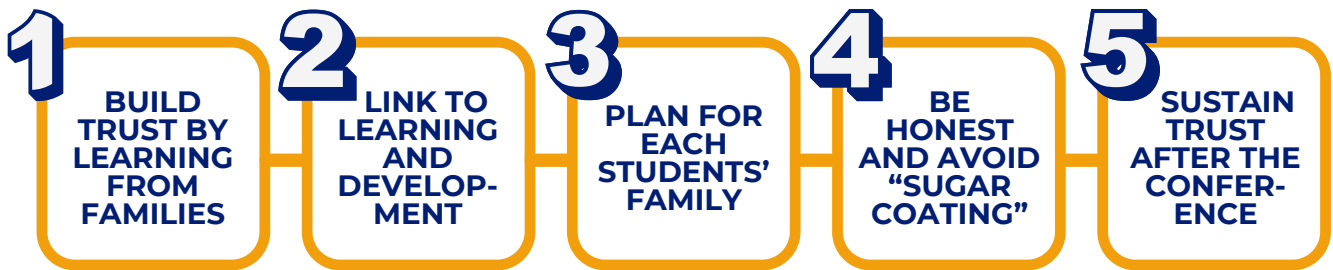




# SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS: FAMILY CONFERENCE GUIDE

## FAMILY CONFERENCES OVERVIEW

Family conferences are a key opportunity for teachers to build trust with families, share grade-level expectations, and discuss academic performance. These conferences strengthen family-school partnerships, equipping families with the information needed to support and co-create their child's learning experience. This guide outlines five thoughtful steps to help teachers plan inclusive conferences that reflect both family and teacher priorities, fostering mutual learning and supporting student success.



## STEP 1: BUILD TRUST BY LEARNING FROM FAMILIES

As teachers, we might feel pressured to do all the talking during family conferences or have every answer ready. However, strong family-school partnerships are true collaborations, where both sides bring unique knowledge and skills to support student success. Building trust during conferences involves being mindful of how you engage with families. While teachers are instructional experts, taking a listening and learning approach shows families that you value their expertise on their children.



When planning family conferences, consider how you can tap into families' insights about their child, such as their interests, goals, concerns, motivations, and effective behavior strategies. Reflect on your students and what you'd like to learn from each family. **Use the table in appendix 1 to organize your thoughts.**



## RELATIONAL TRUST: BRING FAMILIES INTO CONFERENCE PLANNING

To make family conferences more collaborative and asset-based, invite families into the planning process by co-constructing the agenda. This allows families to share their priorities and goals, helping you plan a conversation that's responsive to each student and family.

About 2-3 weeks before conferences, send a brief survey or note home to gather families' priorities. Electronic surveys, like Google Forms, can be shared via text, email, or app. Alternatively, ask families the survey questions in person, such as in the hallway or at pick-up/dismissal. **For sample language, see the message in appendix 2.**



**Tip:** If you don't have the opportunity to send a pre-conference survey, you can begin the conference by asking families **What's the most important thing for us to discuss today and/or what would you like to get out of this conversation.**

- Be ready to **listen and learn** from families during the conference.
- Understand what matters most to them and **tailor the conversation** around their priorities.



- **Provide space** for families to share their thoughts, ask questions, offer perspectives, and express concerns.
- Allow them to **speak without interruption**, ask follow-up questions, and affirm that you hear and understand them.
- Reinforce that **families are the experts** on their child and that their expertise and partnership are valued and needed.

## STEP 2: LINK TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Conferences should focus on learning and development. A successful family conference helps families understand grade-level expectations, what their child is learning, their child's academic strengths and areas for growth, and how they can support learning at home.

When planning, consider what to share so families clearly understand what their child should know and do by the end of the year. Plan how to explain what you're currently teaching and how families can support it at home. Decide which data or work samples to share and what you want families to take away from them, including how their child is performing relative to expectations.



Reflect individually and/or collaborate with your grade and/or content area peers to answer the questions below.



**Tip:** Practice makes perfect. When talking about academics with families, avoid using jargon or language that isn't commonly used outside of professional education spaces. Practice talking about grade level expectations, teaching and learning, and academic performance using accessible and family-friendly language.



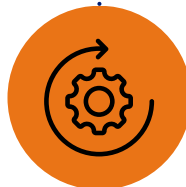
### GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

- What should their student know and be able to do at the end of the school year?
- What does success look like?



### WHAT WE'RE LEARNING

- What are students learning in your classroom right now/this unit?
- What does mastery look like?



### ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- What data or work samples can you show parents to illustrate how their child is performing relative to unit and grade-level expectations, including both academic and social-emotional aspects?



## STEP 3: PLAN FOR EACH STUDENTS' FAMILY

Strong family-school partnerships are customized to each student and their family. Each family conference should be an individualized conversation about the students' unique talents and growth areas.

The discussion should reflect what families shared as their priorities, student celebrations and strengths, discussion of student-specific data, and goal-sharing or goal-setting. Consider the questions in the agenda template below as you plan individualized conferences.

**Blank templates for your planning can be found in the appendix 3.**



### FAMILY PRIORITIES/ QUESTIONS

- What did the student's family say is most important for them to discuss during the conference?
- What questions do they have?
- What do you want to learn from the family?



### CELEBRATIONS & STRENGTHS

- What positive information and celebrations about the student can you share?
- What academic and/or socio-emotional strengths can you share with families?



### ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE & DATA

- What does the data/work samples tell you about the student's academic performance and socio-emotional well-being?



### ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL- EMOTIONAL GOAL(S)

- What is one academic or social-emotional goal the student should work toward?
- **NOTE:** Co-construct goals with families during the conference. Ask: From our discussion and the data, what's most important for your student's progress?



### TOOLS & STRATEGIES

- How do you want parents to support their child's learning and social-emotional growth?
- What tools/ resources/ strategies are you sharing with families so they can support learning at home?



**Tip:** When discussing academic performance and data, be prepared to explain what students should know and be able to do, what they're learning in class, and how they're performing relative to grade level expectations and standards.



## STEP 4: BE HONEST AND AVOID “SUGAR COATING”



A common pitfall in discussing student performance is “sugarcoating”—avoiding difficult truths that families need to hear. Many families overestimate their child’s performance. While these conversations can be uncomfortable, sugarcoating the realities of grade-level expectations and student performance does not benefit students or families.



Honesty is essential for a trusting relationship. When families have a clear, accurate understanding of their child’s learning needs, they are better equipped to support their progress.

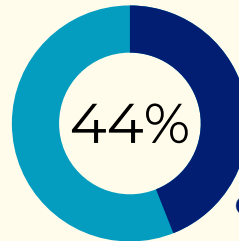


*Learning Heroes* research found that 9 out of 10 parents believe their child is at or above grade level in reading and math, largely based on report cards, with 84% of parents seeing mostly A’s and B’s. However, only 44% of teachers reported that most of their students are prepared for grade-level work, which aligns more closely with *NAEP* data. This highlights a gap where parents value an accurate picture but often have an inaccurate one.

Additionally, *Pew Research Center* found that parents often underestimate the pandemic’s impact on their children’s learning, and misinformed parents cannot effectively advocate for their children’s future.



**9 OUT OF 10 PARENTS BELIEVE THEIR CHILD IS AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEVEL IN READING AND MATH**



**44% OF TEACHERS REPORTED THAT MOST OF THEIR STUDENTS ARE PREPARED FOR GRADE-LEVEL WORK**

Citation:

Learning Heroes: Unlocking the How. Designing Family Engagement Strategies that Lead to School Success. March 2022.



## STEP 5: SUSTAIN TRUST AFTER THE CONFERENCE

What happens after the family conference can be just as important as what happens before and during the conference. You can continue to build trust and strengthen partnerships with families by taking some of the following actions after the conference:



### ASK FOR FEEDBACK



Provide families with an opportunity to let you know how they experienced the conference. Create an exit slip or survey for families to complete at the end of the conference. Ask families if their concerns were addressed; if they have a better understanding of what their child should know and be able to do; if they understand how their child is performing academically;

and if they feel valued as a partner in their child's education. Use their feedback to build upon and strengthen your family engagement practice. **For ideas of what to ask, there are sample surveys in appendix 4.**

### THANK FAMILIES

Everyone likes to feel appreciated! After conferencing with families, send them a quick thank you note. Hand-written notes go a long way in building and strengthening relationships, but you may only sometimes have time. You can say thanks with a quick text, email, or phone call. In your message, share something specific you learned from the family and/or how you plan to use what the family shared about their child. Share your next steps and any actions you committed to taking during the conference. Let families know you value their partnership and are available if they have any follow-up questions or concerns.



## COMMUNICATE ABOUT GOALS

You may have chosen to share a goal with families, or you and the family may have co-constructed goals during the conference. Be sure to keep these goals in mind when planning instruction and monitoring progress. Provide families periodic updates on how their child is progressing toward their goals. Send home additional resources, tools, and strategies aligned to the objectives.



## TIE UP LOOSE-ENDS



During the conference, families may have asked questions that require follow-up, identified a need to be connected to a community resource, or offered to share a connection or resource with you! A family member may have requested to talk to another teacher.

A key characteristic of a trusting relationship is doing what you say you'll do. Be sure to follow up with any next steps or lingering questions/ concerns/needs/connections after the conference.



## MAKE POSITIVE OUTREACH HOME




All families love to hear that their child is successful! Be intentional about making frequent contact with families solely to share good news. When students make progress toward their goals, highlight and celebrate their progress with their families.



When you observe students being kind, compassionate and/or responsible, let families know! Positive communication lets families know you see their child's strengths and talents and sustains the trusting relationship you are forging together for student success.





## APPENDIX 2: BEFORE THE CONFERENCE FAMILY EMAIL

**SAMPLE MESSAGE TO FAMILIES AND SURVEY**

**New Message**  

**To**






**Subject**

Good afternoon [Name],

I'm looking forward to partnering with you this school year. Family conferences are scheduled to take place on [date]. As part of our partnership, I'd like to invite you to co-plan the agenda with me to be sure we're discussing what's most important to you. Please take this brief survey to let me know your priorities and to schedule our conference time.

- Student's Name
- Who will be attending the conference?
- What's the most important thing for us to discuss during your child's conference?
- What questions do you have for me?

Best regards,  
[Your Name]  
[Your Title]  
[Your School]

**Send**     



## APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE AGENDA TEMPLATE

Complete an individualized agenda for each family.

Family Conference Agenda	
<b>Student's Name</b>	
<b>Caregiver's Name</b>	
<b>Agenda Topic</b>	<b>Discussion Items</b>
<b>Family Priorities/ Questions</b>	
<b>Celebrations and Strengths</b>	
<b>Academic Performance and Data</b>	
<b>Academic and/or Social-emotional Goal(s)</b>	
<b>Tools and Strategies for Family Members</b>	

## APPENDIX 4: POST-CONFERENCE SURVEYS

Immediately after the conference:

### SAMPLE MESSAGE TO FAMILIES AND SURVEY

Thank you for attending the family conference. Please take a moment to provide your feedback on the conference experience.

**1. I completed the pre-conference survey.**

Yes    No

**2. I felt engaged in the planning of the conference.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**3. My concerns were addressed in the conference.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**4. The conference helped me better understand my child's social and emotional growth in the school setting.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

### ONGOING FAMILY FEEDBACK

The questions below can help you assess if families get what they need from your family engagement efforts, including family conferences. Consider asking all families in your school community these questions to identify trends and next steps for your family engagement approach.

**1. I have a trusting relationship with my child's teacher.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**2. I feel welcomed into the school community by my child's teacher.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**3. I feel valued as a partner in my child's education.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**4. The school respects my family's culture and identity.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**5. My child's teacher shares positive information about my child with me.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**6. My child's teacher communicates with me regularly.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**7. My child's teacher keeps me informed about what my child should know and be able to do.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**8. My child's teacher keeps me up to date with how my child is performing in class.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree

**9. My child's teacher gives me strategies, tools and/or resources to support my child at home.**

Strongly Agree    Agree    Neutral    Disagree    Strongly Disagree



**Tip:** Consider including these questions in the post-conference survey. Alternatively, you might elect to send this survey to families between conferences to identify ways to continue strengthening your family engagement approach and strategies.