

APPENDIX B

Parents' Perspectives on Conferencing

(First appeared in *Exchange* magazine, July 1997)

by Roslyn Ann Duffy

Children are awake 12 or more hours each day existing in, exploring, and experiencing this world. They snooze away most of the remainder of each 24-hour span. Many spend more than half of their waking hours with people other than their parents. When parents and children separate for long periods each day, there is a tremendous need to hear stories about each other: What did you eat today? Did you learn a new song? Were you sad, mad, or glad over something? Parent conferences are a formal time for parents and teachers to share stories.

Three Concerns

Parents come to conferences with three basic concerns.

- Do you know and like my child?
- Can I trust you?
- Is my child normal?

These concerns are the bottom line.

Three Messages

Parents want to convey three main messages.

- I want to be a good parent.
- I love my child and she is very special to me.
- I want specific things for my child: physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially (PIES).

Structure

Structure a conference to meet parents' needs. Addressing all three concerns and messages leads to successful parent conferences. Imagine three parts to each meeting:

- Part One:** Listen and share stories

- Part Two:** Address the child's school performance
- Part Three:** Prepare for the future

Part One

The first part of a conference is listening. Give parents a chance to talk about their child. Ask how they think Mary is doing in the program. Allow their concern, love, and pride a place of honor at this meeting. A parent's biggest worry is that her child might get lost in the crowd. A conference is not just for teachers to recount Mary's progress. *It is not a verbal report card.*

Listening to parents allows them to communicate two of their messages:

- I want to be a good parent.
- I love my child and she is very special to me.

Mary's parents appreciate the opportunity to talk about Mary. "We love Mary. She is very special to us." In the process of expressing their love for Mary, her parents also demonstrate their commitment to being good parents.

When parents feel listened to, they are much more open to listening.

Sharing comes next. Conferences offer a special opportunity to exchange specific as well as anecdotal information. Mary's mom glows with pride when Mr. Franks tells her about a dress-up game Mary initiated with her friends Juan and Sally yesterday. She laughs with him over Mary's originality. She feels pleased that this adult took the time to notice her child. Her child is the most special person in her world and she loves it when others respond in kind to Mary's antics.

The conference begins by giving Mary's parents time to talk about their child. The teacher joins in by relating special stories about Mary, the children she chooses as playmates, and some of her recent experiences at school. Within ten minutes Mary's parents feel reassured about two of their three concerns.

- Do you know and like my child?
- Can I trust you?

Her teacher notices Mary, enjoys her, and takes note of her activities. That information translates into the message: This teacher knows and likes Mary. When parents receive such a message, they think: Mary is safe here and we can trust this adult. *Trust builds from tiny bits and pieces of experience.*

Part Two

The second part of the conference addresses the child's performance at school. This responds to the third parental concern:

- Is my child normal?

A variation of this question is more basic: Is my child in 'trouble'? 'Trouble' includes many aspects of development. Use the acronym — PIES. PIES stand for four areas of development: physical, intellectual, emotional, and social. Remember to give parents a serving of PIES.

Parents live with only one or at most a few children. Often there are no other nearby relatives. When four-year-old Sammy tells a lie, his Dad panics. Have I raised a liar? What should I do? Does Sammy lie at school, too? Mr. Silla, Sammy's teacher, has been around hundreds of four- and five-year-olds. His perspective and knowledge of child development enable him to reassure Sammy's Dad that lying is fairly typical for children Sammy's age. Children learn to establish boundaries between fantasy and reality in their late preschool years. Mr. Silla can help Sammy's parents plan effective responses when Sam tells falsehoods.

Alerted to this concern, Mr. Silla pays closer attention at school to see if Sammy's statements are truthful. If he observes Sammy claiming that another child's toy is his, he responds clearly, "Sammy, I saw Mary bring this ball into school this morning. I bet you wish it was yours, don't you?" Sammy nods and learns to express himself honestly without being shamed. "Let's give the ball back to Mary together." Both the family and school work together as a team to support Sammy as he learns needed skills. Developing social competence takes time. Parents feel less defensive about their child's struggle with new skills once a solid basis of trust exists.

Sylvia, Matt's teacher, expresses a concern about Matt getting rebuffed by the older children when he attempts to play with them. Matt's mom recalls he looked sad last week when she saw him standing at the edge of the playground. Sylvia and Matt's mom discuss ways to help Matt with this problem:

- Matt's mom offers to encourage Matt to invite other friends over to play with him at home.
- Sylvia supplies a list of names of possible playmates and says she will work with the older children to teach them gentler ways of responding to younger children's requests.
- Sylvia also promises to bring up the problem of excluding others from games at the next class meeting.

Sometimes a teacher has concerns about a child's development. Betty worries about Justin's difficulty

communicating. Justin is three and uses very few words. The other children cannot understand what he says and Justin's frustration frequently leads to biting. Betty knows that Justin's speech is much less developed than most of the other three-year-olds with whom she has worked. Justin's chronic ear infections add to her concern.

Betty has spoken with Justin's parents on several occasions and knows that his speech at home remains unintelligible. They also know about the biting problem and it worries them, too. Betty had her assistant spend one hour last week recording everything Justin said. At their conference, Betty provides Justin's parents with a copy of the assistant's notes on Justin's speech. She also has copies of several notes that went home previously when biting occurred.

Serious concerns need careful documentation. Ongoing communication alerts parents to problems in advance. *Do not use a conference as a surprise tactic.* Without preparation parents easily respond with shock, resentment, and defensiveness to information that may be, at best, frightening.

Be ready with helpful ideas when airing concerns. Betty has several suggestions for helping Justin:

- She urges his parents to have Justin's language development evaluated by a speech therapist.
- She offers to ask the public health nurse to come to the center, observe Justin, and offer other possible recommendations.

Justin's parents trust Betty, know she cares about their son, and willingly agree to arrange an evaluation.

Sometimes parents do not agree to a proposed course of action. They might feel frightened, insulted, or choose to deny possible problems with their child. This response does not mean the teacher did a poor job of considering, documenting, and communicating her concern. It is important to understand such information may just be too painful for a parent to acknowledge. Sometimes it will take hearing the information from two or more teachers down the road, before a parent accepts the possibility of her child being less than perfect. Nonetheless, teachers provide a valuable service to families when they are willing to initiate seeking special help or support for a child. Someone needs to take that first step.

Part Three

The third and final part of the conference prepares for the future. This involves planning ahead, setting goals, and agreeing on joint objectives. This part of the conference addresses the final parental expectation. It

also underscores the second parental message. A conference is a time for Mary's teacher to understand Mary in the context of her family:

- I want specific things for my child: physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially (PIES).
- I love my child and she is very special to me.

Each classroom constantly changes. The interests of the children ideally play a role in determining the content of the program. Sharing home and school experiences links the different parts of a child's life together.

At conference time, Tommy's mom told about a visit from her mother-in-law. Tommy's grandmother had run a bakery for many years. During her visit, Tommy spent many hours helping in the kitchen. It was easy for his teacher to ask Tommy to bring in one of his grandmother's recipes to share. Tommy proudly did so and led the class in making crusty bread sticks. Tommy's mother appreciates having her value — the importance of extended family members — reinforced at school. Tommy's self-esteem, emotional growth, and social development benefit from this experience.

Jennifer's mom is very anxious for Jennifer to learn to read. Her older sister had a very hard time learning to read and she frets about Jennifer having similar problems. Jennifer turns five in a few weeks. Lori, Jennifer's teacher, describes the activities offered at the school and how they prepare Jennifer to learn to read. Jennifer's mom feels relieved to hear about the value of play for five-year-olds. Lori shows her some of the activities Jennifer does daily and explains their developmental role. By the end of the conference Jennifer's mom feels confident in her daughter's progress. She relaxes her vigilance over Jennifer's reading skills. Once again, trust is being strengthened. Now Jennifer's intellectual development is being addressed in a way supported by her mom, her teacher, and the program's philosophy.

At Malia's conference, her parents discovered Malia's fascination with whales. Although her parents knew that the class went to the aquarium for this month's field trip, they did not know about Malia's special interest. They managed to adjust their vacation plans to include a side trip to the aquarium to see Orca whales. Involvement in Malia's school experiences is very important to her parents. Malia's intellectual and emotional growth thrives. Conferences give parents a valuable tool to maintain their involvement with school programs. In real life such details often get skipped.

Parents miss their children. Working parents long to share the little hugs, wipe away the occasional tear,

and beam with pride at each new accomplishment. Parent conferences provide a way to enter into the richness of their child's school world. To each parent everywhere, her child is special. This is one mother's summation. "My child is my most precious jewel." Conferences provide a setting for both parents and teachers to display those jewels, even the rough-cut ones.

Sidebar: (Pre-conference handout for parents)

Parents' Conference Guidelines

Please use the following ideas to help prepare for your child's conference:

- The **Suggested Parents' Questions** section is for your use.
- The **Home Information** and **Parents Expectations/ Perceptions** sections will be added to your child's file as a reference to help our staff serve you and your child in the best way possible.

Suggested Parents' Questions

- What are my child's preferred interests, activities, or play areas at school?
- With whom does my child play most often?
- Does my child demonstrate any skills above his age level in certain areas?
If so, what areas?
- Does my child show a developmental lag or need help in any area?
If so, what areas and what assistance do you recommend at home, school or from outside sources?
- Any other questions?

ACTION PLAN

Three things I plan to do at home as a result of this conference are:

Child's Name _____

Date _____

Home Information

- What activities or people does my child talk about at home?
- Are there any changes at home: past, present, or planned? Please elaborate.
- Do you feel your child behaves similarly at both school and home?

For example, at home: Is he talkative? Is he quiet or shy? Does he nap or eat at regular times? Does he prefer self-directed activities? Does she more often choose activities involving adults? Other?

- What topics, activities or stories captivate his attention the most?
(Spiders? Garbage trucks? Swimming? Dr. Seuss?)

Parents Expectations/ Perceptions

- What are my goals or expectations for my child?
Short range:
Long range:
- In what way might the school help my child to attain these goals?
- How do I feel about my child's progress at preschool?
Physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially (PIES)
- Do I have any areas of reservation, conflict, or dissatisfaction?
- How do I feel about having my child in child care?
- Any other comments?

ACTION PLAN

Three things we plan to do at school as a result of this conference are: