

Conferencing with Parents of Infants

by Kay Albrecht

Parent conferences are an accepted part of a high quality care and early education program. Conferences form the foundation of the communication system between parents and the programs in which children spend their day. The length of the day and the busy schedules of working parents often leave teachers wondering how to make this crucial part of the program a viable one.

Conferences Are Parent Education

Conferences are a component of parent education. There are five goals of parent education.

- to help parents develop self-confidence in their own parenting style;
- to increase their understanding of child development;
- to enhance parenting skills so that parents are able to support their child's increasing developmental competence;
- to empower parents to make good parenting decisions and choices; and
- to connect parents to resources.

To address each of these goals for parents of infants, reconceptualize parent conferences into a broader system of conferencing.



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Assumptions about Conferencing with Parents of Infants Are Different

Parent conferences are actually part of a broader communication system. The system is based on five assumptions:

- All communication needs to take place more often.
- Family systems have many adjustments to make as they transition to parenthood. Parenting in the U.S. is a lonely endeavor. Close relatives, neighborhoods as community, and same-age and stage friends have gone the way of the dinosaurs for many families.
- Parents of infants are different than parents of older children. There is little argument that this is true, particularly for first time parents. The question is what to do about it without wearing out teachers and their directors.
- A wider variety of formats is required for conferencing with parents of infants. One type of conferencing is not enough.
- Parents of infants want and need more resources and information.

Re-conceptualizing Conferencing

Pamela, director of a large church-sponsored program, is exploring whether she should drop her infant program altogether. "Parents of infants take so much hand holding and support. They are upset about every change in their baby or in the program. They view even normal changes as indicators that something is wrong. We are spending hours a week with these parents and wonder if it is worth it."

Re-conceptualizing conferencing into a more multi-dimensional approach lessens the feeling of being overwhelmed by infant parents. Parent communication is viewed as an ongoing two way communication system between parents, the school, and the teacher. The foundation of the relationship is a reciprocal one that benefits both participants. Four types of conferencing facilitate a reciprocal relationship:

- formal, face to face conferences with written documentation;
- informal conferences with written documentation;
- formal, oral conferences that occur at checkpoints in the care and early education schedule; and
- informal, oral conferences that occur as a part of the regular interface between the parent and the teacher.

Let's look at each of these types of communicating and conferencing.

Formal Conferences with Written Documentation

This is the traditional conference. Parents and the teacher sit down together



to review some sort of written evaluation of the child's developmental skill repertoire. Formal conferences with written documentation are an important part of the parent education process because they validate the importance of understanding the child's age and stage.

What is often missing from the formal conference is an opportunity for the parents to let teachers know about their feelings, issues, or concerns. Formal conferences are usually directed by the teacher, who shares information she has collected with the parents.

Parents can become a part of the formal conference process by identifying topics they would like to include or discuss. A series of open ended questions to consider before the conference might stimulate parents' thinking about what they might want to discuss.

Informal Conferences with Written Documentation

It seemed like it started all at once for Ying Chu. One day, she began to cry loudly when her mother or father dropped her off at school or came in the door to pick her up. The teacher reports similar behavior from Ying Chu during the day. She says that every time she moves away, Ying Chu starts to scream and cry, particularly when the teacher is helping another baby.

Ying Chu's mother is beside herself with this change. Until now, everything had been going fine. She wonders where this behavior is coming from and is considering looking for another program for her child.

Every infant teacher worth her salt knows that Ying Chu is experiencing separation anxiety — the normal separation behavior that accompanies the attachment process. Why, then, doesn't Ying Chu's mother know what is going on?

Infants change so dramatically during the first three years. They go from helpless, dependent, puzzling newborns to walking, talking, and interacting toddlers. This is a dramatic and rapid process. Parents, particularly first time parents, need opportunities to understand and support this rapid developmental growth.

Because infant development takes place so quickly, it must be shared as it happens. Parents of infants benefit from seeing and sharing the little changes that indicate growth, not just the easily observable milestones like pulling to a stand or walking. Informal, written communication can fill this role.

We used to call them anecdotal notes — observations of what happened, when it happened, where it happened, and with whom it happened written down to consider later for implications or conclusions.

Seizing the opportunity to share this type of developmental data on a regular basis creates a wonderful dialogue between parents and teachers. Try using an inexpensive spiral-bound notebook for each infant. Start by writing one anecdotal note a week on each child. Then send the notebook home and ask the parents to write one anecdotal note about what happens at home.

This back and forth of observations — not opinions or judgments — hones skills for both parties. Teachers learn to really observe babies' behavior as a source for notes. Parents become good observers of their child's developmental growth at home and better at sharing it with their child's teacher.

Something else beneficial happens. Parents get a glimpse of what teachers do all day besides diaper, feed, and hold infants. Informal, written communication reinforces that observation is a crucial part of the teacher's role. It communicates that parents are important sources of information about their child's development. It also gives teachers the perfect opportunity to share other resources with parents. Written materials, videotapes, reference books, helping professionals, and support from other parents with similar experiences can all be offered to enhance the parent education process.

Ying Chu's parents needed opportunities to note her increasing discomfort with arrival and departure, discuss separation anxiety and how normal it is, read about separation anxiety, and talk to another parent whose child is through this stage. Her family would be more knowledgeable and less worried about this emerging emotional developmental milestone if these types of conferences had occurred.

Formal, Oral Conferences

Madeline and Tab, parents of Amanda, have been enrolled since their baby was six weeks old. At about six months, they requested a conference with the infant coordinator to discuss concerns they were unable to work out with their teacher.

Conversation during the conference revealed that the family was satisfied with the routine care their daughter was getting and happy with the teacher's relationship with Amanda. They had no concerns about their child's safety or health and felt the teacher did a good job of communicating with them about Amanda's daily patterns like eating, sleeping, and diaper changes.

What then was the problem? It turns out Madeline had seen another teacher reading a story to one of the babies and was extremely concerned that Amanda was never read to at school. Because she had never seen it, it wasn't happening. In spite of notes to the contrary on the daily communication sheet and posted curriculum plans indicating which books were being

Conferencing with Parents of School-Agers

by Linda G. Miller

The image of conferencing with parents of school-agers is probably a negative one. A parent-teacher conference over a stack of papers marked with red ink is not very inviting, and those of us who have survived this type of conference would probably like to "JUST SAY NO." The image of conferencing can be a very different one. Because we are filling a very unique role in the school-ager's life, our conferences can be informative as well as enjoyable and look unlike traditional conferences.

Children in their school-age years are incredibly active and social beings, but they spend the majority of the day engaged at desks with paper and pencil activities. What they really need is to be involved with stimulating activities and projects where they can interact with others in a meaningful way or choose to work alone. School-age programs provide these activities and projects, enriching the lives of both school-agers and their families.

If we buy into the "project approach" whereby school-agers contribute to meaningful, long term projects over time, we will be observing, recording, encouraging, reflecting, narrating, and enjoying all along with the school-agers we serve. Instead of a pass/fail, yes/no, complete/incomplete kind of evaluation, we can provide an evaluation that reflects who, why, and in what direction school-agers are developing. Our evaluation will be formative (in the process) instead of summative (at the end). For example, parents whose child is participating in a drama project may get information about their child through the pictures taken of set construction, the video of characters brainstorming about their motivations, the announcement of the play to be presented, or the actual performance of the play. These show living, real documentation of a child's experiences.

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read this week, Madeline and Tab were concerned about their child's cognitive and language development.

As this vignette illustrates so vividly, points of view can be very different. For this family, all of the usual concerns were absent.



Health and safety, attention, written information about the child's daily schedule, etc. were of no concern. One observation during arrival or departure led them to conclude that their child was in some way left out of an important developmental experience.

What we share with parents is as important as what we don't share. Every teacher of infants knows that early exposure to books is an important curriculum activity that fosters a love of reading in later life. Books are read to infants in programs every day. How often do we share with parents that we read to their child every day?

Building in checkpoints for regular exchanges between parents and their teachers is an important part of the conferencing system. T. Berry Brazelton identified *Touchpoints* of development that offer pediatricians an opportunity to discuss upcoming developmental changes and progress. Perhaps we need a *Touchpoints*-like approach to formal, oral conferencing!

Consider formal, oral conferences at the end of the first full week of care, one month later, and at least quarterly thereafter. In addition, formal, oral conferences might be helpful any time something is going to change — like a teacher's schedule or a change in staffing.

Although this seems like a lot of conferences, they can take place fairly simply by telephone. The scheduling problems of face-to-face conferences are almost completely avoided.

Frequent connections like these confirm that everyone is on the same page and that nothing is going on that needs attention. Structure the topics to cover so similar topics are covered each time. Make a list of questions to ask each time you talk. (For example, what are your observations about your child's experience at the center? Has anything changed in your family?) Keep the notes from the conversation each time to analyze for trends, continued concerns, or even compliments to share with your director or other teachers.

Informal, Oral Conferences

Informal, oral conferences that occur as a part of the regular interface between parents and their child's teacher is the last type of conference. These take place daily during the arrival or departure time of the family at the center. Don't overlook them as conferences. Parents get to view their child's experience from these verbal exchanges. The amount and accuracy of these conversations can either build confidence or concern.

Confidence builds if the infant staff show their connection with the baby.



So what is the conference, anyway? We may not have a sit down appointment or a score sheet. Hopefully, however, each day (or certainly each week) we will be able to give parents some insight into how their child is doing. Parents may gain this insight through a letter, a conversation, a picture, a culminating event of a project, a video, samples of art, brief narratives, a letter written by another school-ager, or even a phone call. One very big part of the picture, the school-ager's social development, is all but ignored in traditional school. What a wonderful gift we have to give — to let parents know (in many different ways) that their child is learning to negotiate, to empathize, to facilitate another individual's goal. Take great notes and lots of pictures because school-agers change so fast!

In a sense, we are in the best position possible to let parents know how their school-ager is developing physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially because we are able to say what the school-ager *can do* and that the school-ager *is becoming*.



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Concern builds if opening and closing staff aren't reliable reporters of the child's experience or can't share information with parents when asked.

Operational supports help. Written communication systems like pattern sheets, telephone calls from the child's primary teacher who arrives after the parent drops off the child or before the child leaves, and varying schedules so parents see their child's teacher either upon arrival or departure all help. And this is an ongoing staff development issue. Helping early and late teachers see the importance of arrival and departure interactions as crucial parent conferences is a topic worth discussing often.

Teachers and parents must invest in building a relationship. The outcome of the investment is parents whose parenting skills grow as their baby matures and develops. Taking the time to set up and implement a multidimensional conferencing system makes conferences *become* parent education.