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# THE READING CONFERENCE: QUESTIONS, INFORMATION, ACTIVITIES AND FEEDBACK

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The recent focus upon our nation's schools through national and state commissions, reports and reforms, has made communication between parents and teachers even more critical than in previous years. The importance of parental involvement and communication has been extensively documented in the literature. Saxe (1975), Grant (1979), Brookover and Lezotte (1979), Phi Delta Kappa (1980), and Henderson (1982) present information that parent involvement is essential to schools and promotes increased achievement for students.

Couple this with the importance of the basic skills and a concern for the development of literacy and the schools have a natural vehicle for communicating and involving parents -- the parent reading conference. Many parents have questions about their child's reading progress and reading program and the teacher parent conference allows educators to interact with parents, explain the program and answer questions.

Let's examine this process to enhance and improve our communication with parents. A conference is very similar to teaching in that it requires a great deal of planning. Conferences further parallel the instructional process in that they contain similar behaviors that are evident in teaching to an objective. Our lessons include questions, present information, include activities and present feedback to students. Likewise, conferences include the same behaviors in that our preliminary questions provide a focus to the conference; teachers typically present information to parents; activities occur during the conference; feedback is given to and by teachers and parents during the conference.

Just as a lesson can fail because of poor planning, so can a conference. To avoid this, the teacher must make some preliminary decisions. The teacher must first decide the purpose of the conference. According to Hunter (1976), there are three types of conferences and each type serves a different purpose. These types include giving information,

receiving information and problem solving. We are now ready to enter the first phase of the conference.

### QUESTIONS

Although each phase of the conference involves planning, this phase involves careful consideration since it establishes the focus for the conference. Questions to be answered prior to scheduling the conference are prerequisite for the other phases of the conference. These five major questions must be addressed before other activities occur. They include:

- 1) What is the purpose of this conference?

There are three basic purposes for holding a conference. The first is to convey information. As the teacher, you may want to explain the school reading program or the child's placement on a specific reading test or something the child has done that is noteworthy. A second purpose for holding a conference is to receive information. The teacher may need or want additional information about a child's previous reading performance, or developmental information that would help one make decisions about how a child thinks, what they read at home, etc. The third purpose is problem solving. If you are having a problem with a child, you may want a conference to work out a solution.

Once the purpose has been determined, the teacher is ready to proceed with the next series of questions. These questions are relatively simple, but answering them prior to the conference will allow for a smoother professional contact with a parent.

- 2) Who will attend the conference?

In more instances, the parent(s) or guardian(s) will attend the conference. But there will be times when you may want to include the student or reading specialist or the principal. Who you invite will depend upon the purpose of the conference. If you are having a specific problem with a child regarding completing reading homework assignments or acting up during the reading period, you may want to invite the child to attend the conference also.

- 3) Where will the conference be held?

The classroom is the most likely spot for the conference to be held. Reading materials and student work samples will be close at hand. If you have a

special conference room that includes comfortable chairs and a conducive seat arrangement, you may want to consider hosting the conference elsewhere. In any event, the location must be determined and conveyed to the parent.

4) When will the conference be held?

Most teachers would say, after school. But with today's working parents it may be necessary to schedule a conference in the evening or on a Saturday. In some instances, parents can get away from their job during the day and the conference might be held during a teacher's planning period or just prior to the start of the school day.

5) How long will the conference last?

The answer to this question will obviously depend upon the nature of the conference. If the problem is minor or we need to ask a parent one or two questions we can anticipate that twenty to thirty minutes will be sufficient. More intensive problems will require a longer period, but in any case, you will need to give parents a time estimate--especially if they're coming over a lunch period or if you have another class to teach after the conference.

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## INFORMATION

Information can be associated with input and generally provides parents with knowledge of their child or the reading program. The information to be conveyed during the conference will vary according to the purpose of the conference. But some basic information will be appropriate to many conferences and will also require some pre-planning and compilation prior to the conference.

6) Assessment

Test information is frequently shared during the reading conference. The teacher should present the information as realistically as possible, while remaining positive. For example, the teacher can relay scores as number of correct responses or percent of correct responses, rather than expressing the negative.

7) PROGRAM

A brief explanation of the child's reading program, showing parents the child's reading text, workbook with supplementary reading materials will familiarize parents with

the materials and content of the program. A daily schedule indicating the reading periods frequently may help parents understand the pressures and philosophy of the school reading program. Parents are frequently not familiar with the various types of reading programs and a few moments spent on relaying the advantages and characteristics of the approach will enhance their understanding.

#### 8) Materials

Teachers should develop a folder of work samples for each child. This folder should accurately portray the range of reading activities children complete for reading. Samples of language experience stories, creative writing samples, regular assignments, extra credit assignments, and workbook or dittoed materials that may be pertinent to the conference.

### ACTIVITIES

The activities to occur during the conference are established as the agenda is developed for the conference as with the questions and information, pre-planning is likewise required. The agenda should plan activities that focus upon the purpose of the conference. One can equate the activities with the materials used for the instructional process. As such, the activities should serve to support the questions and information that is presented. Activities would typically center upon:

#### 9) Welcoming the parent

Every effort should be made to establish rapport with the parent. Many parents frequently feel ill at ease when talking with their child's teacher. As teachers, we want to make them feel welcome, relaxed, comfortable and important. Our goal is to ultimately open up communication with parents so the signals that we emit upon our first encounter will hopefully convey this intent.

#### 10) Share the Agenda

At the beginning of the conference, the teacher should thank the parent for coming and state the purpose of the conference. Even though this was most likely conveyed over the telephone or in a note to the parent, this will serve as an official reminder of the purpose and what you hope to accomplish by the end of the conference.

#### 11) Materials Examination

If the conference is information sharing regarding

type of program and methods used, it would be appropriate to pull the texts and workbooks that students are using and allow the parent time to leaf through them. This could also occur, however, prior to the conference, if several conferences are scheduled on one day. The teacher might display the materials on a table, outside the conference area, so a parent could examine them while waiting to begin the conference. If you are examining the materials in the conference room with the parents, pull the child's work samples and review these with the parents to enter into the conference. This will serve as an opener and can also become a positive entry point for further discussion.

### FEEDBACK

Just as students need feedback regarding instruction, so do parents regarding the conference. The feedback should include a number of strategies to reinforce, summarize, and follow-up.

#### 12) Interaction

Teacher and parent interactions are obviously very important in a conference. Just as we may have students that we overreact to, we may also have parents who bring out the worst in us. As professionals we must examine our reactions, not become defensive and be as objective and constructive as possible.

#### 13) Encouragement

The teacher should begin the conference by making the parent feel welcome and at ease, and should establish rapport. In addition, information sharing should be considered positive. Parents should be encouraged to comment about their child's program, progress, problems and any questions that are raised. Parents should also be encouraged to ask questions. In fact, prior to the conference, suggest that parents write down any questions that they might have.

#### 14) Listen

Teachers, who are accustomed to doing most of the talking must make a concerted effort to pause periodically, to look for verbal and nonverbal cues and to pick up on parents' questions and concerns. In addition, teachers should listen enthusiastically to parents. The teacher who appears bored during the conference or presents an image that what parents are saying is unimportant will do little to enhance cooperation and collaboration between parents and schools.

15) Summarize

At the close of the conference the teacher should first ask the parent to summarize the major points of the conference. This will ensure that both parties have heard the same information. The teacher should reiterate the major points of the conference and parent and teacher should collaboratively develop a plan that addresses any problems that have been discussed. If this was not a problem-solving conference, but an information oriented conference, then a brief summary will be sufficient. Teachers should make a point of having every conference end on a positive note, just as it began. This may seem difficult with particular students, especially if one is into a problem-solving conference, but the positive approach will bring more dividends than the negative.

16) Evaluation

Take a few moments at the end of the conference to judge the effectiveness of the conference. Were your questions and the parents' questions adequately answered? Did the parents leave the conference with a positive feeling? How will you follow-up on the conference and institute any plans that were jointly developed during the conference?

SUMMARY

This article was developed to help teachers plan for more effective reading conferences. Although applied to the area of reading, this format and the steps presented can also be utilized in other areas. The planning and events of the conference overlap with the instructional process; as such, once identified, they can become as automatic as instruction.

Following these steps will allow for smoother conferences and greater communication between teachers and parents and will ultimately provide a positive effect for students. A few moments spent planning will help ensure the focus and communication that was desired by scheduling the conference.

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