

# Successful Parent-Teacher Interviews Over the Phone

Due to COVID restrictions, many schools are now conducting Parent-Teacher conferences over the phone or using ZOOM. This creates some different challenges to the usual face-to-face meetings. Here are some tips to optimise your parent-teacher conferences.

**BEFORE THE CALL** - Be prepared – Make sure you are absolutely clear on the following.  
*What are the key messages you want to communicate to the parent?*  
*What outcomes are you trying to achieve?*

Whilst this might be one of many calls that you need to make to parents, this is THE CALL that parent has been waiting for. It is likely to be an important call for the parent. Remember this is their son or daughter and for most parents their children are the most important part of their life, more valuable to them than their house or car or anything they own. Be on time and at all times be professional and personable. This phone conversation is important to building trust with the parent. Whilst it is over the phone, we still need to treat it as we would a face-to-face parent interview. Stand up for better energy levels if you feel your energy is low.

Hide Your Caller ID – in your phone change the setting to keep your caller ID private. Avoid using the speakerphone if possible. Use the handset or headphones.

Take 3 deep, slow, breaths to calm your mind. Focus on lowering your shoulders. If things get tense at any stage during the conference, stop and take two deep breaths.

Smile Before You Dial - People are amazingly perceptive and read your energy level, sincerity and attitude in your voice. Smiling as you dial changes your demeanor and your voice. Making a good first impression is still important. We don't have the opportunity to communicate through non-verbals, make eye contact or smile whilst we shake hands to greet them.

**DURING THE CALL** - Introduce yourself and tell the parent how much you have been looking forward to talking with them about their child. Ask them how they are going in these challenging times. It can also be helpful to show that you know their child e.g. *"I bet Billy is missing his soccer matches!"* Apologising that you aren't able to meet face-to-face and acknowledging that it is more difficult over the phone sets a tone of *"We are in this together!"*

Parents want to hear YOUR perception of how their child is progressing in their learning. Think about what you would say if you bumped into them at the shops and they asked, *"How is Billy going?"* I like to use the format of *'Open to Learning Conversations'* by Viviane Robinson.

Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill

- Tell them what you think
- Tell them why you think it
- Inquire – *their reactions, their own thoughts, check for accuracy*
- Detect and check assumptions
- Establish common ground
- Make a plan and summarise what will happen moving ahead

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Ask the parent if they have something they wish to tell you about their child. However, most parents are particularly interested in hearing your perspective of how their child is progressing so you are still likely to do most of the talking (think 80/20 not 50/50).

If the parent sounds like they have something they "want to get off their chest", listen attentively but don't respond until they have finished. Often they will have rehearsed and prepared what they are going to say. They are not ready to change from speaking mode to listening mode until they have said the speech they have rehearsed.

However, if a parent becomes abusive or aggressive, remain calm and respond that you are sorry they feel that way however you will not be able to continue the conversation if they are abusive. If their unacceptable behaviour continues, in a calm voice tell them that the phone call will have to end and that you will set up a further conversation at another time.

Keep track of time to keep on schedule. At the end of the conversation ask the parent to summarise the key messages they have heard. This helps check for understanding.

**AFTER THE CALL** - Take some notes and record any actions needed to follow up.

## Key points

Be prepared

What are your key messages?

What outcomes do you want?

Hide your caller ID

Smile before you dial – your voice will communicate your attitude

Parents want to hear YOUR opinion of how they are progressing

- Tell them what you think
- Tell them why you think it
- Inquire their reactions
- Check assumptions
- Establish common ground
- Make a plan and summarise what next

At the end of the call check for understanding

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Steve is an expert in school leadership and work-life satisfaction. Steve was a Principal for 20 years and is the author of four books, *'Time Management For Teachers'*, *'A Gr8 Life...Live it Now!'*, *'First Semester Can Make or Break You!'* and *'Attitude is Everything'*. Steve lives in Brisbane with his wife and family but works with school leaders and staff in schools across Australia and internationally.

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