher’s View

1. I began my teaching career just over four months ago, and while I am confident in my curriculum delivery, student evaluation, and teaching style I am still apprehensive about the upcoming Parent/Teacher conferences. I’m only 22 years old and I’ll have to sit across from individuals who are older and most likely wiser than me. Plus, they know their children better than I do. How can I manage the important discussions I need to have with the nervousness that I feel?

2. An email arrived this morning from a parent of a student I have been having difficulty with since the start of the year. We have corresponded on the phone and through email but now a face to face meeting is warranted. I’m hoping that we can get to the bottom of her child’s multiple issues. I just want to be prepared to offer some strategies for improvement and focus on the positive characteristics of the student. I think it may make a difference.

A Parent’s View

Having four children and countless parent/teacher conferences under my belt, I thought I finally had the swing of them. In some respects I do: The teacher gives an update; my wife and I respond to the update and ask questions; then we wrap things up until the next meeting. This system is not working, however, for our fifth child. As a Kindergartener, he is not only reading well above grade level, but also asking thoughtful questions about what he reads and making out-of-the-box connections. He loves engineering and plays with construction materials of all kinds, frequently designing innovative structures. Because he does what is asked of him in class and is meeting benchmarks, his teacher cheerfully remarked that he is doing well and on target for the end of Kindergarten goals. When we pointed out his advanced reading and building skills, she simply noted that she has other readers and builders, and remarked on what a kind, polite boy he is in class. How can we best communicate that he has special needs that deserve to be met?

Opportunities exist throughout the year for teachers and parents to confer. Phone calls, e-mails, and notes all represent communication between the two places where children spend most of their time: school and home. Additionally, every so often, teachers and parents have the opportunity to engage in a face-to-face meeting. However, the simple mention of a conference can elicit a variety of strong feelings in both parties. Parent/Teacher conferences differ greatly depending on the student, the parent(s), the teacher and the issues at hand, but they offer one of the best opportunities to create a school/home plan to help students succeed.

George Bernard Shaw said, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” It is best to go into the process with a flexible plan. Before the meeting organize your thoughts into notes of points you wish to share and questions you wish to ask. This will allow you to go with the flow of conversation, yet still cover your key concerns.

Sometimes, an unexpected, larger issue emerges for which you are unprepared. If this happens and you are asked for a response, you may wish to listen carefully, pose clarifying questions, and then ask for time to reflect on the matter. If you do so, make sure you then set a time and method to follow-up with your response, whether that is a phone call, another meeting, or reaching out to others (advocates, administrators, counselors, etc.).



1. Getting Personal

AT SCHOOL

- Conferences present the opportunity to share personalized information about a student from the teacher perspective. Some of the best insights about a child stem from observations and interactions during the school day. It is important to focus on the student's social interactions, listening, questioning, involvement in class discussion, as well as his or her respect, enthusiasm and excitement. In this way a picture of the whole child comes into focus.
- All too often, the parents of a child who is doing exceedingly well feel that there is no need for a conference. Equally welcome both the parents of the students who are succeeding, and those with students in need of assistance. It is important to praise the efforts of those doing well.
- Conferences can also be a time to learn more about the student's interests. For instance, a parent can share with you information about activities and clubs that their child participates in outside of school. There can be discussions about what books they enjoy, trips they like to go on, etc.

AT HOME

- It can be the case that what a parent sees at home is not what a child demonstrates at school. Perhaps the child is only asked to do grade level tasks at school, providing no opportunity to show advanced capability. However, it could also be that the child hides his talents in order to fit in with others or has disengaged due to social/emotional considerations. To support your concerns at the parent/teacher conference, bring in specific, concrete examples as evidence of what you are seeing at home. Simply saying, "he is reading chapter books," or "he loves to construct interesting buildings," does not provide as much helpful evidence as, say, questions or connections your child made in response to an advanced text or photographs of detailed, imaginative structures he has built.

2. Focus on the Positive

AT SCHOOL

- Start the discussion of schoolwork by focusing on areas of success, commenting on effort, creativity, class participation, evidence of understanding, group participation, homework, and enthusiasm. Save the areas warranting improvement and intervention until later in the meeting. Save the specifics relating to quiz/test scores until later in the meeting as well. In this way you will be able to present a variety of information, rather than summing up a whole child with a numbered average. Parents will be grateful!
- In the case of a student who is having difficulty on all fronts, focus on particular strategies that can take place at home and school to remediate the situation. Being prepared and anticipating the inevitable "what should we do?" questions not only saves time, but lets the parent know you are involved and invested.

AT HOME

- A great way to advocate for your child's needs in a conference is by asking thoughtful questions in relation to evidence.
 - Does my child finish work quickly and well, or does it require think-time and effort?*
 - Is a pre-assessment administered before beginning a new unit? If so, and my child demonstrates mastery on what is about to be taught, what will he do instead?*
 - Do the standardized assessments only measure up to grade level, or beyond?*
 - If my child has already met grade-level benchmarks, what are your goals for him for the remainder of the year?*
 - Is there a chance to engage in higher order thinking and creative problem solving in the curriculum?*
- In asking or answering questions, keep the focus on evidence and use a positive approach to foster cooperation on behalf of your child.

3. Continual Communication

AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

- The Parent/Teacher conference should not be the only contact during the school year. Leave the meeting with a promise to be in touch, by either side. Sometimes leaving the door open is enough for comfort. Remember, parents want to know how their children are doing and teachers want to be sure that students enjoy the time spent at school and at home with homework.
- In this digital world, communication can exist in a variety of ways. Some parents prefer using e-mail. Others like an occasional phone call, and still there are others who need to meet face-to-face for follow-up meetings. Discuss what will work best for both of you. Remember to be aware of student privacy in email or other electronic communication. Email is a public, legal document and sometimes a call or meeting is more appropriate.
- Be mindful of your timing. While it is tempting to want to catch someone when you see them (morning drop-off, afternoon pick-up, in the hall, out in the community, etc.), that is not an effective time for extensive communication. Instead, you can use it as a chance to indicate your interest in setting a time to speak.
- Whether you are the parent or the educator, know when to seek support. Sometimes an administrator, counselor, specialist, etc. - can foster more effective communication if you are at an impasse.

There are many resources available to you. Here is a small sampling of our favorites.

For Parents:

- Arlene DeVries' 1996 *Parenting for High Potential* article, "How to Make Parent/Teacher Conferences Worthwhile and Productive," is a "must read." In it she provides the ten most important questions to consider.
<http://nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1109>
- Duke University's Talent Identification Program offers more tips for parents on how to have a successful Parent/Teacher conference.
<http://tip.duke.edu/node/700>

For Teachers:

- Dr. James Delisle offers outstanding easy to follow tips for teachers and parents.
http://giftedkidstamaki-parents.wikispaces.com/file/view/Successful_Parent_Teacher_conferences.pdf
- Edutopia offers 5 great resources, including templates and handouts, for a successful Parent/Teacher conference. There are also associated links on the webpage for further exploration.
<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/parent-teacher-conference-resources-matt-davis>

"When you become a parent, or a teacher, you turn into a manager of this whole system. You become the person controlling the bubble of innocence around a child, regulating it."

-- Kazuo Ishiguro

Please print or share this via email with other parents and teachers in your community who may find this useful. Find more Connecting for High Potential at www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx

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