# Parent-Teacher Conferences: Two-Way Communicating Before, During, and After

[Parent-teacher](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/teacher-parent-conferences/resource/3713.html) conferences are an opportunity to extend the lines of communication between home and school, keep families informed about their children's academic and social progress, and develop two-way communication strategies that invite family engagement and improve student learning.

Productive conferences take careful planning. To prepare the ground for a useful and meaningful dialogue, think about communicating with families before, during, and after conferences, using two-way communication strategies for maximum impact.

### Before the Conference

Send a personal letter to each parent to confirm the day, time, and place of the conference, including a response form where parents can outline issues they hope to discuss or learn about during the conference. This will help you go in prepared, and ready to respond to individual concerns.   
  
Gather portfolios of each student's work. Review notes on each student's behavior, academic progress, and interactions with peers. Bring up no more than two or three concerns, and consider “sandwiching”--starting and ending on positive note, even if the content in the middle is less than positive.  
  
Clarify ahead of time who will be attending each conference--is it the child's biological parents, a relative, a guardian, a grandparent, or a foster parent? Invite parents to bring lists of questions or concerns, and allow time to review them. Have curriculum materials available so you can look at examples of what students are learning together. If possible, make arrangements for interpreters for non-English-speakers.

Don't conduct a parent-teacher conference from behind your desk. A teacher's desk can inhibit conversation and makes many parents uncomfortable (perhaps a throwback to their days as a student). Instead, conduct conferences at a table, and sit on the same side of the table as your guests. This will start your conversation on equal footing and encourage authentic dialogue.

### During the Conference

Greet parents in a positive manner with a smile and a handshake. Keep in mind that a well-run parent-teacher conference focuses in on the following “must do's” every time:

* Provide parents with specific academic information.
* Invite and obtain additional information from parents. Ask them about their perspective on their child, and their goals for their child’s future
* Listen carefully to parents-try for a 50-50 balance in talking.
* Combine your perceptions and observations with parent ideas, turn these into a plan of action.
* Let families know that you are available for follow-up (phone calls, personal meetings, etc.).

If you are sharing some negative information with parents, be sure you “sandwich” it. Begin with positive information, then share the negative information, and conclude with another piece of positive information.

Always use “active listening” skills. If a parent says something about the child, try to use some of the parent's words in your response. For example, if Mr. Brown says, “Tommy seems shy whenever he's around other people.” You say, “I understand that Tommy is often reluctant to talk with others—it sometimes happens in class. Maybe I could put him in a smaller group so he will be less shy.” By listening actively, you help build positive bridges of communication for conferences and in the future.

Ask for input or feedback into how families work with their children at home (“Mr. Wilson, what do you do when Bobby gets frustrated?”) Never give commands (“You should” or “You must”) Rather, offer specific suggestions in the form of an invitation (“Mrs. Harper, based on our conversation this evening, I wonder if you and Michelle could spend an additional 10 minutes a night on spelling words?”). It is better to invite parents to be part of a solution than tell them what they should or should not do.

Summarize some of the major points, and clarify any action plan you have established. Ask families what they need from you to make sure their end of the action plan is enacted. Most important, always end a conference on a positive note.

### After the Conference

Save a moment after each conference to jot down notes. Don't take notes during the conference—it can inhibit conversation and make eye contact difficult. Record and file observations and suggestions later.

Be sure to [follow up](http://www.teachervision.fen.com/education-and-parents/resource/3730.html) with phone calls, notes, messages, or letters to every parent, including those who didn't attend. Immediate feedback is necessary to establish a pattern of ongoing two-way communication.