Effective parent conferences are a key part of promoting successful two-way communication. They provide an opportunity for teachers and parents to step back from the day-to-day classroom events and take stock of how students are doing academically, socially, and emotionally. They are also an important vehicle for helping parents understand how they can become involved in their child’s education. The following 7 tools are designed to help you prepare for conferences, foster effective interactions during the conference, and organize ways to follow up.

1) **What is most important to accomplish during parent conferences?** Your teaching context (district/school curriculum, grade level, your teaching and assessment practices, make-up of your class) will influence the goals you establish for your conferences. The following tool could help you establish priorities regarding what to discuss with parents during conferences (versus using other venues such as newsletter or workshops) and how conferences should be conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priorities in My Teaching Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does my district/school want parents to understand about their child’s progress in [subject matter] at my grade level (e.g., your school may be focusing for the year on a target area such as reading information texts)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are parents most interested in understanding about their child’s progress?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What key areas in [subject matter] are taught and assessed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do parents need to know about student development in [subject matter] at my grade level? How could information about students’ social and emotional growth at this age level help parents understand their academic progress? What information have I already made available to parents (e.g., newsletters, orientations, workshops) that I can build on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do parents need to know about my teaching and assessment practices that will help them understand their child’s progress (e.g., use of student portfolios to document writing progress; use of rubrics to assess science inquiry projects)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What tone or atmosphere do I want to create? What do I hope to communicate about my relationship with the parents’ child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are unique characteristics of students (and families) in my class that will influence how we communicate about student progress (e.g., language, culture, educational values, communities in which families live)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are supports and barriers to family participation in parent conferences (e.g., work schedules, transportation, child care, attitudes about school)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parent Conference Toolkit
2) What information and materials should I gather to foster a two-way conversation? It is tempting to “tell” parents about their child’s progress, especially when time is limited. But one-way communication misses a valuable opportunity to learn from parents about what they know and understand about their child, and to hear their questions. Consider the list of possible artifacts and information below (and add your own), and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages for fostering a discussion about student progress and parent questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Advantages for Fostering Discussion</th>
<th>Disadvantages for Fostering Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade book</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test papers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic assessments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samples of student work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs of classroom activities (writing workshop, group work, performances)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance records</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire for parents to fill out about their child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation form for parents to fill out after the conference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) What printed information should parents take home with them? Parent conferences are a good opportunity to distribute printed material to parents. The following are possible resources you might put out on a table for them to browse and take home as they leave the conference (or as they enter). They may need to be translated for families whose first language is not English.

- Description of your goals for learning in [subject matter]
- Tips for working with students at home in [subject matter]
- Tips for helping with homework
- Tips on parenting for students at your grade level
- Community resources that support families
- Calendar of classroom/school events
- Volunteer forms for upcoming events
4) **How do I want to structure my conferences?** Thirty minutes will go fast, so having a structure in mind can help you get the most out of the time available, help you keep “on task,” and help you think about how to be responsive to the families of students in your class. In working to foster two-way communication, the following issues are important to consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-Conference</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What will parents do while they wait for their conference to begin (e.g., waiting area, materials to browse, slide show to view)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What physical setting is most conducive to conversation (e.g., placement of tables, chairs, materials)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opening the Conference</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will I greet parents and help them feel welcome? How will I address the many kinds of “parents” I could meet (e.g., mother, father, relative, foster parent, guardian)? How will I know the correct pronunciation of their name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will I address communication issues for parents whose first language is not English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will I let parents know my plan for the structure of the conference so we both have an “agenda” to follow and know when we each will have time to talk (e.g., poster board near conference setting, verbal description)? Do I want their input on how we will use our time, or will we follow my plan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will I communicate that I know and care about their student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>During the Conference</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When/how will information and materials be shared? What educational terms or “jargon” do I need to avoid or explain (e.g., criterion-referenced test; rubric)? How will I check for understanding?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What will I do to help us follow the plan and stay within our allotted time (e.g., have clock visible; verbal cues to switch to next part of the agenda)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will I make sure I listen to parents and allow ample time to hear their questions and concerns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What will I do to assure that all family members present have ample opportunity to speak (e.g., <em>Mr. Jennison, we haven’t heard from you yet. What are your thoughts on this issue?</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bringing the Conference to a Close</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When and how will I signal that the conference ending time is drawing near?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will we all know what agreements have been made?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will parents be clear about follow-up or next steps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How will I assure that the conference ends on a positive note?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5) What plan will I use to conduct individual conferences? At the elementary level, teachers must discuss multiple subjects for a group of students. At the middle school and high school levels teachers typically have fewer subjects to discuss, but more students. So having a plan for how you will conduct individual conferences can help you make decisions about how to spend your time, remind you during conferences about what you want to accomplish, and provide a place to take notes regarding parent input and questions. The following tool can be adapted to suit your grade level and subject matter context.

Plan for Individual Conference

Student Name: ________________________________ Date: ___________

Family Members/Relationship to Student: ________________________________

Information and Material (create your own list of items you plan to have available at the conference)

___ [item] ___ [item] ___ [item]

Brief outline of how conference is structured:

Key points you want to discuss about student progress (academic, social, emotional) and issues or questions you want to raise:

Key questions you want to ask parents about the student:

Parent comments and questions raised:

Summary of key ideas discussed, action items agreed upon:
6) **How will I schedule conferences?** Below is a sample letter inviting parents to attend conferences and asking them to indicate their availability. The forms can be used to develop a conference schedule. Adapt it to your situation.

---

**Making Connections: Parent conferences are coming up!**

Date

Dear Parents,

One of the best events of the year is coming up soon—**parent conferences**! This is one of my favorite events because it gives me a chance to talk with each of you in some depth about your student. This fall our conferences will feature three important items:

- We will discuss student work samples so you can see how your student is progressing in [subject].
- We will discuss how your student is adjusting to [grade level] and participating in our class.
- I want to hear your comments and questions and explore ways we both can help your student learn best.

These items will help us follow up on the ideas discussed during our fall curriculum orientation.

I have listed the times available for 30-minute conferences below and would like to know which three time slots you are available. Please place a 1, 2, or 3, next to your top three choices and return this form to school with your student by [date].

---

**Parent Conference Sign-Up**

___ I am available for a 30-minute conference during the following time blocks (indicate your top three choices by placing a 1, 2, or 3 next to each):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[date]</th>
<th>[date]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2:30 - 5 p.m.</td>
<td>1:30 - 4 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 7 p.m.</td>
<td>4 - 6 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - 9 p.m.</td>
<td>6 - 8 p.m.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

___ Please contact me about transportation or child care needs.

___ I am not available on the above dates. Please contact me about other options.

Student's Name: __________________________________________

Parent's Name: __________________________________________
7) How will I make sure all parents attend? Parents are busy people with many responsibilities to juggle. Helping parents be aware of conference dates and times, providing well-timed reminders, and creating curiosity and interest in attending can help improve turnout.

A Checklist for Promoting Good Parent Turnout

- **Publicize:** Use simple, inviting language (and have it translated if necessary) to let parents know about parent conferences initially and to provide reminders.
  - Newsletters, fliers
  - School calendar
  - School or classroom website

- **Provide Information about the Conference Purpose and Structure:** Parents may assume that they will “just hear the same old stuff” from you that they have been hearing for years and see no need to attend. If they know ahead of time that you plan to make your conference **interactive**, and that they will have opportunities to learn new things about their child (e.g., discuss work samples), they are more likely to come.

- **Help parents make connections across other parent events:** Sometimes parents do not see how the various events offered by a school (e.g., ice cream socials, curriculum nights, workshops, conferences) can help them build, over time, a better understanding of the school and classroom environment, the other families in their child’s class(es), their students as members of these communities, and how they can become involved in their child’s education. Your publicity can work to make those connections explicit.

- **Accommodate Family Schedules:** Most schools designate specific time blocks during days and evenings for conferences. However, for full participation, you may need to accommodate some families by offering alternative formats (e.g., having a phone conference at a scheduled time) or alternative dates/times that suit their schedules.

- **Include Students:** Students can become your best recruiters for your conferences. They can:
  - Write hand-written invitations to parents
  - Remind parents of the upcoming event
  - Help plan which work samples parents will discuss during the event
  - Provide child care (secondary)
  - Be greeters or guides to the classroom

- **Provide Services:** Families have different needs and experience different challenges in being able to attend school events. The following are examples of services that might assure good participation in conferences: child care; find other families who can provide transportation; arrange translation services