

Tips for Conducting a Successful Parent Conference in School-Age Programs¹

Introduction

Thorough preparation and effective communication skills provide the foundation for successful conferences with parents. Here are some tips for setting the stage for a positive meeting and conducting parent conferences with confidence from beginning to end.

Get Ready

- Set goals for the conference – decide what you want parents to know, what you want to learn from parents, what understandings you want to reach. Reflect on what goals the parent(s) may have for the conference.
- Gather important documentation and materials you want to share, including child *Portfolio* items.
- Decide whether or not the child will participate in the conference; involvement in a parent conference is especially appropriate for older school-age children.
- Contact the parent(s) to determine what time and day would be most convenient. Ask parents if they have particular questions or concerns they would like you to address.
- Select an appropriate, comfortable location for the conference and plan ways to create a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere using comfortable chairs set up in an informal arrangement. Avoid an intimidating set up where you are separated from parents by a formal desk or table.
- Talk with colleagues about the conference. If there will be difficult issues or questions to discuss, ask a colleague to help you prepare for meeting the challenge by participating in a role play where your colleague takes the position of the parent. Role play rehearsals help staff practice articulating important thoughts clearly and effectively.

¹ Excerpted from Arkansas School-Age Credential Modules. Reprinted with permission from the SD Department of Social Services, Office of Child Care Services and Roberta L. Newman, author – OST Move to Quality Initiative Certification Training Curriculum (2004). Credential Modules 12: *Conducting Observations and Sharing Information with Parents*. Pages 41 – 42.

- Make a commitment to having a *learning conversation*² with parents – a conversation where you work hard to help parents understand what you have to share and also strive to understand parents’ thoughts, ideas, and concerns.

Conduct the Conference

- Greet parents with a friendly smile. Take a few minutes for informal conversation before beginning the conference; let parents know you are interested in getting to know them and working with them are partners. This helps everyone relax and sets a positive tone.
- Begin the conference by sharing positive feedback and information. Let parents know that you are pleased to have the opportunity to explain the program’s goals and philosophy and how you and the program are working to support their child’s positive growth and development.
- Present child *Portfolios* and other documentation clearly and objectively. When sharing information, avoid making statements that imply judgment, blame, or criticism. Invite parents to ask questions and make observations about what you have to share. If the child is involved in the conference, invite the child to describe sample items from his/her work and play, photographs, and any other materials to be shared.
- While talking with parents, use active listening techniques to promote two-way feedback and good communication.
 - Use open-ended questions to encourage parents to share their own perspectives. (“What are Josie’s favorite things to do on weekends?”)
 - Listen carefully to what parents have to say. To promote understanding, give parents feedback by paraphrasing their comments, asking clarifying questions, and summarizing what you think they have said. (“It sounds like you are concerned that Jose spends too much time playing basketball in the program every day. Am I right?”)

² See Stone, Douglas; Patton, Bruce; and Heen, Sheila of The Harvard Negotiation Project. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York, NY: Viking, Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999.

- Tune in to facial expressions and body language that may reveal parents are uncomfortable, upset, confused, or angry. Look for ways to verify your perceptions of parent discomfort and exhibit empathy and concern if appropriate.
- Take notes during the conference. Let parents know this will help you follow up on important issues discussed.
- If difficult issues are discussed, be sure to acknowledge and reflect parents' feelings and opinions. ("I understand it's upsetting to hear that Clay often loses his temper and starts fights when he's called out during baseball games.") Then use the following techniques to promote good problem solving:
 - Ask and invite questions to clarify information and perspectives. ("How does Clay handle his anger when he's upset at home or with friends in the neighborhood?" "Do you have suggestions we could try to help Clay stay calm when things don't go his way?")
 - Suggest multiple solutions to challenging problems. If there doesn't seem to be an apparent immediate solution, assure parents that you will continue to look into the issues and ask them to do the same, if appropriate.
 - Identify common concerns and goals related to the issue(s).
 - Summarize observations and opinions that are shared.
 - Remember that it can be very difficult for parents to hear about problems children are having. They need time to explore and digest issues and concerns before they can accept problems and participate in working toward solutions.
- At the end of the conference, summarize what was shared, what problems may still exist, what agreements have been made, and how staff and parents can work together to support the child in the future. Close the conference with positive comments about your experience and relationship with the child.