

Parent-Teacher Interviews

Parent-teacher interviews are a time when parents and teachers have an opportunity to share knowledge about students and as such, parent-teacher interviews should be a two-way interaction between school and home.

Primary and secondary school parent-teacher interviews are often organised in a very different way. In primary school, the interview is often with just one teacher – the classroom teacher, who will cover the full range of subjects a student is studying – generally including reports from specialist teachers such as music or language teachers. In secondary school however, interviews are usually one-on-one with each of the separate teachers who teach a student.

In many schools, the responsibility for organising the interviews will lie with the student – parents should not be put off by a child who says 'no one wants to see you mum – you don't need to bother going.' Teachers want to meet parents and parents should tell their child that they want to meet their teachers. Students will probably bring home a schedule of interview times which should be taken to the interview session.

Parents need to find out what the school policy is for student attendance at parent-teacher interviews – many schools prefer older students to attend the interviews with their parents, but prefer the interviews regarding younger students to be just with the parents.

Parents need to prepare for the interview beforehand. Ask your child if there is anything they would like you to ask the teacher on their behalf – parents can record questions their child may have and raise them at the parent-teacher interview.

Parent-teacher nights have to run to a very tight schedule – there is usually a large number of parents for each teacher to see. The first prerequisite for a successful interview is to be on time. In some instances, it may be unavoidable that interviews go for longer than the scheduled time. However, if a deeper and longer discussion is needed, teachers will probably request that the parents make an appointment to meet with them at another time so that both parties can focus on the discussion without running out of time. Parents should always try and respect the time schedule, even if they feel the parent before them has had more than their share of time by going over their scheduled time limit.

Even though it is predominately a time for parents to listen and learn about their child's education, it is also a time for parents to share with the teacher their child's attitude to school and learning – what they like, what they find difficult and even any concerns that a parent might have about their child's progress or school program.

Parents should always be prepared to ask questions and to ask for an explanation if there is something they do not understand. For example, a parent might be concerned about the amount of homework that their child is doing – they should ask how much homework is currently being set and try and compare it to the amount they think is being done. It will be useful for a teacher to hear how much time is actually being spent on tasks at home as it may not correlate with the amount of work being produced.

When making comments, it is much more useful to the teacher if parents are specific – statements such as ‘he spent ten hours on the assignment over the weekend’ or ‘he spent four hours last night doing his maths homework’ are more useful than ‘he spent all weekend doing the assignment’ or ‘he spent a long time last night doing his homework’.

If the teacher seems to be expressing some concerns, parents should ensure that they really understand the details of what the teacher is saying. Parents may have to ask the teacher to be specific about learning or behaviour difficulties, ask what is being done at school to help overcome the difficulties, and what could be done at home to ensure that the family is working in partnership with the school.

Parent-teacher interviews are not a time for parents to boast about their child, and at the same time, it is probably not useful to start the interview by being too defensive. If the teacher mentions that they have a concern, it means that something needs to be done. The aim of the interview should be to discover how parents and teachers can work together as a team to best help the student. Team work will mean assessing how parents can reinforce what the school is doing.

Parents should remember that the interview is about the student and not about themselves – less positive comments should not be seen as a reflection on them. Parent-teacher interviews are there to promote teamwork between the school, the parents and the student – that’s why it is not generally appropriate for parents to talk about their own school experiences. Parents should try and stay on topic – it may not be relevant to talk about the student’s siblings or friends.

If the teacher makes suggestions, it might be a good idea for parents to write them down – parents do not want to take back the wrong message to their child who will probably want their parents to report back to them after the interview. If as a result of the meeting a plan is being put into place, it would be appropriate to ask for some feedback at a suitable time – maybe in one or two months.

If it appears from the start of the interview that there are no concerns, parents should have some questions ready for the teacher, such as:

- Does my child participate in class discussions and activities?
- What activities does my child seem to enjoy the most at school?
- Does my child easily join in activities in the playground?
- What goals would you like my child to achieve?
- What can I do as a parent to help my child progress in school this year?

Both parents and teachers are giving up valuable time to attend parent-teacher interviews, so parents should take advantage of the ten minutes or so that they have with the teacher to further benefit the student.