
Tips for Staff:
The Essential Conversation:
Focus on Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences

Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot, in her book, *The Essential Conversation*, talks about the phenomenon of “hiding behind the ritual.” Teachers typically start conferences with information parents already know. While that may help teachers build confidence and may help build rapport, it often means there isn’t time for the content that really needs to be discussed, and often both the teacher and family members leave dissatisfied.

Dr. Lawrence-Lightfoot makes these suggestions to teachers:

- Give parents plenty of notice before the conference and provide a list of questions they can think about. Offer them the opportunity to send you a note/email ahead of time with any particulars they would like to discuss so you can be prepared.
- Thoughtfully prepare before the conference. Think about what real, authentic observations you can share that will communicate to the family that you know and care about their child. Share more than a list of skills. Sharing stories that highlight the child’s uniqueness is often a wonderful place to start.
- Consider having older children attend for part of the conference to present his or her portfolio.
- While there certainly are conferences which are genuinely all positive, you also want to create an atmosphere where it is possible to talk about the harder things when that needs to happen. This requires building the relationship with the family on a daily basis prior to the conference.
- Avoid what Dr. Lightfoot calls “the doorknob phenomena” where the parent is leaving the conference and says something like “we didn’t get to talk about the thing I really wanted to talk about.” Sometimes these concerns reflect back on a negative experience that parent had as a child in school. Bringing these issues up at the end of the conference doesn’t allow you the time to give the issue the attention it deserves.

In preparation for conferences, consider preparing by reading *The Essential Conversation*, which is based on in-depth interviews that Dr. Lightfoot conducted with teachers. She shares many thoughtful insights into the parent-teacher conference. While much is focused on elementary school-age children, there is also much that is relevant for families with younger children. Dr. Lightfoot is a member of the Bright Horizons Board of Directors and Professor of Education at Harvard University.

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