

From the New York State United Teachers:

Ten things you should never do in a parent-teacher conference... and ten strategies for success. *Veteran teachers share their dos and don'ts.*

New teachers are understandably nervous about their first parent-teacher conferences. So much to say, so little time! Even veteran teachers still may have qualms about upcoming parent-teacher conferences. To help you prepare, New York Teacher interviewed experienced classroom teachers, including master teachers who offer courses in the union's Effective Teaching Program. Here are their thoughts on 10 common mistakes, along with ways to have a successful session:

1. **DON'T** summon parents into the classroom and direct them to sit in front of your desk. Parents may be anxious or fearful about meeting with you, a key authority figure in their child's life. If you distance yourself, put them in a subservient position, or appear to condescend, you're undercutting the chances of a successful meeting.

DO always greet parents warmly at the door. Plan and create an inviting environment. Accompany parents to a place where you can sit together and converse comfortably. Some teachers opt to group chairs in a semi-circle near a table or other surface where they can share student work. (And make sure the chairs are big enough!)

2. **DON'T** begin by focusing on the student's problem. An Albany-area teacher recalled a parent-teacher conference when she was on the receiving end as the mother of a second-grader. "The teacher's first words to me were: 'Well, she's very messy.' She went on in detail about my daughter's messy desk, her writing - even her hair - until I wanted to cry. There was nothing about my daughter's wonderful sense of humor or her creativity. I wondered if she even liked my daughter." The students in your class are all somebody's beloved child, and parents come in hopes that you can see their child's best.

DO start the meeting by showing that you care and know something positive about their child. Summarize the student's strengths before raising problems. Of course, if you have a heavy student load, it can be hard to get to know each child well by early fall conferences. Three hints:

Keep an index card on each child and jot down observations that you can later share ("Alex was telling us in class the other day about his winning home run." "Tamira has a wonderful way of making friends with children who are new or feeling shy.")

If you have access to a camera, take photos of your students to use on a seating chart or to jog your memory before parent-teacher conferences.

As a getting-to-know-you assignment, ask students to write about their interests, both academically and outside of school.

3. DON'T dress too casually for the occasion. Some people think casual attire will make the parent feel more comfortable, but experts say that can backfire. You are a professional, and professional attire communicates that message. DO dress in a way that reflects the meeting's importance and your respect for the parent(s) and their child.

4. DON'T wing it.

DO rehearse what you want to say. Practice warm-up introductions, prepare an outline, prepare a checklist of areas to cover. Plan how you will keep track of time.

5. DON'T rely on verbal descriptions of the student's work and progress. Avoid subjective statements such as "His conduct is bad." Instead, cite specifics such as: "She talks out of turn," or "He won't sit in his seat."

DO use materials from the student's work folder. It is much easier to demonstrate progress or show parents concretely what a student needs to do to improve.

6. DON'T point a finger at parents or place blame. DO use positive, nonverbal behavior. Listen reflectively. Maintain good eye contact. Lean in when you speak or make suggestions. In your suggestions, acknowledge the stresses of parenting: "I know it can be difficult to find the time to read with your child every night. Try asking your child to read aloud while you're preparing dinner."

7. DON'T dominate a meeting so that parents can't ask questions or make suggestions. There's so much you want to tell them, but think hard about how much information parents need. Parents are most interested in specifics related to their child, and will almost always have concerns or questions of their own. Allow for occasional silences, which give the parent an opportunity to ask a question or voice a concern.

DO engage parents in planning best ways to help their child. Seek their suggestions first.

8. DON'T send them home empty-handed. DO give parents something to take home with them. They can review material more completely and refer back to it during the year. This can also save time at the conference. If you offer a handout on curriculum, for example, you won't need to go over it verbally in exhaustive detail.

9. DON'T use educational jargon or acronyms. This can have a chilling effect on parent communications. Some common buzzwords that you know but parents might not: whole language, RTI, SATs, ACTs, IEPs, paradigm, inclusion, cooperative learning.

DO use clear and descriptive terms. Adjust conference to the parents' needs and levels of understanding. If you must use a buzzword, get in the habit of using parenthetical definitions: "This year we will use math manipulatives, which are objects, like this set of marbles, that let kids touch and experience what is meant by mathematical symbols."

10. DON'T end the meeting on a negative note by recounting student's problem. DO end positively, with a proactive message of hope. Set goals. Review how parents can help. Mention plans for follow-through. Let parents know their support is needed and appreciated. If appropriate, send a follow-up letter.