PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

Parents as Partners in Education
Families and Schools Working Together

Berger Riojas-Cortez

Eight Edition

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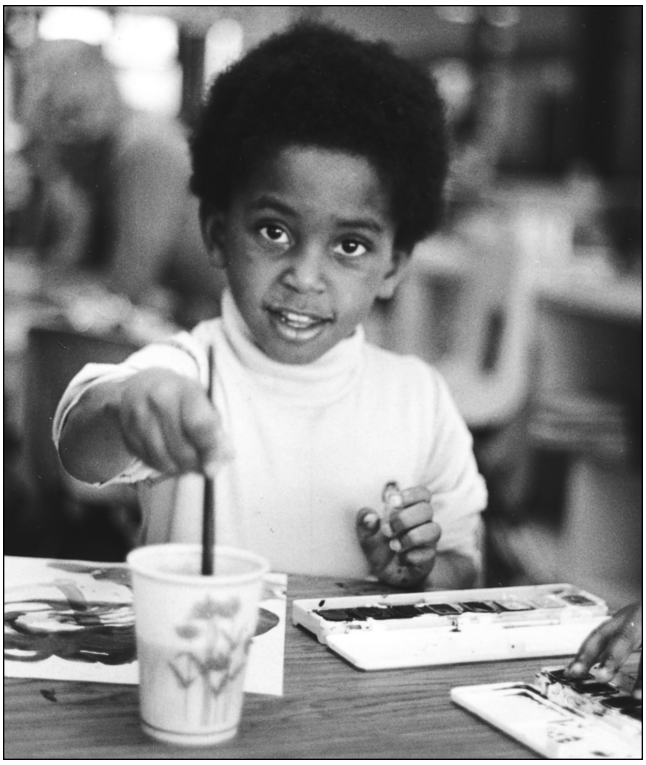
will talk about at conference time and what they will put in the portfolio to share with the parents. These conferences involve more planning with the student than the traditional conference. At conference time, the student leads the discussion of what has been accomplished, what needs to be worked on, and what the future goals are. The concept behind this conference is similar to the Individualized Education Plan in that plans are made for individual students, but the pupil is more responsible for determining the objectives and goals.

Some schools organize student–teacher–parent conferences into a participatory situation with four sets of parents and children meeting at the same time. Each set discusses the child's achievements and goals. The teacher enters the discussion whenever a parent or child has questions or comments or when the teacher has a reason for participating in their conference. At some point during the session, each set of parents and students include the teacher in their discussion.

Different issues arise with this change in the format of the conference. With this type of conference, the child and parents are responsible for its success. Teachers must have good organizational and leadership skills so that the student has established goals and direction before the conference. During the conference, the teacher will not have the opportunity to monopolize the discussion, but the student and parents must take the teacher's responsibility seriously if the conference is to be successful.



To promote the well-being of this child, conferences need to be cooperative with the teacher and sensitive to the parents' feelings.
provided by Eugenia Hepworth Berger

Congruent Expectations

Conferences go more smoothly when the teacher and parents have congruent expectations about the performance of the child. If the child is an excellent student and both teacher and parents are pleased with the evaluation, it is easy to accept the report. If the child has a disability and both teacher and parents recognize the disabling condition, they can work together to plan an appropriate program for the child.

Too often the outward signs of good marks and pleasant personality and behavior fail to uncover how the child feels and whether the teacher can make the educational experience more satisfying and challenging. In working with a successful student, parents and teachers may fail to communicate about the child's potential and the need to have a good self-concept. Special interests of the child, friends, reading preferences, experiences, and needs are important for the teacher to know. Bring the child into the decision-making process. Together, the parents, teacher, and child can plan activities that will encourage growth and improve self-concept. Let these parents and children communicate too.

Situation. Denzel is one of those students every teacher loves to have in class. He is enthusiastic, stays on task, completes his work, and never causes a disturbance. A quiet, attractive boy with his long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, Denzel always does the correct thing. He is polite to everyone and avoids fighting or taking sides when others are arguing.

Mrs. Jackson relaxed in her chair as she prepared for the conference with Denzel's parents. "What an easy conference," she thought. "I really don't have to talk with Denzel's parents because he fits into the routine, is well adjusted, and is progressing nicely." As she looked up, she saw Mrs. Johnson, Denzel's mother, standing outside the door. She rose to greet her and led her into the room, offering her a chair. As they sat side by side, Mrs. Jackson remarked, "It is really good to see you, Mrs. Johnson. I enjoy

Denzel in class, and he is having no problems. Here are some of the papers I have collected. You can see that he completes his work and does a good job. I wish all my students were like Denzel."

After looking over the papers, Mrs. Johnson looked up and said, "It is nice not to have to worry about Denzel. I wish that Tanisha were as conscientious. I'm dreading that conference. I've really enjoyed having you be Denzel's teacher."

Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Johnson glanced at Denzel's papers and leaned back, satisfied.

"Look at the time; we finished in 10 minutes," Mrs. Johnson said. "You have five minutes to spare. Have a good day."

"You have a good day, too," the teacher said as she escorted Denzel's mother to the door.

1. What did the conference accomplish?
2. Could there be a problem? How does Denzel feel?
3. What should Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Jackson consider as they think about Denzel? Does Denzel feel good about himself? Is he a class leader? Does he get along well with the other children?
4. What does he enjoy doing the most? Is there anything that might make his school career even better?

Situation. "Welcome, Mrs. García. We are so pleased to have Jaime with us this year," said Jaime's preschool teacher, Mr. López, greeting the boy's mother.

"He's just so happy to be here," Mrs. García said. "He was a little anxious at first, but you have made him feel welcome."

"I'm pleased Jaime is beginning to feel comfortable. I noticed that he is interacting with the other children more—he played on the jungle gym today. His coordination is improving, and he is much more outgoing than he was three weeks ago when he first started. Let me share some of his paintings and some stories we have recorded. He illustrated this story. Look at the detail. What a great imagination!"

Mr. López and Mrs. García looked at the papers together.

"What does Jaime enjoy doing at home?" Mr. López asked.

"He becomes very involved in building with his LEGO set," Mrs. García said. "He loves to have us read him stories. We share stories together each afternoon and in the evening before he goes to bed. I try to limit his television viewing, though he does get to watch *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers* occasionally."

"Does he have any children to play with in his neighborhood?"

"There are no 4-year-old children, but Beto, who lives down the street, is in kindergarten, and he plays with Jaime about three times a week."

"I'll bet they play hard too!" Mr. López said and then turned to the current class activities.

"Our theme for this month is the sun," she said. "We're studying about shadows, reflections, and how the sun helps flowers to grow. These are some of the collages we have made. As you can tell, a lot of the pictures were made by tearing the paper, but we are also working on cutting. Let me show you how we are having him hold his scissors. Do you think you can help him with this at home? I'll be sending home activity suggestions and notes that let you know what we are doing at school."

"Thank you," Mrs. García said. "That way, I'll be more able to help Jaime at home if he needs it."

"Why don't you go into the observation room and watch him for a while before you leave," Mr. López said. "Don't forget that you can observe anytime, and you might want to volunteer to help in the preschool."

Jaime's mother looked surprised and answered, "I hadn't thought about that, but it might be enjoyable.

"What haven't we covered? Do you have any questions that we neglected to discuss?" Mr. López asked. After a pause, he added, "It was nice to be able to share with you about Jaime's experiences here. Be sure to call if you have any concerns or if something is happening at home that we should know about. We want to keep in touch."

"I enjoyed talking with you. I can see why Jaime enjoys school so much. Gracias, thank you. Goodbye," Jaime's mother said as she walked toward the observation room.

1. What was effective in this conference?
2. Did the mother get to share enough?
3. What would you suggest to make it better?

Situation. Ashley, a charming 7-year-old with big brown eyes, curly black hair, and a sparkling smile, seemed older and larger than most children her age. When she came into the classroom before school started, she always went up to Miss Allen and told her about what was going on in her neighborhood. The stories were usually about fights, guns, holdups,

gangs, and anger. There was reason to believe that she was relating what she had actually witnessed or heard. Ashley lived with her father; her mother had disappeared several years earlier and, although Ashley knew she was still alive, she had no contact with her. At one period in Ashley's life, she lived in a cardboard box. Life had not been easy for this child, who had experienced much change and abuse.

When school started, Ashley was unable to stay on task. She seemed to crave attention, whether it be from sharing, describing a story in the author's chair, or acting out. Her primary method of obtaining attention was through acting out. She spoke out of turn, took pencils from other children, and shoved and pushed. Because she was large for her age, she could hurt another child with a shove.

One day, Ashley threatened an aide working in the classroom by suggesting that her older sister would beat her up. Time-out did not help because she did not oblige, but she did seem to be threatened by a trip to the office. The school year was in its fourth week and there had been no parent–teacher conferences.

1. What would you suggest the teacher do to obtain parent collaboration?
2. Do you believe that parent–school cooperation is feasible? Why or why not?
3. What could you do as a teacher to help Ashley become a productive child?
4. Would a conference that included Ashley and her father be a good idea? Why or why not?
5. If you believed that Ashley comes from an abusive home, would you change your approach? Why or why not?

Preconference Preparation

Before the day of the conference and throughout the reporting period, you, as the teacher, prepare by getting to know the student, conducting ongoing assessment, and developing a portfolio. Before the conference, review the child's history, cultural background, family situation, successes, and concerns. Depending on which records are kept by the school, try to learn about the student's educational experience. Review the papers in the current portfolio so that you can know the student's growth or delay that has occurred under your guidance.

Try to have three- to five-minute individual conferences with each child to talk about what you are going to cover in the conference. Determine if there is anything that the child would like to see included, thus providing you insight into the child's thoughts. If you recognize the child's thoughts as important, you increase the child's respect for self and belief in the teacher or a caring ally.

The Day of the Conference

Relax before conference time. It is important to establish a cooperative climate. If the teacher is relaxed and poised, parents will be able to relax too, and the climate for communication will be improved. Meyers and Pawlas (1989) recommend developing a form to use for record keeping for planning as well as keeping records for future conferences. The teacher is able to focus on one or two predetermined issues and keep records of the collaboration. Multiple concerns can be overwhelming; time does not allow all issues to be resolved. When determining the issues to be discussed, however, parents should have the option of helping determine the agenda. Perhaps they have a concern that is not known by the teacher. They can either share their concerns by sending back an information sheet suggesting what they would like to discuss, or during the conference the teacher can encourage them to bring up their concerns or comments.

Why do parents enter into parent–teacher conferences with apprehension? Some are worried because they want the best for their child but do not know how to achieve it. They are unsure of themselves in the discussion and might be threatened by jargon. The parent–teacher conference should be an opportunity for the exchange of ideas and information and a chance to support each other; both can enter into the conference with enthusiasm and confidence.

The Conference

Begin the conference in a relaxed, positive manner. During the conference, review your objectives, use effective communication skills, discuss concrete examples of work, and plan together.

Besides being adept at reflective listening, you need to listen intuitively to determine if parents have problems within their homes or are themselves emotionally immature. Such problems make it difficult for the child to have the home support needed for educational success. Remember that you, as the teacher, can gain a great deal of knowledge and understanding of the child from the parents and the conference is a good way to gain that knowledge.

When indicated, invite other professionals, such as the school's social worker or principal, to the conference to support and help the family and child. We want to learn more from the parents in order to understand the child's needs (Cannella, 2002).

Sandwich Approach. Use the sandwich approach for the conference (Manning, 1985). Start the conference with pleasant and positive items. If you have negative comments or concerns to be discussed, bring them up during the middle of the conference. Always end with a positive summary, spend time planning with parents, and make a pleasant comment about the child.

Clear Statement of Objectives. Some objectives may be universal; others will be specific for the individual conference. Use the following objectives as a guide:

1. To gain a team member (the parent) in the education of the child
2. To document the child's progress for the parent
3. To explain the educational program you are using as it relates to the individual child
4. To learn about the environment in which the child lives
5. To allow the parents to express feelings, questions, and concerns
6. To get a better understanding of the expectations the parent holds for the child
7. To set up a lasting network of communication among parent, teacher, and child
8. To establish cooperative goals for the education of the child

The Parent as Part of the Team. After you have made sure the room is comfortable, two-way communication will be uninterrupted, and you are ready to listen and be responsive to the parent, it is easy to recognize the parent as a part of the educational team. Parents arrive at conferences as experts on their children's history, hobbies, interests, likes and dislikes, friends, and experiences. Explain to the parents that all participants in the conference are members of a team looking at the progress of the child and working together to benefit the child. How can *we* help the child who is having a difficult time? How can *we* enrich the program for the child who is accelerated? How can *we* get the child to do the task at hand? How can *we* promote self-esteem? If the teacher and parents work as a team to answer these questions, the conference will be far more productive than if the teacher simply dictates answers to the parents. Here are some tips that will help parents feel they are part of the team:

- Review your file and know enough about the child before the parent arrives that the parent can tell you have taken a personal interest in the child's welfare.
- Know the parent's name. Do not assume that the child and parent have the same last name. Look in the record for the correct name.
- Ensure the privacy of the conference.
- Begin on a positive note. Start by praising an accomplishment of the child or a contribution the child has made to the class.
- Know the time limitations.
- Do not use terminology that may have meaning for you but not the parent.
- Do not refer to organizations, forms, tests, materials, or ideas by their initials or acronyms. Do not assume that everyone knows what the initials or acronyms mean.
- Have some questions about and show interest in the child.
- Remind parents that they may ask questions at any time and that you will be pleased to explain anything that is not clear.
- Keep on the subject: the child's schooling and development.
- Encourage the parents to contribute. Allow parents to talk for at least 50 percent of the time.
- Show that you understand the parent by checking periodically during the conference. For example, you might ask, "Would you agree with this?" or "Do you have suggestions to add about this?"
- Make note of an idea suggested by a parent, but do not get so involved in writing that you lose the flow of the conversation.
- Keep in mind the parents' cultural background and follow culturally appropriate rules.
- Use attentive behaviors—that is, lean forward, look interested, and nod when in agreement.
- Do not ignore a parent's question.
- Be honest yet tactful and sensitive to the parent's feelings.
- Base your discussion on objective observation and concrete examples of work.
- Deal in specifics rather than generalities whenever possible.

- Evaluate needs and select methods of remediating difficulties.
- Evaluate strengths and select methods of enriching those strengths.
- Plan educational goals together.
- Talk about how you have modified your teaching to meet the needs of the child.
- Clarify and summarize the discussion.
- Make plans to continue the dialogue.

Concrete Examples of Child's Work and Development

Both parent and teacher are interested in the child's accomplishments. By making objective observations of the child's classroom behavior with anecdotal notes collected throughout the reporting periods, the teacher documents the child's social as well as intellectual achievements. Anecdotal records of significant behaviors are especially valuable for conferences with parents of young children. Papers and tests may not be available, so the anecdotal records become tools for evaluating the child's social, intellectual, and physical progress. In the case of children with behavioral difficulties, it is also important to be able to cite specific incidents rather than vague generalizations about incidents. Keep anecdotal records in electronic files.

The accumulated examples of the child's work with a few words from the teacher also illustrate to parents what their child is doing. It is not necessary to state when a child has not progressed, for that will be obvious. If another child has made great progress, that too will be evident from the samples collected. Consider asking parents if they have come to the same conclusion as you when comparing early and subsequent papers.

Some teachers supplement papers and anecdotal records with videos of children in the classroom. Although time-consuming, a video report is enjoyable for parents and encourages interaction between parent and teacher on the child's classroom participation.

Bringing concrete examples to the conference illustrating the child's work may prevent a confrontation and allows parent and teacher to analyze the work together. Include anecdotal records and samples of the child's work in comparison with expected behavior at that age level. In preschool this may include fine-motor control, large-muscle activities, art, and problem solving. For school-age children, examples may include papers, artwork, projects, work in academic subjects, tests, notebooks, workbooks, and anecdotal records. It is also helpful to parents for the teacher to collect a set of unidentified "average" papers. If parents want to compare their child's work with that of the "average" child, they have a basis for this comparison.

Whatever the level of the child's performance, the parent and teacher need to form a team as they evaluate the child's educational progress and work together for the good of the child.

Use the conference form recommended by Meyers and Pawlas (1989) to keep a record. Parents and teacher—and student, if in attendance—decide on goals, highlights, or accomplishments and plans for the future. All attendees should read and sign the conference form and retain a copy.

Postconference Plans

After the conference, write a note thanking the parents for their participation. Later, in a follow-up telephone call, let the parents know how the conference plans are being implemented and how the student is participating. Each contact increases the parent–school collaboration.

A checklist may be used for self-evaluation, as shown in Figure 6–10. If you are able to answer yes to these questions, you are ready to have productive parent–teacher conferences.

Working with Angry Parents

What do you do when an upset and angry parent confronts you? Most professionals face such a situation at one time or another. Margolis and Brannigan (1986) list seven steps to help you control the volatile situation and allow the parent to regain composure. If you understand the dynamics of anger, you can engage in reflective listening. As a result, you can redirect the wrath and empathize with the parent. The steps include the following:

1. Remain calm and courteous, and maintain natural eye contact through the barrage. After the parents have expressed their anger, usually dominated by emotion, ask them to repeat their concerns so you can understand the situation better. The second time around, the statements are usually more comprehensible and rational.
2. Use reflective listening and give reflective summaries of their statements. You can explore the

content of their messages later, but during this stage attempt to establish a more relaxed and trusting atmosphere.
3. Continue with reflective listening, and ask some open-ended questions that allow them to talk more as you gain greater understanding.
4. Keep exploring until you have determined what the underlying critical issues are. Do not evaluate, and do not be defensive.
5. After the issues have been fully explored, rephrase and summarize, including points of agreement. Check to see if your summary of their concerns is correct. Offer to let them add to what you have summarized. When you clearly define the concerns, they often seem more manageable.
6. Margolis and Brannigan (1986) point out that by now, listening has been used to build trust and defuse the anger. You are more likely to understand the problem from the parent's perspective. When the first five steps "are followed in an open, sincere, and empathetic manner, disagreements frequently dissolve and respect emerges" (p. 345). If such is not the case, go back and allow free exploration again.
7. Use a systematic problem-solving approach to any issues that remain unresolved. The steps in collaborative problem solving include (a) understand each other's needs and the resources available to help satisfy those needs, (b) formulate a hypothesis that might solve the problem, (c) brainstorm other solutions, (d) combine ideas and solutions to create new solutions, (e) together, develop criteria to judge the solutions, (f) clarify and evaluate solutions, and (g) select the most likely solution. At the end of the confrontation, the result should satisfy both educator and parent.

Situation. "I've never come to a school conference without having to wait 45 minutes to talk with you. Then, when I get in, you rush me, never let me ask questions, and just tell me how poorly Mary is doing. I know that Mary is doing poorly! I have my hands full just trying to go to work and feed my four children. Can't you do something to help Mary? Do you care?" Mary's father breathlessly expressed his anger and frustration.

"Hold on, Mr. Washington," Mr. Bonner said. "You're responsible for Mary, not me. She does poorly because she doesn't pay attention; she's more interested in her friends than in school, and she cuts class. I can work with students who come to school ready to learn. I just don't have the strength or the patience to take on your daughter until she changes her attitude."

"I waited 45 minutes to hear that?" Mr. Washington asked. "What's going on here? No wonder Mary skips school. Where's the superintendent's office? I need to talk with your supervisor." Mr. Washington stalked out of the room.

1. How could Mr. Bonner respond in a manner to reduce Mr. Washington's anger?
2. What kind of interaction should take place to promote problem solving?
3. Is there anything Mr. Bonner can do to help this situation?
4. What can Mr. Washington do to help resolve his daughter's problems?
5. What responsibility does Mary have?

Making a Contract—Parent–Teacher Communication

Most teachers have experienced working with children who do not stay on task, daydream, act out in class, or seem to be wasting their potential. Parents of these children are usually just as concerned as the teacher. In a contract arrangement, the parents are empowered to get involved in the child's school behavior. In an effort to increase the student's positive participation in school, teachers and parents have an ongoing communication system that acknowledges how the child does in school. Parents and teachers work together to establish the goals and parameters of the contract. Usually a note is sent home each day detailing how the student performed at school. This includes schoolwork as well as classroom behavior. The parents reinforce the positive behavior and help diminish the negative. By communicating each day with a focus on the goals of the contract, parents and teachers form a team to help the child become successful in school.

Kelley (1990) describes a home-based reinforcement method in her book on school–home notes. It is based on behavioral theory and is similar to the contract method. This approach is beneficial for children who have difficulty staying on task or are not performing up to their abilities. The school–home note, or daily report card, is an intervention method that requires the participation of parents as