

Reading Assignment

Family Conferences



Family Conferences

By Holly Delgado

Whenever we are organizing family conferences, there are three things we want to consider:

1. Determine the purpose. Why are we holding this family conference?
2. Determine the logistics — the who, what, when, and where.
3. Ensure we have established a supportive climate with our families.

Determine the Purpose

To determine a purpose for the conference, we need to consider what we want to accomplish. For most family conferences, this is showing family members a broad picture of their child's development across all curricular content areas.

It is an opportunity for family members to share their own observations of their child's growth and their hopes or goals for their child, as well as express any concerns that have arisen since your last meeting.

It is also an opportunity for teachers to share the academic progress, growth, and development they have seen over the previous period or throughout the course of the year, since the last family conference. Through the use of anecdotal stories, photos, videos, and work samples, it is a chance to help families visualize the learning that occurs day to day in a play-based learning environment.

Finally, it is an opportunity for teachers and families to truly partner in individualized goal setting and determining some of the action items, or steps to get there, for the upcoming period.

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Determine the Logistics

When determining the logistics, there are a few questions we need to ask ourselves:

- **Who needs to be present?** Obviously, parents or legal guardians and the teacher should be present for the family conference. What about associate teachers or classroom assistants? Extended family or biological parents in the case of foster families? Grandmothers or grandfathers who are responsible for a large portion of child care in the home? Any other professional who interacts with the child on a regular basis, such as a speech and language therapist, social worker or family engagement specialist, or a program director who might be involved in supporting self-regulation and social-emotional development? What about the child or siblings? If they are present, what will they be doing? Will the child

be a part of the conference? Is there something or someone to keep the children engaged in activities while the teacher and family meet?

In a partnership, decisions on who should or will be invited to the meeting should be discussed prior to the family conference occurring. This gives family members an opportunity to think through any questions they might have for the early childhood team or to choose their support team — the people they want present to support them through the family conference or who are responsible for extending the learning in the home environment.

- **Where will the conference take place?** We want to ensure we choose a quiet, comfortable location. Many of our classrooms may not typically have adult-sized chairs or furniture, so you'll want to bring these in. In terms of seating

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arrangement, you want to place yourself on the same side of the table or near the family, so as not to unintentionally close off the conversation by placing a desk or table between you and family members. Be cognizant of the message your nonverbal body placement is sending to the family.

- **When should the conference happen?** Work hard to arrange the conference during a time that fits into the family's schedule. If many of your parents are working, consider having evening options. If you are a private child care program, use the local public school calendar as a guide — noting any days the family might already be making alternative child care arrangements due to parent-teacher conferences at the schools of older siblings. Consider lunch breaks or coupling the family conference with pickup

or dropoff times when the family is already in the school or center. Many programs like to alternate home visits with family conference held at the school. Think through your entire school year and preplan dates so families can plan ahead and get them into their own calendars.

Establish a Supportive Climate

When establishing a supportive climate, just like we do with the children in our classrooms, we want to ensure we are truly sharing control with the parents or legal guardians.

- **Take cues from the family's verbal and nonverbal interactions.** Watch their body language, listen to their voice tone — determine what it is telling you and then be responsive to

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those needs. If family members are closing themselves off or becoming upset or angry, simply be a listening ear for their venting. Reflect what they are saying back to them for clarification and so they know you hear them. Not all problems need to be solved during this one meeting; you can always plan for additional meetings to delve into a specific topic in more detail.

- **Participate at the family's level.** Some families will naturally be more engaged, while others will be looking to you as the professional to facilitate the conversation. Adjust your interaction style accordingly, differentiating the levels of support and prompts or questioning you might have with each family.
- **Learn from the family.** This is a partnership — families are their child's first teachers. Open



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yourself up to listen and learn from their expertise. Help family members who are unsure see themselves as competent, successful parents by drawing attention to the routines they've built at home, the support they provide for their child, and the meaningful ways they are developing their child's school readiness.

- **Give conversational control to the families.** Acknowledge and comment on what they are saying. Use open-ended questions sparingly and in authentic, meaningful ways. Consider opening the conversation with a question that immediately gives the family control of the direction of the conference: "How do you think this year is going for your child?" Follow their lead and include anecdotal stories or observations to support what the parent is saying. Use this time to continue forming an authentic relationship with the family.
- **Make sure your verbal and nonverbal cues portray a genuine interest in the interaction.** Lean forward, use eye contact, use questions strategically, and really listen to what the family members have to say.
- **Be responsive to their needs.** Sometimes families just want to know someone is listening to them and validating their feelings or concerns.
- **Listen carefully and be respectful.** This means being aware of potential cultural differences in communication techniques or styles.
- **Provide specific feedback.** Be prepared with work samples, photographs, videos, or anecdotal stories that provide a visual into the classroom. Describe what the child is able to do by using specific observations taken during the course of the school day.

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- **Ask honest questions and respond to questions honestly.** This builds a climate of trust between you and the family members, promoting mutual honesty. (If parents ask about another child's interactions with their child, do keep in mind that you must maintain the confidentiality of other children in your program.)
- **Don't be afraid to acknowledge that you might not have all of the answers!** Develop a plan or strategies that might work, but leave yourself open to tweaking that plan and changing those strategies based on the child's response. Let parents know you want to keep the lines of communication open so you can continue to work together to best meet the needs of the children in your program. Feel free to say, "I haven't seen that behavior..." or "I'm not sure... but I'd like to gather some more observations and I will get back to you."

When concerns arise, be honest and objective, using these tips as guidelines:

- **Focus on the child's strengths.** Use developmental milestones as a reference point, but frame your discussion around the skills the child has mastered.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Be cognizant of the words you choose to use and your tone during the discussion.
- **Avoid labels or stereotypes.** Instead of referring to children in negative terms, such as "aggressive," "rowdy," or "not ready for kindergarten," reframe your discussion using positive and specific descriptive words such as "active," "interested in pretend play — being a superhero," or "learning to problem solve."

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- **Provide specific anecdotal context.** Try to avoid speaking generally or abstractly about skills and provide parents a visual of the concern via observation-based anecdotes. You might say, “When he becomes frustrated in school, we see him respond by...,” and then objectively list any behaviors observed. Give family members opportunities to offer their input; ask about their observations with statements like “I wonder if you have noticed...”

Remember the function of the family conference: We are here to provide a broad picture of development. If conversations become too narrowly focused on one behavior or concern, schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss those concerns in more detail at a later point in time. Make sure to follow up with family at a later date, offering support, resources, and any other information as applicable.



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Coming to a Close

When wrapping up the conference, determine an action plan:

- **Develop long-term goals.** These should be reasonable expectations that both you and the family would like to see achieved by the end of the period or school year.
- **Discuss next steps.** What short-term strategies are you and the family going to employ in order to achieve long-term goals?
- **Decide who is responsible for each of the action steps.** Are there specific resources or materials needed, and, if so, who will gather those? How will you build these action steps into a consistent routine?
- **Determine how you will monitor that progress.** This may be as simple as informal communication at arrival or dropoff, or a more formal method of communicating, such as a log or journal.
- **Hold yourselves accountable** by having both the family members in attendance and the teachers sign-off on the plan.