

insights

Michael Grose's top 10 parenting tips for school meetings

by Michael Grose



Conferences and meetings between parents and professionals offer an opportunity to discover a child's progress; share information or resolve social and learning challenges. They can also be the source of conflict and stress as views can differ so it helps to remember that everyone's goal is to work from the best interests of a child or young person.

Here are some tips to help make the meeting or conference more productive and less stressful for everyone involved:

1. Confirm the meeting

If the meeting has been called by someone at the school then confirm that you will be attending. Confirm also if someone such as another parent, family member, friend or professional will be attending the meeting. If in doubt, find out if more than one person will be attending from your child's school, including an outside professional such as a speech therapist or other specialist.

2. Work from a fresh slate

Sometimes meetings can be marred before they start as negative past experiences can carry residual resentment. Every new meeting offers a fresh opportunity to create better outcomes for your child.

3. Prepare well

Before a meeting or conference, list any questions that you want to raise. Keep the questions short and to the point. Similarly, it may be useful to list some of your child's strengths and areas of improvement that you've seen at home. Writing information down in advance ensures that your point of view is expressed and that critical information is covered. Similarly, make sure you take notes during the meeting so that vital information isn't missed.

4. Listen first

Give the teacher a chance to make an assessment of your child's progress or behaviour. This may sound obvious but some meetings never get off the ground because an enthusiastic parent takes over.

5. Ask specific questions

Clarify the information you don't understand, asking for concrete examples. Drill down to get a clear picture of any issues involving behaviour or learning. *"So he doesn't listen in class. Specifically, when does he seem to tune out?"* If your conference is student-led then take your cues from teacher and your child. Be prepared to ask specific questions that show your interest; display your understanding of what your child is showing you and also may help you form a true picture of your child as a learner.

6. Stay solution-focused

If your child's behavioural or learning challenges are discussed it's tempting to be defensive or sceptical. Ask for concrete examples to help you gain a clear understanding from the teacher's perspective. Look over the proof offered such as observational records or testing results using these as the basis for moving towards a solution. Ask the teacher and other professionals what any test results may mean in terms of progress, strengths, needs and further support.

7. Remain calm

If the meeting doesn't go well, stay calm. Meetings involving your own child can be very emotive because you and your child's teacher are often discussing issues that are outside your direct control. Calmly stating your needs and views is far more effective than general accusations or inflexibly taking a stand. Ask for a break if you need one, even suggesting you meet at another time if your emotions are taking over.

8. Consider there are many ways to be right

Keep in mind that everyone wants the same thing- your child to make progress. Teachers view your child through a different lens than you and their conclusions and solutions can seem at odds with your own views. It may be at these times that you need to trust the professionalism of your child's teacher who has more than likely experienced these same challenges before.

9. Ask what you can do

Show your commitment to producing better results by asking for exercises that you can do at home to develop skills. It may be a good opportunity to ask for recommendations for outside resources to help you and your child. Often teachers know about camps, activities, organisations or events that can encourage educational and social growth.

10. Consider how to discuss at home

Once a meeting is over consider how you will talk about it with your child. Discuss areas that need work in positive, specific terms. *"We talked about your reading and your teacher suggested that we need to...."* Involve your child in discussing plans for improvement. Make sure these plans are doable rather than overwhelming him or her with an exhaustive list of suggestions. Small inroads in progress or improved behaviour have been found to have a snowball effect, impacting on broader areas of improvement.

Parent teacher meetings and conferences take many formats including the direct involvement of children. Regardless of the format you will be more effective if you go in with a positive attitude, an approachable demeanour, and a willingness to work collaboratively with your child's teacher to reach the best outcomes possible for your child.



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