

Tips for Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences with Bilingual Families

By: Kristina Robertson (2007)

"Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I'll remember. Involve me and I'll understand."

— Confucius

Introduction

Your family has been selected for a new reality show called "Education Around the World." You and your children are relocated within a week to a country very different from the United States — let's say China. To win the grand prize on the reality show, you must help your children succeed in the Chinese public school system. Before you leave the U.S., you barely learn survival Chinese and you've gotten the basic assistance to get your children registered in the Chinese school system. You don't know anything, however, about the Chinese educational system, and you are not sure what the expectations are for students or their parents, or how you will communicate with the teacher since he/she speaks very little English.

Once you have arrived and the school year begins, you are not able to understand the information that is sent home; your children are struggling to learn math, social studies, and science in Chinese with one hour of English support each day; and you don't know how you should communicate with the teacher or if the school has parent-teacher conferences. If the school does hold conferences, how does it work? Do you sign up for a time? Do you go there and wait for your turn? Do the teachers come visit the house? Or are parent-teacher conferences only held when there is a problem? And perhaps the most important question of all: if you want an English translator, how do you request one?

This example demonstrates what some of our ELL families might experience as they attempt to understand the U.S. educational system and such practices as parent-teacher conferences. The challenges of this situation could also be compounded if parents do not have very much education themselves and feel uncomfortable in an educational environment.

In addition, parents may come from a culture where it is either insulting to a teacher to ask for student progress information. Alternatively, the expectation may be that the children have been sent to the teacher to learn and if the teacher is asking for a parent's help, then there must be something wrong with the teacher. You can see how many bridges must be crossed in order to offer the kind of outreach and support parents may need to fully benefit from parent-teacher conferences.

Teacher tips for parent-teacher conferences with bilingual families

Before the conference

Encourage parent attendance

To prepare for a successful conference night, see the [September Bright Ideas](#) article on encouraging bilingual family involvement, which includes ideas on bilingual invitations, childcare, and other steps you can take to encourage parent attendance.

Make personal contact

After sending the conference invitations home, call the parents or greet the families at school and ask them if they will be able to meet with you.

Make an appointment with the parents

Take a tip from sales people: give parents an appointment time. When you offer the appointment time, ask the parent if they will be able to come at that time or to suggest a time that is more convenient for them. Then describe the parent-teacher conference and what they should expect.

Give parents a reminder call

Another tip from sales people: The day before the conference, make a reminder call. Be aware that families may have children in other grades or in other schools, and do your best to coordinate with all staff involved on the appointment times for the family. If possible, be flexible if a family can't make the appointment on conference day, and arrange to meet the family on another day after school.

Arrange for an interpreter

It is very important that students are not the interpreters. Students may not feel comfortable interpreting for their parents. They may not know the appropriate vocabulary to interpret the educational information. And they may not necessarily be forthcoming if they do not like the information being presented. (Some

teachers have reported that a few of their Spanish-speaking students told their parents that 'F' stood for "Fantástico".)

Enlist help to find an interpreter if necessary

If you do not have an official interpreter available at your school, talk to your principal and/or school district about the need to get one. If in-person interpreters are not available (and you may not be able to get one for a low-incidence language such as Urdu or Farsi), there are companies that provide interpreters over the phone so that you could set up a phone conference with your student's parents. If another bilingual parent offers to serve as an interpreter, make sure that the conference parent is comfortable with this. Also make sure that this does not violate privacy policies in your school district.

Consider training parents to become interpreters

If interpreters are not readily available at your school, consider offering an "interpreters' training" for bilingual parents, and enlist the support of those parents who have become familiar with the school and educational environment. Offer the training they need so that they feel comfortable and confident with their skills in a new role as an interpreter for other parents. Again, make sure that this does not violate privacy policies in your school district.

Create an interpreters' schedule with other teachers

Be aware that interpreters may have many classrooms to assist. If possible, collaborate with other teachers to establish an "interpreters' schedule."

Train interpreters and staff

Before conference night, have a training session for interpreters and staff in order to make the process successful and ensure that all people involved have the skills and understanding necessary to support the families.

Meet with the interpreter

Meet with the interpreter before the conference to go over the meeting schedule and agenda, and to address any questions or concerns. Be sure to define the kind of information that will be shared and to reinforce the fact that the interpreter is translating the information, not offering advice or opinions.

Review educational terms and vocabulary with the interpreter

Make sure that the interpreter feels comfortable interpreting certain vocabulary words that may not exist in their own language such as "special education," "state standards," or "curriculum."

Allow more time for translations

Conferences that include an interpreter will take more time while you, the interpreter, and the parents exchange information.

Be aware of cultural differences

If possible, get some background information about your students' cultures and educational expectations that their parents may have. The following true anecdote illustrates the importance of this: a kindergarten teacher held a conference with parents who were from an African country. The kindergarten teacher was very concerned about their child's excessive talking, activity, and inability to pay attention or play quietly with the other children. The parents beamed at the teacher and described how happy they were that their child was displaying such inquisitive and active intelligent behavior. They had a very different perspective on the behaviors of a successful learner.

During the conference

Speak with the parents, not the interpreter

During the conference, always make eye contact with and talk directly to the parent (as opposed to speaking with the interpreter).

Speak evenly and pause frequently

Speak at a measured pace (not slowly or more loudly), and pause often so the interpreter can translate a manageable amount of information.

Use simple documents in your explanations

Use documents for visual support, but keep them simple. For example, don't offer a full-page single-spaced description of the curriculum. Offer an example of the student's work and a bullet list or rubric to show how it is evaluated, or a simple calendar with curriculum projects filled in.

Discuss educational plans and the parents' expectations

Some schools develop educational plans with the parents, and this may be a new concept for ELL parents. Simplify the process by asking the parent, "What do you hope your child will learn this year?" or "What do you want your child to get better at?"

Offer translated information if possible

Many schools now offer basic student progress forms in two languages — English on one side and a second language on the other. Teachers fill in the appropriate information for each student and then give the parents the form, showing them the translated explanation of the form on the back. Some forms include

classroom schedules and an area for grades and test scores, while others use very basic symbols such as smiley faces. While the teacher's remarks themselves may not be translated, the parents will have an explanation in their language of how their child is being evaluated, and will be able to get a good sense of their child's progress from the form. If your school offers such forms, they can be a highly useful tool in communicating with parents.

Offer information about local support resources

Parents may not know about resources such as the public library's homework-help program or a tutoring support program offered in the school or community.

Encourage reading at home

Emphasize the importance of reading at home in the student's native language and/or English. The important thing is to encourage the joy of reading and to continue to support the development of both languages.

Leave time for parent questions

Underscore the importance of ongoing communication between the home and the school. Provide the parents with ways that they can contact you and communicate their questions and concerns with the necessary bilingual support. And of course — don't forget to thank them for coming!

After the conference

Send a thank you note

One of the most important things about a parent-teacher conference is the development of a partnership between the teacher and the parents. Once the conference has been completed, you can send a note home to the parents and tell them how much you enjoyed meeting them and talking about their child, or you can make a call to the family within a few weeks of the conference to inform them about the positive progress you have noticed in their child.