

Conducting a Successful Parent Conference

Approaching the Conference

Parent-staff conferences can produce anxiety both in parents and in staff. We all care about the child and may worry that we will be judged in some way or found wanting for our piece of the child's experience. Another source of anxiety is that parents (and staff) may not know what to expect. In almost every case, if we relax, conferences become a time of mutual affirmation, respect, and sharing about the child. It will help if you have prepared what you want to say, you are familiar with the child's portfolio and the items you want to highlight, and you have notes on the child's and family's experiences that you want to discuss. The more you are aware of the family's values and concerns, sensitivities and strengths, the better the chance for a great conference.

It will help if you send parents these forms ahead of time: the conference report form, with an outline of discussion points; a copy of the current personal care plan, and a copy of the current child development profile.

Note: *Conferences are not times to surprise parents by bringing up sensitive events or issues for the first time (for example, "Jeremy has a problem with aggression," "Staff are concerned about your overcritical statements to teachers"). Conferences are times to review issues and, if necessary, put a concern in context, discuss it in depth, plan, or adjust a plan.*

Preparing What You Will Say

Remember that this is not a report on the child's behavior but on the child's experience in a group setting. A child who is having a difficult time may behave in a way that poses a problem for staff and for the child in the center's setting, but the child may be fine developmentally. Adjusting to the group, the routines, the separation, or the environment often has nothing to do with the child's normal development. Helping the child may depend on the caregiver's capacity to provide a setting that works for that particular child.

Here are some specific ideas to keep in mind when preparing what you will say:

- Be positive: look for the strengths and endearing qualities in the child.
- Be clear.
- Summarize.
- Be prepared with specific examples: behavior, situations, and feelings.
- Be honest about concerns or questions but recognize sensitivities.
- If you have any questions about how to approach a parent about a sensitive issue, discuss them with a supervisor. It is often essential to rehearse a question or comment about a sensitive issue. It can also be helpful to role-play some of the possible responses you may encounter.

- Don't be judgmental: report on problems or concerns without judging the child, parents, or program.
- Actively listen: you want to know what the parents know, think, and feel. If you are uncertain about their perspective, ask them for clarification. There are no dumb questions when trying to understand the child and the family.
- Pay attention to and respect the family's values and culture: recognize that differences of opinions about child care and education are often just that, differences of opinion or belief. We believe in what we do, but it is neither the only way nor the true way to do things.

Getting Off to a Good Start

Put the parent at ease by offering coffee or juice. Say something right away that shows you enjoy the child and respect the parents. Possibly share a story about their child from that day. Explain the purpose of the conference; tell them you want to make sure it offers them a chance to discuss what is on their minds. If you have any time constraints, let them know this up front. Be willing to offer additional meeting time if needed.