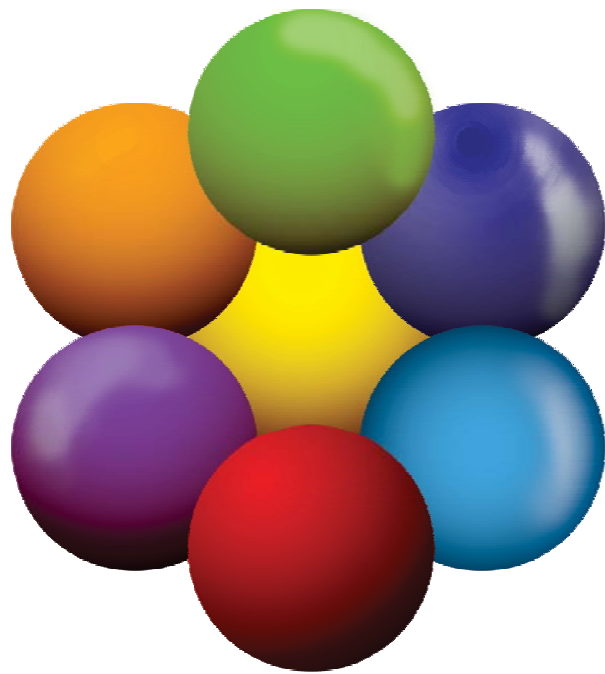
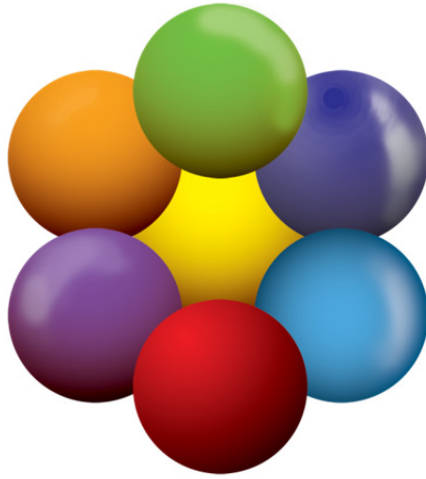


Parent Conferences



Excerpt from
Chapter X: Working with Parents as Partners
Why Didn't I Learn This in College?
by
Paula Rutherford



About Just ASK

The Essential Question of Just ASK's Work

What do schools and classrooms look like when they are organized around a commitment to the achievement of high standards by all students?

Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK) is based in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. Established in 1989, Just ASK provides products and services for educators in formats that facilitate a shared understanding and the use of best practice in teaching, learning, and leading in 21st century classrooms, schools, and districts.

Driven by the essential question displayed above, the publications and products developed and distributed by Just ASK are used by Just ASK consultants in their long-term multifaceted work with schools and districts, stand alone for use in professional development initiatives led by district personnel, and are often used as texts for college courses. These comprehensive resources use a common language and concept system that makes the **Common Core** come alive. Because they are cross-referenced, administrators, teacher leaders, veteran teachers, mentors, coaches, and new teachers can all be on the same page!

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Parent Conferences

Parent conferences are a part of our professional lives that can be an opportunity to establish or extend a positive and productive partnership in the education of the children.

Plan on putting your best foot forward and be sure that both your feet and the rest of you are clothed in the most professional attire you have in your closet...or you can borrow! This is not the time for jeans, t-shirts, and tennis shoes, or any garments in need of ironing!

The following list looks long, but most of the items are common sense. If people have always said that you have wonderful manners and are a terrific listener, then all you will need to do is continue to use those admirable skills, determine the desired outcomes for the conference, and make an agenda for the meeting.

The reality is that while you may be nervous because you are the teacher and want to appear perfectly prepared and professional, the parents are just as nervous, if not more nervous, than you. Keep that in mind when you meet with them! Also keep in mind that they are hoping to hear that either their child is en route to Harvard or, at the very least, has turned a new leaf and now has the potential to be a superstar student. Remember each student is someone's baby!

Before the Conference

- Extend a personal invitation to both parents.
- Check for the need for a translator.
- Be explicit about the purposes of the conference.
- Allow enough time for meaningful discussion, and be sure all parties understand the beginning time as well as the closing time.
- Get your papers organized in advance. This includes student work, rubrics, standards of learning, and assessment results. Copy segments of your grade book, or create a form, so parents cannot see the grades of other students, and remember that they really want to see the numbers/grades you have recorded.
- Make a "conference plan." What end do you have in mind and what topics do you think would help the team get there?
- Check names. Children's names may be different from parents and if you have more than one "Smith" or "Gonzales" be sure you have the right family matched with the right student.

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Parent Conferences

At the Conference

- Greet parents near the entrance to the school.
- Eliminate physical barriers. Do not sit behind your desk and do not make parents sit in small primary student chairs.
- Be mindful of your body language.
- Open the conference on a positive note.
- Ask for their opinions and reactions throughout the conference.
- Focus on strengths, interests, and anecdotes that capture the learner and the parents “being right.”
- Be specific with your comments.
- Back any generalization up with data or artifacts.
- Listen carefully to what parents say. Pause, probe, and paraphrase!
- Focus on solutions and emphasize collaboration.
- Be careful of the professional language you use with the parents. If there are certain terms you need to use, consider the conference one of many opportunities to inform and educate the community.
- Check for understanding and agreement throughout the conference and at conference closure.*

After the Conference

- Write up a brief summary for your records. You may think that you will remember, but you won't! Jot down any pertinent information or impressions you received from the parents.
- Record and assess your behavior and the results you obtained from the conference. If you are pleased, make a note of what caused that to happen. If you did not obtain the outcomes you wanted, make note of your thoughts on what went wrong.
- If you have any strength left, write a brief thank you note or email message to express your appreciation of their time and interest, as well as the opportunity to work with their child.

*If the conversation becomes confrontational, keep both feet on the ground, use your active listening skills as your default response, and use your assertiveness skills as necessary. See pages 269-270 for further guidance in discussing difficult situations with parents.

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When There Is a Problem

We have to send the message that we are all in this together!

Very few people are parenting experts and those who are so acclaimed often have really difficult children. We must not assume the role of parenting expert and place blame on the parents just because we have an education degree. Most of us who are parents might not win gold stars in parenting ourselves if our friends and neighbors were polled. The reality is that many of us do not have to “parent” when we get home from work at the end of a long day, so we are hardly in a position to judge the quality and quantity of time the parent spends on “our” homework.

There is no certification required for parenting, and it may be the only work harder or more complex than teaching. At least if the child is really difficult, we only have them for one year. The parents have a lifetime to deal with the issues.

So why do parents sometimes seem so defensive and so protective of their child? Because they are parents! When that child was born, he or she was perfect and was going to accomplish wondrous things. Figuring out how to celebrate the wondrous accomplishments while dealing with the inevitable crises is an eternal struggle. Figuring out how to be an advocate for your child without being an enabler is a constant source of confusion for even the most dedicated parent.

This, of course, does not excuse parents from being our partners in the education of their child. We must, however, continue to invite them to be our **partners** rather than the recipients of complaints, mandates, and/or implied accusations. Very few parents send their children to school with the hope that they will learn absolutely nothing and systematically drive us crazy. Nor do they relish the idea that “**the teacher**” is calling. Often what we are seeing is the continuation of a vicious cycle. The parent of the child who has problems in school may well have had problems of their own when they were in school and so are a little suspicious of, and perhaps a bit afraid of, schools and educators. Their best offense is a good defense, so we can often feel attacked. Our job in this situation is to break the cycle. The other scenario used by defensive parents is that any child of theirs is extraordinarily brilliant so the problem must be the school’s. In any case, we need to take the high road and find room for collaboration.

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When There Is a Problem

It is worth repeating here. If you have made positive home contacts earlier in the year, the potential for negative interactions is minimized because you have already established that you and the parents are partners in the education process.

If despite your best efforts you need to lead a difficult conference use the following guidelines:

- Keep both feet on the ground. If you are upset, say that now is not a good time to discuss this. Wait until you are calm to call or to continue a discussion.
- When you need to call home to explain a problem, write out a script of what you are going to say before you call.
- Pause before you pounce. Do not say something, write something or email something you will regret later.
- Do not lecture or nag.
- Try as best you can to identify the cause of the problem and match your intervention to the perceived cause.
- If you are a parent, empathize as a parent.
- Ask what they have tried so far.
- Ask what has worked best in the past.
- Use inclusive language such as, “We have a problem” and “Are you hearing/seeing what I hear/see?”
- Use attribution retraining. See page 18.
- Use collaborative problem solving.
- When it seems appropriate, ask if they would like suggestions on what they might try at home. Do not give unasked for advice.
- Also ask if they would be interested in something to read. If they say no, then you at least know that you offered help as a collaborator rather than as a parenting expert.
- Review communication skills on pages 20-21 and translate them to communicating with adults.
- Review dealing with unmet expectations on pages 32-33 and translate them to communicating with adults.
- Consult your colleagues. If the problem or interaction seems bigger than you can solve alone, do not hesitate to ask another staff member to advise you prior to the conference and/or to sit in with you. Staff members to consider including are the guidance counselor, the social worker, the school psychologist, a special educator (as appropriate), or an administrator.
- When there is progress in a negative situation, call home to report the progress.
- Always thank the parent for working with you...even if you would like a little more help! See page 22 for options.



Working with Parents as Partners

How Am I Doing?

Mark each item: W for Working Well, G for Goal for the Month, or N for Not Yet

- ___ I demonstrate that I consider family members partners in their child's education rather than as subordinates to be directed by me.
- ___ I provide opportunities for families, even those who might not have been active in the school in the past, to feel welcome as participants in the classroom and school communities.
- ___ I do not rush to judgement about the parenting skills of my students' families.
- ___ I am purposeful about using families as sources of information about students' educational, linguistic, and social backgrounds.
- ___ I consistently keep parents informed about the instructional program and the learning experiences I plan for their children through a website, newsletters, and/or evening academic events that feature student work and expected standards.
- ___ I work to develop an understanding of the racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds of my students and use personal practical experience and research to respond respectfully to those differences.
- ___ I am readily available for conferences with parents and my behavior indicates that I consider such interactions an important part of my job.
- ___ I plan conferences with an end in mind and I ensure that parents know the outcomes and agenda in advance.
- ___ I seek out parents and make parents feel comfortable contacting me and interacting with me as a partner in their child's education.
- ___ I contact parents with good news as often as I contact parents with bad news.
- ___ I contact parents in a timely manner whenever there is a change in their child's behavior.
- ___ I use discretion in handling confidential information and difficult situations.
- ___ I ensure that supportable facts, rather than rumors or insinuations, are discussion points in conversations and conferences.
- ___ I use clear, concise, and grammatically correct language in oral and written communication.
- ___ I use communication skills that demonstrate an awareness of cultural, gender, and generational differences.

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