
Five Guidelines for Parent-Teacher Conferences

By John P. McSweeney

For many teachers, the most exasperating period of their work year is not the myriad of papers to be corrected, or the endless lesson plans, or the perennial discipline problems. Rather, it is the quarterly scheduling of teacher-parent conferences. More grumbling occurs in the faculty lounge over this assignment than over all the other duty rosters posted on bulletin boards or placed in teachers' boxes throughout the year. Traditionally, teachers have not been prepared in their teacher training to work with parents, and unpleasant teacher-parent conferences they experience make them leary of the whole practice. Knowledge of techniques of conducting a successful conference will enhance a teacher's confidence, and success in applying these techniques will often improve a teacher's attitude toward the value of the entire experience.

A realistic appraisal of teacher-parent conferences would show that there are problems to overcome. In addition to the lack of formal teacher training in conducting conferences, these meetings usually occur under the most unpleasant of circumstances. Gertrude McPherson points out that rarely do parents ". . . come to school to compliment the

teacher," or "rarely did a teacher seek out a parent to praise a child."¹ She believes that teachers find the back-to-school conference to be of limited value because parents of students who are having academic or disciplinary problems attend such programs only infrequently.

Role Expectations

Mary E. and Harry C. Brede-meir cite the differences in teachers' and parents' expectations of the others' role.² Teachers, in the view of many parents, should discover the innate brilliance of their children and, through teacher-student interaction, the children should be able to climb to the top of the class.

Often, teachers suffer from insular thinking. Until recent times, teachers have been given the role of working in an environment which included children, other teachers, and school administrators. Many teachers and administrators are still not comfortable with the view that schools should welcome visitors to view and comment on what the school is doing. In addition, social psychologists have discovered that people choose to associate with those whom they perceive to be very much like themselves. It is no wonder, then, that a middle class teacher will find it particularly difficult to communicate with a minority parent who may be from the lower class, or

with a society matron who is a member of the community's elite. In neither instance will the teacher find the person to be a mirror image of himself or herself.³

Channeling Emotions for a Successful Conference

New teachers dread teacher-parent conferences because they are often depicted as being emotion-charged, and most administrators and experienced teachers will often recommend some advice to beginning teachers to keep emotions out of the conference. As good intentioned as this advice may be, new teachers inevitably conclude they have failed if emotions surface during the course of the teacher-parent conference they conduct. John Kord Lage-mann astutely points out in his article, "The Delicate Art of Asking Questions," every encounter between people is emotional. According to him, "There is no such thing as an impersonal meeting of the minds."⁴ Teachers will find that an exchange of feelings can be beneficial for a successful meeting if this exchange is anticipated and if it is channeled in a productive manner.

Five guidelines for improving teacher-parent conferences could diminish, if not eliminate, many commonly held teacher fears: (1) Planning, (2) Commonalities, (3) Climate, (4) Control, and (5) Conclusion.

Dr. McSweeney is professor of education at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

Planning

Planning for a conference may be the most important guideline for a successful conference. It involves accumulating not only the information on a student's academic work, but also all the information available from the student's cumulative folder and the student's counselor. Planning involves the thinking and the preparing needed to develop successfully the other four aspects of the conference.

Using mental imagery to help prepare for the real conference can ease a teacher's fears and help him or her relax, thus enhancing the atmosphere of a conference.⁵ Structured mental imagery can assist a teacher in projecting an image of relaxed assurance that the teacher and parent, working together, can help the student with his or her problem.

Commonalities

Commonalities is the second guideline in developing a suc-

cessful teacher-parent conference. Social psychologists have learned that we like people who appear similar to us. Similar types are classified as mirror images of each other and they enjoy being with each other. Experiments have shown, for example, that salesmen who project an image of being similar to their customers were more successful than those who were perceived as experts.⁶ Even if a teacher is different from the parent in ethnic, religious, or socio-economic background, there are commonalities which he or she can find with the parent. It might be that the teacher and the parent are both from the same home town, or have children the same age, or happen to know the same minister or other members of the community. A teacher who is acquainted with the opinion leaders in a community will be able to find mutual acquaintances to mention in his effort to gain rapport with the parent. Sales personnel have used mental imagery and old school or community ties to

enhance their relationships with prospects. These approaches can also work for teachers in their relationships with parents.

Climate

Climate pertains to the physical setting of the conference, along with the tone and non-verbal communication during the conference. A teacher-parent conference should be held in a room which affords privacy and no distractions. A conference room is ideal because it gives a sense of intimacy. A classroom is the usual setting for teacher-parent conferences. While it is not ideal, it can be acceptable if the teacher remembers two very important factors. First, the teacher's desk serves as a barrier between the teacher and the parent; thus, it is imperative to provide for an arrangement where the teacher can sit face-to-face with the parent. Second, because small desks are usually unsuitable for parents to use, a chair borrowed from another room will eliminate embarrassment to the teacher and the parent.

Climate also involves non-verbal communication. The teacher's willingness to listen to the parent's views and the sense of assurance the teacher conveys that the conference will be a success will be perceived by the parent. The teacher's emotional state, his or her personality, words, and behavior constitute the aura he or she projects to the parent.⁷

Control

Control of a conference means that a teacher does not dominate the conversation. In fact, a capable teacher will allow the parent to express his or her feelings. Once feelings have been expressed, the teacher and parent can work to solve the problem. Control means

(To page 35)

mary purpose is to bring your students closer to God. As a teacher, you have the wonderful privilege of equating the joy of activity with the joy that comes from knowing and loving our wonderful Creator. With God's help, lead and encourage your students to accept the challenge of becoming physically educated. []

Guidelines for Parent-Teacher Conferences

(Continued from page 19)

that the teacher is always aware that he or she is responsible for seeing that the conference moves toward some specific goal.⁸ A teacher may do very little of the talking, but it is important that he or she remember to move the topic of the conversation back to the main purpose without appearing to be rushing the conference.

Conclusion

A successful conclusion to a conference is essential, or the entire process will be another frustrating experience for both the teacher and the parent. If a teacher has good listening skills, he or she has been providing feedback to the parent during the course of the conference, and this will make the conference conclusion easier for both the parent and the teacher. "The sandwich technique" can be helpful in ending a conference on a positive note. A teacher brings up the student's deficiencies and problems only after praising the student at the beginning of the conference, and then points out some other praiseworthy attributes of the student near the end of the conference. The important point to remember is that, to be effective, this approach must be handled tactfully and sincerely.⁹ The conclusion culminates the meeting,

with the teacher pinpointing major areas of discussion and outlining mutually agreed actions which will follow the meeting.

Each of the guidelines for a teacher-parent conference complements the other. Conducting a conference is an art form, and a teacher who practices these guidelines will be able to enhance his or her ability to conduct a conference. Through practice will come assurance that teacher-parent conferences will become less painful and much more profitable for parent, students, and teachers. It is worth the effort. The gains in psychic satisfaction may prove to be immeasurable. []

FOOTNOTES

¹ Gertrude McPherson, *Small Town Teacher* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 130.

² Mary E. Bredemeir and Harry C. Bredemeir, *Social Forces in Education* (Sherman Oaks, Calif.: Alfred Publishers Co., Inc., 1978), pp. 276-277.

³ N. Miller and P. Zimbardo, "Motives for Fear-Induced Affiliation: Emotional Comparison or Interpersonal Similarity?" *Journal of Personality* 34 (1966):481-503.

⁴ John Kord Lagemann, "The Delicate Art of Asking Questions," in *Word Power* ed. Editors of *Reader's Digest* (New York: Berkley Books, 1980), pp. 157-158.

⁵ Ron Zembe, "Picture This: Using Mental Imagery to Enhance Learning," *Training*.

⁶ Timothy C. Brock, "Communicator-Recipient Similarity and Decision Change," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (June, 1965), pp. 650-654.

⁷ Lon Albee, *Job Hunting After Forty* (New York: Arco Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), pp. 76-77.

⁸ Charles R. Gruner, Cal M. Logue, Dwight L. Freshley, and Richard C. Huseman, *Speech Communication in Society* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1972), pp. 270-271.

⁹ Howard Bloomethal, *Promoting Your Cause* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1974), p. 25.

Reprinted by permission from *The Clearing House*, vol. 56, No. 7 (March, 1983), pages 319, 320. A publication of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation.

Tips for Better Bible Teaching

(Continued from page 13)

Church, vol. 6, p. 154). Every effort should be made to ask questions that reflect all cognitive levels

and are adapted to the individual differences and needs of the class. Questions should be chosen keeping in mind the various levels of spiritual maturity of the students. Questions can be designed with specific students in mind but directed toward others. Sufficient time should be allowed for the students to think through their answers. Surveys indicate that most teachers allow, on the average, less than one second before requiring an answer. Practice waiting at least five seconds before you call for a response or answer your own question.

System and Order

The Bible teacher can feel assured that he or she need never be alone in the process of communicating God's Word in the classroom. God has made available the Holy Spirit, apart from which there can be no true understanding or effective sharing of spiritual truths. However, Christ's declaration that the Holy Spirit "shall teach you all things" and "guide you into all truth" (John 14:26; 16:13) is a *conditional* promise. The presence and work of the divine Teacher can be hindered or limited by the attitude of the teacher, his or her methods of teaching, as well as classroom conditions, atmosphere, and decorum.

In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul discusses the issue of spiritual gifts, and in conclusion, identifies the kind of environment that must be provided in order for the Holy Spirit to operate most efficiently. Note the apostle's words: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

In describing God's organization of the camp of Israel, Ellen White states:

God is a God of order. Everything connected with heaven is in perfect order; subjection and thorough discipline mark the