

Making the Best of Parent-Teacher Conferences: Eight Steps to Success for Parents

1. Remember the F-word: Focus. The aim of a parent-teacher Conference is for adults to build a mutually respectful alliance that will support a child's (sometimes difficult) journey through school. Kids thrive when they feel the adults in their lives see them in the same way. Parents and teachers should try to use the precious minutes of a conference to reach agreement about a child's strengths and challenges – and how to respond to each.
2. Be there. We expect our children to attend school every day. Research shows that they do better academically when both parents attend conferences and PTA meetings. A parental no-show sends a message to a child that maybe school isn't such a high priority, or perhaps that they aren't.
3. Leave your old school baggage at home. We all have memories of teachers and classes that made us miserable. It's important to set those aside and approach your child's teacher as a peer and partner. Assume a teacher wants to see your child succeed in school and life – just as you do. The respect you show a teacher is contagious and will find its way back to your child.
4. Use a report card as a tool, not a centerpiece. Turn any review of grades or other evaluations into an opportunity to ask what's working and what's not for your child, and the teacher's observations. Do not dwell on the grade itself and do not attempt to pressure a teacher to change a grade, especially at a conference. (If there is a real issue of injustice, it should take it to an administrator.) Remember, an "A" student won't die from getting a "B", nor will a "B" student suffer irreparable harm from getting a "C." Most of us learned lessons about life and about ourselves from getting lower grades than we wished.
5. Share insider information: Tell the teacher what you know about your child as a learner. You've seen plenty. You know what motivates your child, what has worked with teachers in the past, and what your child loves and hates about school. Also, tell your child's teacher about your hopes and fears for your child. All parents worry from the day they send their children off to Kindergarten, and on through high school. No parent ever has all the information they'd like to have about their child's school life. When you articulate your concerns and wishes, it alerts a teacher to something important about your child's life. That information can help a teacher fine-tune instruction or interactions to be more effective for your child.
6. Ask about the things that matter most. Go beyond grades. Ask about your child as a citizen of the classroom. Is he or she respectful of adults and other students? Not every child is going to be a brilliant student, but brilliant or not, you want your child to be a loving,

respectful, productive citizen who can live in community with others. Ask about your child's social life in school. Ask whether she or he has friends, is part of a group, knows how to socialize and work respectfully with other children. How your child functions with other people is going to make a big difference in later life.

7. Ask what you can do. Ask how you can support your child's success without micromanaging or rescuing him or her from mistakes and the valuable lessons they offer.

8. Trust your child's development. Try relaxing a little and having faith in your child in your child's journey through school.

Michael Thompson, Ph.D., is the author of "The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child to Achieve Success in School and in Life," and co-author of "Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Lives of Boys."