

# Parent-teacher meetings



## Handy hints and tips for parent-teacher meetings

### Some tips for parent-teacher meetings

Parent-teacher meetings, both formal and informal, are a regular feature of primary school life. Newly qualified teachers are understandably nervous about their first set of parent-teacher meetings. Even many experienced teachers find these meetings daunting and exhaustive!

Evidence shows that many newly qualified teachers say that their initial teacher education does not prepare them adequately for this part of the job. The following may be of help.

### Some tips for parent-teacher meetings

1. Always begin the meeting with something positive about the child. You can then work your way around to areas that need to be improved. You might like to adopt the 'sandwich' approach: Start with something positive, continue with the things that the child needs to work on and finish with something positive.
2. Be honest and truthful. Parents should be given accurate information on their child, but at the same time, be careful how you phrase your comments. It's very easy to say something innocently, only for it to be interpreted as a criticism of parenting skills.
3. Have some specific suggestions ready for the parent if they ask 'What can I do to help at home?' If they don't ask, you may have to make the suggestion yourself.
4. Listen to what parents have to say.
5. Be prepared! Have available plenty of work samples, especially if you are going to talk about an area of weakness.
6. Agree upon specific targets for improvement or changed behaviour.

### The difficult parent-teacher meeting

It happens to all teachers at some stage in their careers and not just to someone in their first year in the job: In the middle of a string of parent-teacher meetings that are going really well, you have one that tests you to the limit. In spite of all your preparation for the meeting, your professionalism and even your patience can be sorely tested.

Often the meeting concerns a child who is struggling with a particular difficulty, such as disruptive behaviour, inability to stay on task with class work or regular failure to complete homework. You may even need, in the context of special needs, to raise issues such as referral for assessment or a medical examination. You can also find yourself faced with unexpected parental concerns or even complaints.

There is no single answer to any of these situations, but, if in doubt, try any or all of the following:

- Prepare for the meeting.
- Keep a record of difficulties in school. It is important that if you need to raise difficult issues that you have evidence to support what you say.

Good advice would be to keep a record of:

- unusual or disruptive behaviour in class or in the playground

- particular observations of learning and/or test results
- incomplete or missing learning assignments
- all communications with home.

Break bad news prior to the meeting. Parents should not be shocked by news at a parent-teacher meeting for which they are totally unprepared. It is best to let parents know of your concerns as early as possible, through notes home or a comment in the child's journal. Sometimes there will be situations where a teacher will decide to raise difficult issues in the face-to-face setting of a meeting, rather than sending notes home. But, in general, ongoing communication with home leads to better parent-teacher meetings.

Get help from other teachers. If you feel that for a particular meeting you need the help of the principal, the child's previous teacher, learning support teacher, resource teacher or other colleague, then don't be afraid to ask. You may even want one of them to sit in for a particular meeting. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a mark of professionalism. Other professionals consult—why shouldn't you!

Think of possible solutions before the meeting—you should have tried to find a solution to the problem. You should keep a record of all of the possibilities and be able to inform parents of what worked in the past and what didn't work.

### During and after parent-teacher meetings

Take notes of the key points of each meeting. This will avoid the 'I think she said ...' confusion after an afternoon of meetings. Have potential solutions in mind for problems and offer concrete suggestions that the parents can use at home. Don't forget the follow-up. Even if you think the meeting has solved the problem or that it will be dealt with by another person, follow it up. This will give you an opportunity to make sure that something, like a medical examination, actually happened. It will show that you are genuinely concerned for the child, and parents will thank you and remember your support.

### Resources for parent-teacher meetings

It is worthwhile searching for existing materials and templates that may help with your preparations for parent-teacher meetings. Find out if your school has any existing materials. Search the topic of parent-teacher meetings on the Internet. Check your state education department's website for any existing resources or suggestions. For example, the Victorian Education Department suggests using the Rubric Assessment Tool as an available resource for use at parent-teacher meetings. Other websites may offer testimonials from teachers that share and offer advice of their experiences with parent-teacher meetings. Finally, you can always ask your colleagues, who may have had many more years of experience, for their advice.

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