

## Home and School Connections: Conferencing Effectively About the Children We Share

*“Teachers who establish partnerships with the families or other caregivers of their students must understand the cultural backgrounds of their students and the unique challenges those families may be experiencing. Teachers must be able to communicate clearly and respectfully with family members and demonstrate a genuine interest in the welfare of the child and family. They must be skillful in conducting meetings with caregivers that create a sense of teamwork between the home and school as well as delineate appropriate and manageable ways for providing support for a student’s learning at home. In addition, teachers must demonstrate sensitivity to ways in which caregivers may be most appropriately involved in schools as classroom volunteers or committee members.”*

*(National Staff Development Council Standards – Family Involvement)*

As I sit down to write this month’s article for the NBTA News, I find myself thinking that I just might have to admit that age is finally catching up to me. Why you ask? Well, it seems that I have LOST at least 3 weeks of September and perhaps 2 weeks of October. I have no idea where they went!

While I may be finding it difficult to imagine that November is upon us, the thickening frost on my windshield each morning reinforces the fact that time has indeed marched on. The chill in the air reminds us all that it will soon be **that** time of year again --- (insert Count Dracula-like laugh here) --- Report Cards and Parent Teacher Interviews. (And you thought Halloween could be scary!)

Other than their obvious proximity of timing, I think we must acknowledge that both of these milestone events, evoke more trepidation from students, their parents and teachers than perhaps any other single event in the school calendar.

For many of our struggling students, this annual dashing of September’s “new school year expectations” when juxtaposed with the “realities of my report card marks” leaves opportunity for many possibilities for miscommunication and misunderstanding between home and school. (A recent study suggests that our struggling students do not see a link between their report card mark and their day-to-day academic performance and achievement in class. This inability to make this link results in them viewing report card marks as a

random valuation on them personally rather than a measure of academic performance that has potential for improvement.)

Likewise, many of our parents are reminded of their own feelings of inadequacy, fear or frustration regarding school as they watch their children’s school experience. I can still remember watching my parents prepare to leave the house on “Parent/Teacher Talk” night.

***“...report card and conference time can be one of the more intimidating yet most informative times during the school year...”***

(Showing my age yet again with that terminology, aren’t I?) I distinctly remember feeling my mother’s nervousness as she went through rituals of extreme preparedness for the event and then her immense relief upon her arrival home later that evening at having survived “another round”. I now realize that her nervousness had far less to do with my performance at school and was more symptomatic of her own negative school experiences that resulted in her not finishing high school.

As teachers, it is also important to remember that the urban legend of the “irate parent” can sometimes lead to inclinations of defensiveness

in our approach to home and school communication.

For all teachers, but perhaps most especially for our newer teachers, conference time can be one of the more intimidating yet most informative times during the school year.

What follows are a few tips that may be helpful in preparing yourself to handle conferences professionally and effectively and not feel intimidated:

- Dress appropriately. Clearly demonstrate your professionalism, importance of the meeting and respect for the parents.
- Pay attention to your surroundings and make every effort to make things inviting. Arrange desks or a table where you can sit with families to discuss common areas of interest or concern as opposed to sitting behind the teacher’s desk talking at one another.
- Have access to a digital camera? This can be a great tool to help prepare for conferences. Take lots of photos of students engaged in classroom activities throughout the term and display them in prominent locations. While conferencing, reference them as you explain links with curricular outcomes.
- Have a copy of the report card with you plus any documentation you think they’ll need - e.g. monthly reports, behavioral logs, tests (that have been signed by

the parents), examples of grade level standards, exemplars of student work, etc.

- Begin the conference by asking "Do you have any questions or comments about the report card?", and then go from there.
- Maintain a positive attitude, good eye contact and listen attentively, i.e. learn as much as possible about the student's home life, their hobbies, responsibilities, etc.
- Be relaxed and calm when discussing a behavioral or emotional issue. Your intent is to get the parents to be your allies and work together to resolve any problems.
- If and when you discuss actual events about the student's misbehavior (or other problems), give examples of what he/she did or was involved in - if the student is there, all the better - he/she has to explain and be accountable. (Of course, if these have been significant issues, then significant communication between home

and school would already have occurred. The parent-teacher conference would not be the occasion to initiate such conversation.)

- End by shaking hands, smiling and perhaps even some small talk about school social events, etc.

Things to avoid while conferencing with families:

DO NOT -

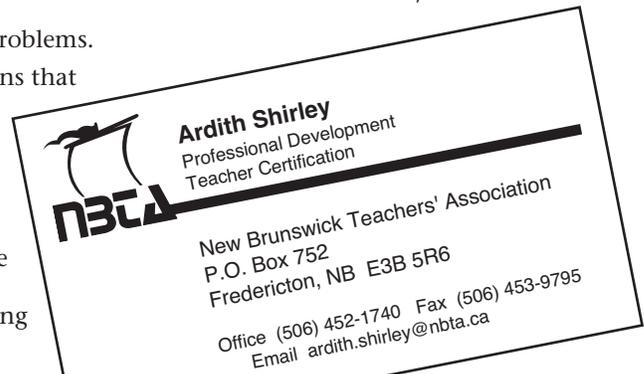
- Begin by focusing on the student's problems.
- Compare one student to another.
- Argue with a parent or blame them.
- Focus on family problems.
- Allow conversations that speak negatively about other teachers, the school or the administration.
- Allow any possible distractions or interruptions during

the parent teacher conference - e.g. turn off your cell phone.

Know that since each one of your students is different and unique, your interviews will be just as diverse. Finally, keep in mind that students and parents look to you as an expert in their education.

Be professional, personable, compassionate, and most of all confident in your abilities.

Best wishes for a happy and healthy reporting period!



## May I Recommend?

(Who am I kidding? Who has time to read anything I might recommend in November? I will save anything I have come across in the last month or so until our next issue! Stay tuned! ☺)

### Closing Quote:

*"Communication does not depend on syntax, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard. People can only hear you when they are moving toward you, and they are not likely to when your words are pursuing them. Even the choicest words lose their power when they are used to overpower. Attitudes are the real figures of speech."*

- Edwin H. Friedman

## References

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