

per closure plastic bags, one for each day that the class meets. On the first set, write the day of the week on each bag using a permanent marker (for example, “This Monday,” “This Tuesday,” and so on). On the second set, write the following words: “Next Monday,” “Next Tuesday,” and so on.

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## Tips on Parent-Teacher Relations

### Materials

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None needed

### What to do

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1. Establish **rapport** with parents and families. Aside from the typical home visit, communicate to families all year that you value them and their role in the life and education of their child. Learn the names of siblings, pets, or other people living with the children. Without presenting yourself as being nosy, express interest in or concern about events going on in the child’s home. Encourage the children to make cards or gifts for birthdays, Mother’s day, Father’s day, relatives who are sick, and so on.
2. Maintain **communication** throughout the year with letters, notes, phone calls, and brief exchanges whenever possible. If you even consider whether or not an incident—positive or negative—warrants a phone call, DO IT! Parents appreciate your effort in making the call ten times more than the actual information you convey.
3. Make an extra effort for a **new** family in the area or a new child to the class. Welcome them to visit the school, call you with questions, speak to previous parents, and so on.
4. Utilize parents and families as a **resource**. Ask for input or advice, invite them to join you on field trips or special events, invite them to share a talent with the class, or invite a sibling to read to the class. Most parents are happy to be a part of their child’s school experience.
5. Familiarize families with your **goals** and daily schedule for the classroom early in the year so they know your priorities and are comfortable with the program.

Reasons for a Parent Conference (from the least to most challenging to conduct)

- **Regularly Scheduled, Typical Conference:** This is a parental briefing (usually twice a year) to update them on their child's good status.
- **Regularly Scheduled, Some Concerns:** The agenda will include some issues you or the parents feel warrant discussion.
- **Specially Scheduled:** This is requested by you or the parent to discuss a specific problem, concern, or event.

Tips on Conducting the Parent Conference

- Design the setting so that the parents will be as comfortable as possible. Because they are on **your** turf, most parents are much more nervous than teachers realize. If possible, consider playing quiet relaxing music in the background, and provide comfortable chairs in a private space where you don't anticipate any interruptions.
- Begin the conference with a casual opening, such as, "Do you have any specific questions or concerns you'd like to start with?" If they have something on their minds, it will be difficult for them to listen until they have expressed their thoughts. Furthermore, you can often get an idea of what the parents view as the "agenda" for the meeting by giving them this first opening. They may simply want to hear your report so they can relax, or they may have a burning issue to raise.
- Do not come across as the "expert" on their child—**parents** are the experts on their children. The parents know their child better than anyone, so be cautious. If appropriate, you may ask them what they do at home regarding certain issues, or if they have suggestions for you that may work better than your current methods. Many parents view the teacher as the professional expert, but you'll be much more respected if you're candid about what you know and think without attempting to come across as a highly confident leading authority on child development. Don't be ashamed to say you're not sure or you don't have an answer. You can always get more information, either by conducting some observations of their child or seeking input from other staff members. Then get back to them at a later date.
- In addition to being candid about what you don't know, be assertive enough to be candid about what you **do** know or feel. Your wording, however, is crucial to your presentation and to parental reaction. First, be sure to include some positive aspects about a child with whom you're concerned. Think through what you need to say, practice how you say it, and imagine how you would react if **you** were the parent. Whenever possible, try to phrase things in a positive form, such as, "We've been encouraging Sue to share," or "We've been working hard on sharing" rather than, "Sue is not a very good at sharing." Strive for

honesty, but do so in a professional and diplomatic manner.

- Do not breach the confidentiality of other families. You will often be asked questions about other children and families in the classroom. Be cautious about what information you feel is appropriate to share. Word travels fast in circles of parents!
- Provide parents with suggested resources, book lists, or articles that you think may be relevant. Again, be cautious not to communicate that they need to educate themselves, but simply that they may be interested.
- Be sure to document the conference. Make note of issues that are raised, so that at a future date you may be able to revisit the conference notes, provide follow-up information if needed, brief new staff, and continue or update the discussion at your next conference.
- Gather as much information as possible before conducting the conference. It's handy to consolidate all the information onto one sheet of paper, with the exception of any assessment tools or samples of artwork. Be sure to include a few specific stories, keep anecdotal notes all year in preparation for conferences, and ask all other staff for their insight before conducting the conference. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of having more than one staff member attend the conference. On one hand, you may feel more comfortable and may have more information simply because there's more than one teacher present. On the other hand, however, parents often feel **more** uncomfortable and less apt to share at an emotional level if more than one teacher conducts the conference.
- Allow some flexibility in scheduling conferences in order to accommodate the needs of all who are interested in attending. Your time is valuable too, so inform parents ahead of time as to how long you expect conferences to last (usually about thirty minutes). Provide some type of written or verbal reminder of the time and date of the conference.
- Encourage the parents to maintain the lines of communication, keep you informed of how they're feeling, and schedule another conference soon if they feel an issue needs to be discussed further. Express appreciation for their time and participation!

 Shirley R. Salach, Northwood, NH