

Three Way Conferences

by Ginny Zeller



“When did you learn how to do that?”

“I didn’t know you knew how to count that high!”

“Look, you put hair on the picture of you!”

“Wow, what a great idea!”

Imagine how encouraged and proud a child feels when she hears so many positive statements. Good teaching? You are right. These comments were made by parents who were participating in a conference that included their child.

Including children in conferences is an exciting and valuable part of teaching. I would like to share with you some observations and ideas to get you started.

What is a student, parent, teacher conference?

It is a meeting of the **child** and his **family** and his **teacher**. The child is an active participant. The teacher is the facilitator and supports the child. This conference is a gift of time for a child to share his school world with his family.

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I find that most of these conferences take about 30 minutes.

Why should I have one?

Three way conferences have *positive results* for all of the participants — child, parent, and teacher.

The **child** can share what she likes and does not like in school. She can *explain* in her own words *what she has learned* and where she is having problems. She can *take responsibility* for her own actions and has time to *problem solve* with the help of her family and teacher.

Parents feel *less anxiety* in attending conferences because their child is doing so much of the sharing. They can become *active participants* in their child's learning. They can observe their child's pride in what he can do and *offer support* in areas that are more difficult. They can observe how their child approaches problem solving and if this is an area of concern.

The **teacher** learns much more about the family as a whole. She can observe how they interact and *help explain appropriate developmental levels* and goals, and she can *model* how to accept this child where he is and how to move forward. "Zak, we can see how much you've learned since school began. Let's see how we can plan together on what you can work on next."

When should I have three way conferences?

There are many opportunities when you can include a child in a conference.

Often we call for conferences when there is a *discipline problem*. We all know how difficult it is for some children to accept responsibility for their actions. When the child is present, he can help explain the problem. The child can tell what happened from his point of view and the teacher can add any other input. Together, with all participants involved, they can brainstorm a solution. Parents can observe how their child chooses to follow or break rules and why. Problems sometimes lessen when the child has input into the solution.

Many times there is an *information gathering* conference within the first few months of school. When the child is included, she can share any fears or concerns. She can tell about her interests, providing information that can be used to help create an appropriate curriculum. This is a wonderful opportunity to go over rules and to show how problems are handled within your classroom. It can clarify any misunderstandings about rules because both the child and her family are hearing the same words from the teacher.

One of the most powerful ways to hold a three way conference is to have the child *share*, in her own words, *what she has learned*.

How do I get ready for this conference?

Begin with a few things to include at conference time. *Save examples* of the child's work. This can be started very easily in a student file. Include some of the very *first things* a child did. Most of us have our children *draw themselves* within the first few weeks of school. Date the pictures and then use them whenever the child and you are conferencing. "This is the first picture you drew of yourself. What do you think?" Often the child cannot believe he did it!

I have a student now who is so amazed that this was how she drew herself that she asks to see her first attempt — often. Her usual statement is, "No, I didn't do that! Who did?" After she sees her name on it, she agrees it must be hers, but she still has a difficult time understanding how she could have drawn like that. Her delight in her own accomplishment is contagious. For children who do not see their own progress, offer some assistance. "Do you know that now when you draw yourself you put on a body?"

You can include a *first attempt at writing* (journals, names, labels) and any other areas that you want (math, art, science). Take newer examples (with the child's input) and add as conference time approaches. These samples can develop into portfolios.

You may want to include any *screening* done on a child. Again, to help the child see her own growth, offer a statement like "Do you know that when we started school you could count to 10 and now you count to 20?" This helps a child see her own gains and to hear language to help her explain it to her family.

Children can do a *self-evaluation*. In my class, these are done four times a year. The students draw a self-portrait and then draw who their friends are. They draw and write about something they have learned, and they draw and write about something in which they need to improve. The last item is a beginning step to goal setting.

Children are very aware of where they are having difficulties. This year a child drew herself with her hand over her mouth and a thinking bubble that said, "Stop talking, Emma!" At the bottom was a picture of me saying, "Thank you!" This was an area in which she knew she needed to



improve. At conference time, the child and her family can brainstorm ideas to reach this goal.

Before the Conference –

Give yourself enough time to get ready!

Tell the children about the conferences and how they will get a chance to show their families how much they have learned. Even children who are struggling can show growth in some areas! *Practice with each child.* Go over what he is going to show his parents and help him to point out how much he has learned. This is the area where you can offer the most support at the conference by guiding the child to show progress.

At the Conference

Allow the child to take charge of explaining what she has accomplished. It's fun to listen to a child, bursting with pride, lead his family through several months of work. Offer support only when needed. You will be amazed at how little you say!

Sometimes you might want to share some information that you don't want the child to hear. Perhaps you need to speak with the family about some very big delays that you observe. You can ask the child to go to another area, such as the rug, where Legos can be used. "I'm going to talk to your mom now and we'll call you back to finish up our conference."

At the Conclusion of the Conference

Help the child and her family *set one or two realistic goals* in any area. Brainstorm ideas to reach these goals together. Write them down and have the child and his family sign the paper.

It can be as simple as:

John needs to listen better.

1. He will sit closer to the front at rug time.
2. He will look at the teacher when she is talking.

In one month we will discuss how we are doing. Make a copy of the goal setting and send it home the next day.

What do parents think of three way conferences?

Most of the comments that families shared with me after attending three way conferences have been positive.

"I was very proud of the way my daughter showed me all her hard work."

"My son showed such leadership. I didn't know that about him."

"She didn't miss a thing!"

Some parents still wished that I had participated more. For those families, I offered another conference.

Sound like a lot of work? It is. It's also one of the most rewarding moments you will spend with your students. You will get to participate in teaching at its best — teaching and learning that is exciting, positive, and that highlights all of the learning that has taken place for each individual child in your class.

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