

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Strategies for Principals, Teachers, and Parents

Parent-teacher conferences are an essential part of the relationship between schools and their students' families. These conversations can set a positive tone for the school year, but at times they can also create anxiety for those involved—parents, teachers, school administrators, and even students. The meetings, usually held in the fall, don't have to be stressful and can instead be one among many continuing conversations in which principals, educators, and families discuss children's progress and develop strategies for helping students be successful throughout the entire school year.

Principals



Teachers

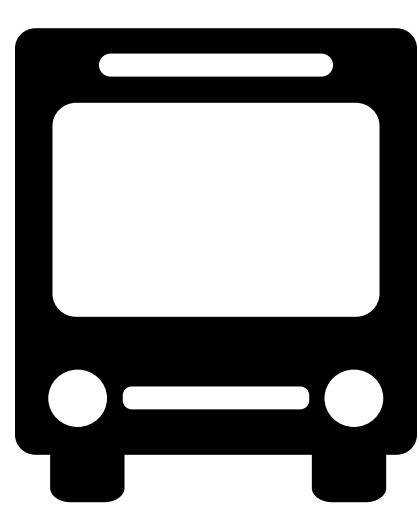


Families

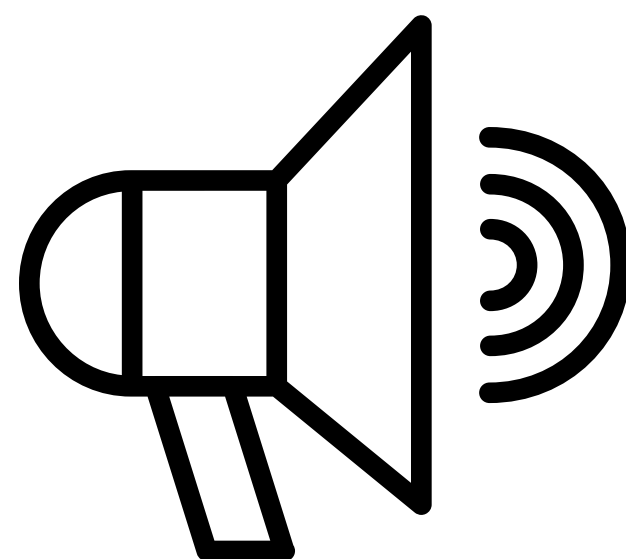


Global Family Research Project views parent-teacher conferences in terms of the 5Rs: reach out, raise up, reinforce, relate, and reimagine. Applying these approaches can lead to innovative ways to partner with families to ensure that they receive the information they need to help their children, and that teachers understand their students' strengths and needs.

Reach Out



Raise Up



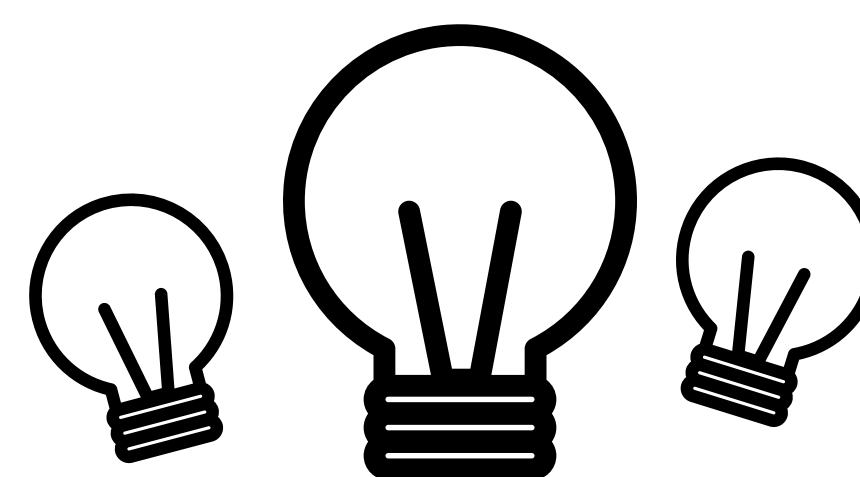
Reinforce



Relate

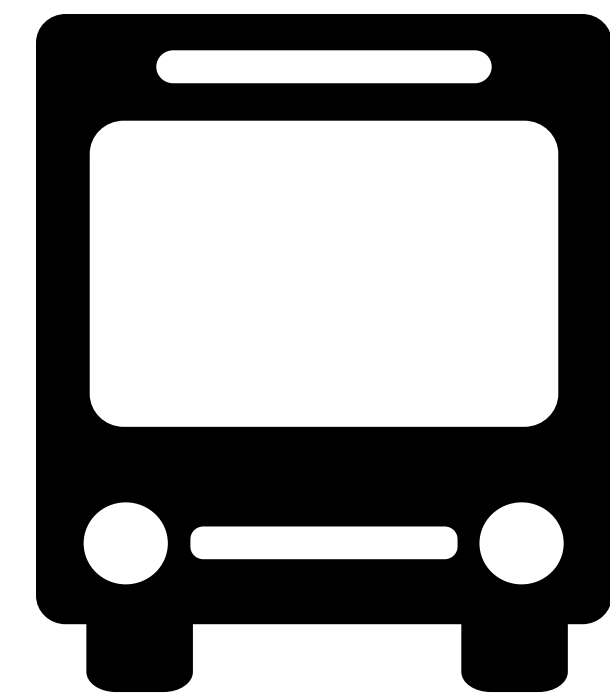


Reimagine



Ideally, educators will have strategies for maintaining contact with families throughout the year. But as the one formal time dedicated to focusing on the specific needs of an individual child, the parent-teacher conference is a tradition that both educators and parents will want to use to their best advantage.

Reach Out



Reaching out means that family engagement programs and resources are accessible to those who have the most difficulty taking advantage of the opportunities. At conference time, this might mean that parents who work don't have the flexibility to attend a daytime meeting with a teacher, or that family members with limited English feel uncomfortable trying to communicate with a teacher.

To reach out, principals can:

- Ensure that interpreters, child care, or transportation is available when needed—and that families are made aware of these services.
- Provide teachers with professional development on how to make the conference a positive experience.
- Consider implementing home-visiting programs—not as a replacement for the conference, but as a way to establish a rapport ahead of conference time. Principals can offer this opportunity to their teachers and families.



To reach out, teachers can:

- Be flexible by being available by phone or video conference when an in-person meeting doesn't work for the family.
- Spend part of the meeting just getting to know the family better before discussing the students' academic progress.
- Consider—as long as the proper releases are signed—allowing parents or guardians to bring another family member or friend if this makes them feel more comfortable, especially if the person can help translate.

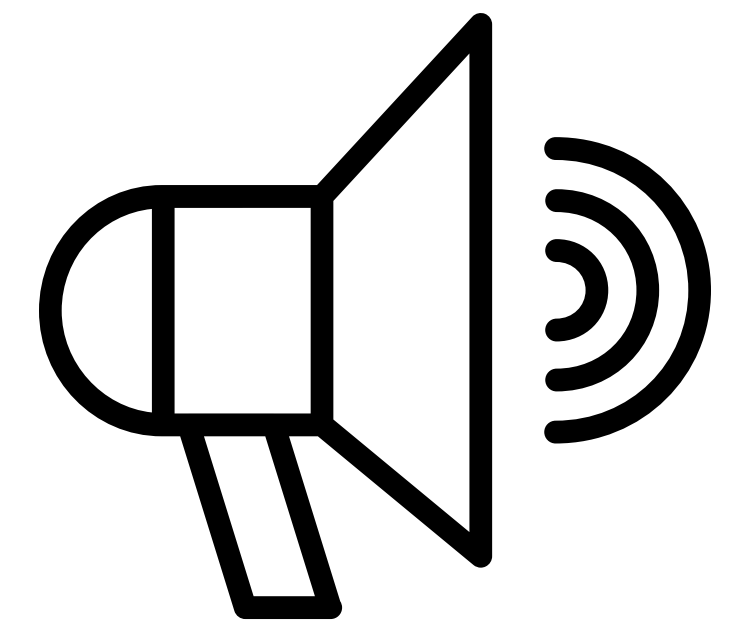


To reach out, families can:

- Let teachers know early if they might have a scheduling conflict or if there is a particular concern they want to address. Sometimes it's easy to forget an important question or piece of information when the meeting is in progress.



Raise Up



Raising up means that conferences focus on two-way communication. Families share what they know about their children, co-design action plans with teachers, and have input into the methods that schools use to maintain communication.



To raise up, principals can:

- Work with the parent association or other parent leaders to promote parent-teacher conferences as a valuable experience and to gather input from families on convenient times as well as on issues they want teachers to address during those conferences.
- Ensure that parents know how to access online student information portals before the conference so they are well prepared to discuss their children's progress. Some schools, for example, make computers available in a parent room at the school in case someone has questions about logging in or navigating the system.



To raise up, teachers can:

- Ask parents to fill out a form listing their children's strengths, areas for improvement, and what they like to do, in and out of school.
- Listen to how parents support their children's learning and their goals for what they want for their children.
- Acknowledge how parents feel when discussing sensitive issues so that parents are encouraged to speak up.



To raise up, families can:

- Ask the best way to contact a teacher with further questions or concerns.
- Let the teacher know the best way and time that they can be contacted.

Reinforce

Reinforcement means that families' cultural values, norms, language, and contexts are integrated into the conversations and action plans related to students' learning goals. Families are validated in the ways they support and promote children's learning and development at home, in school, and in the community.



To reinforce, principals can:

- Translate important documents and messages into the languages spoken in students' homes.
- Consider posting displays throughout the school that reflect the ways families from diverse cultures are supporting their children's learning across the curriculum. Even a world map showing where families are from can make parents feel welcome when they come in the building.
- Provide professional development that covers cultural and other forms of bias to give teachers an opportunity to confront feelings or concerns they might be having about meeting with parents.



To reinforce, teachers can:

- Learn about the cultures of families represented in their classrooms and how informal learning might look different from their own experiences or expectations. Consider consulting with cultural organizations to learn more.
- Provide data showing how children are progressing toward standards in specific areas, and recommend resources for homework assistance if parents seem concerned about helping their children. Teachers need to feel comfortable and knowledgeable about sharing information about how children are doing in relation to rubrics, as well as how they are growing individually across time.
- Show respect for each family, avoid "you should" statements that sound judgmental, and learn from the knowledge parents have about their children.
- Make an action plan together with parents on what both teachers and parents can do to support children's learning and when they will next check in with each other.



To reinforce, families can:

- Participate in school events—such as back-to-school nights, school tours, or other opportunities—to introduce themselves to teachers at the beginning of the year, so the conference is not the first meeting.
- Share examples of what their children are good at and what they have found to be successful at home, which provides teachers with a better understanding of how to incorporate those strategies into the classroom or into students' individual assignments. Some schools, especially at the middle and secondary level, involve students in conferences with teachers. But if they don't, parents can ask their children before the conference if there's anything specific they want the teacher to know.
- Ask for suggestions on how to build on what children are learning in school or which community resources the teacher would recommend.



Relate

Family engagement programs also support relationships in the form of peer networks. Just as educators tend to value learning from each other, parents rely on other parents to introduce them to a school's routines, to pick up tips on learning-related resources in the community, and to provide support when they have questions or concerns.



To support relationships, principals can:



- Help families form connections with each other by hosting coffee times and family events at the school; recruiting parent leaders who can act as liaisons between teachers and families; and furnishing space at the school for families to gather after drop-off time or pickup.
- Provide opportunities for families to work together. Programs such as school gardens, volunteer events, or school productions can give parents opportunities to meet and work together on a project—and are another way to help parents feel part of the school community.

To support relationships, teachers can:



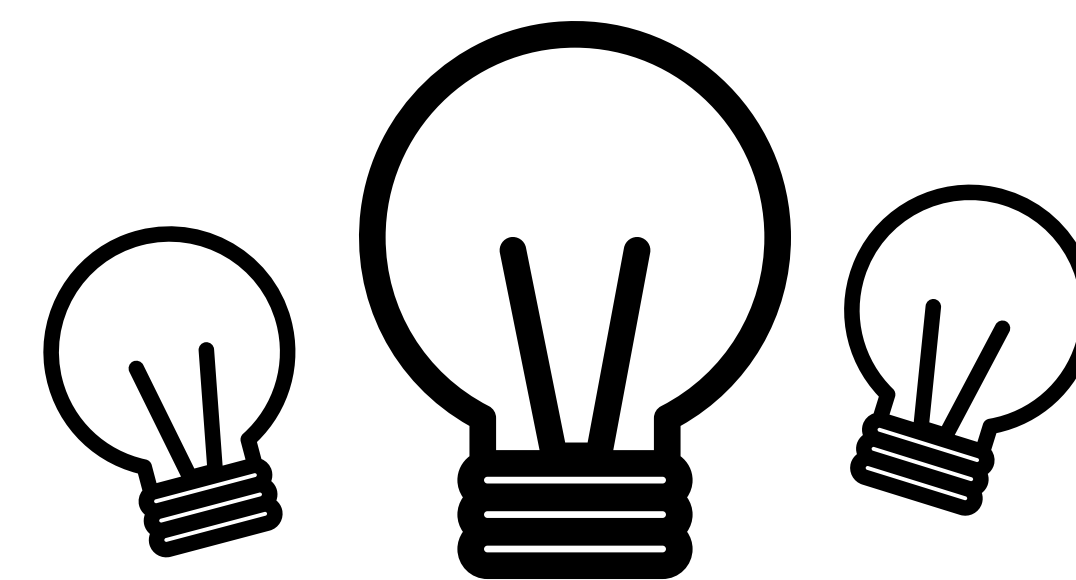
- Nurture the relationships between the families in their classrooms. As they get to know parents better during conference time, they can keep in mind which families might be good connections or resources for each other, maybe because their children have similar interests or they live on the same street, for example.
- Encourage parents to share strategies for how they support learning, such as supervising homework and setting limits on cell phone use. Teachers can also work with parent liaisons to create buddy systems among families to encourage good attendance.

To support relationships, families can:



- Find out from teachers or parent liaisons if there are other families that they should get to know better, or who might have experience with particular district or community-based programs. Those who have been in the school for a few years can also offer to connect with other families who might need support.

Reimagine



Finally, schools may need to reimagine ways to increase families' access to and understanding of information on their children's progress. This might include finding roles for students during the conference or revamping individualized meetings to take place with teams of parents. In addition, community agencies can play a role in giving families the resources to better advocate for their children's needs in school, as well as opportunities to learn with their children.

To reimagine, principals can:



- Build connections with community agencies and providers that have programs or services that broaden and deepen student interests and meet the needs of families in the school. These partnerships can be valuable at conference time, since parents might leave with questions about how to better support their children's learning.
- Consider holding workshops on understanding student data, the types of assessments used, or other topics. Many schools hold only formal conferences in the fall, but school leaders can also consider scheduling regular conferences in the spring to review progress made throughout the year.

To reimagine, teachers can:

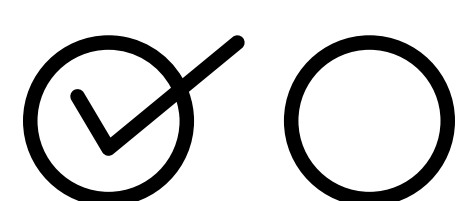


- Recommend resources in the district and the community that can help to extend learning outside the classroom.
- Prepare recommendations—if a spring conference is held—on summer learning for families or what to focus on before the next grade.

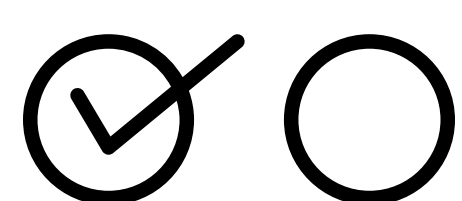
To reimagine, families can:



- Ask teachers and parent liaisons, as well as other families, for resources in the community that can supplement what children are learning, build on families' areas of interest, and continue to support families as their children move through school.
- Join different community groups and networks that support children and families.



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