

The Parent- Teacher Partnership

IT HAD BEEN A HARD DAY. THE ACCUMULATED TENSION AND EXCITEMENT OF MEETING ONE PARENT AFTER another had left me drained. And I still had a long evening of conferences ahead. No time to go home. I drove to a small restaurant in town, hoping to have a quiet, relaxing dinner before the next wave of parents.

The man who parked his car in the space next to mine looked familiar. As soon as he stepped into the light, I recognized him. “Ken,” I called out, “I’m so glad to see you again! What are you doing here?”

Ken grinned at me broadly. “Probably the same thing you are. I’ve got three more conferences scheduled tonight and I need to refuel. How about sitting together? I want to hear how they’re treating you at Hemlock.”

So much for my quiet dinner. Once inside we looked around the crowded restaurant for an empty table. There were none. A voice behind a waving hand called, “Liz! Over here!” It was Julie, a friend from my high school days who had moved away years ago, and her older sister, Martha.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Julie said. “I’m here for a few days visiting Martha. Come join us.”

I gestured in Ken’s direction, trying to indicate that the

two of us were together. Julie nodded, pointed to two empty chairs at her table, and beckoned to both of us.

The first part of our conversation was an exchange of introductions and catch-up. It seemed that Julie was now a single mom, doing well on her own, and “the baby” was now six. Martha’s oldest boy was a teenager. I explained that Ken and I were former colleagues and that I’d been transferred to a new school, that he was still at the old school, and that we were both on a break between conferences.

“Parent-teacher conferences?” Julie said with distaste. “I’ve got one coming up next week and I am *not* looking forward to it.”

That seemed like a strange thing to say. After we ordered dinner, I said, “Sounds as if you might have had a bad experience at your last conference.”

Julie rolled her eyes and sighed.

I was curious but didn’t want to pry. Ken had no such compunctions. “Why? What went wrong?”

“I don’t know if you’d understand,” Julie said nervously. “You’re not a mother.”

“I would admit to that,” said Ken. “But try me anyway.”

Julie paused a moment. Then she said, “I don’t know if I can explain this but . . . look, I think my daughter, Becky, is a great kid, but when I went to my last conference and the teacher told me, with this phony little laugh, ‘Well, to be perfectly frank, Becky is just a *bit* disorganized, and she doesn’t always *quite* tell the truth,’ I felt sick inside. And later when I went home, I began to look at Becky differently and to wonder if she had me fooled and if she really was sneaky and disorganized.”

I was dismayed by Julie’s experience. “That’s terrible,” I said. “You left the conference doubting your own child.”

“And I probably shouldn’t even be saying this,” Julie

went on, “but teachers have a way of making me feel as if anything wrong with my child is my fault. If only I ‘did this’ or ‘did that’ or spent more time with her or were a better parent, Becky would be a better child. . . . And this may sound silly altogether, but sometimes I get this feeling that some teachers think they’re superior to me because they have a college education and I don’t.”

Ken raised his eyebrows. “Oh, come now,” he said derisively.

“Don’t dismiss what Julie’s trying to tell you,” Martha said, jabbing the air with her finger. “I have a college degree and I also happen to be the vice president of my firm. But I remember very well how it feels to be put in one of those little kid’s seats across from the teacher’s desk and having to sit there while she tells me about my son’s poor listening skills. In less than a minute I’m reduced to a scared little girl again being scolded by the teacher.”

“Wait a second,” I said. “I’m getting confused. That’s not my idea of what a conference ought to be—with the teacher doing all the talking and telling you what’s wrong with your child. No. To me a conference is a two-way street. We teachers want input from you parents. We need it. That’s the purpose of the conference. We welcome your ideas.”

“Really,” Martha said disdainfully. “Then how come I feel as if I have to walk on eggs before daring to make the smallest suggestion? Because if, heaven forbid, I happen to offend the teacher by hinting she do something differently, and she gets angry at me, I know darn well she’ll take it out on my kid.”

“Martha, that’s not fair,” I protested, “and it’s not even true!”

Martha ignored me. “But what really gets me,” she

continued, “is when teachers use this patronizing tone. ‘The problem with Michael is blah, blah, blah. I know you work, but maybe if you could spend a little more time with him. . . .’ Or ‘If Michael doesn’t start paying attention now, he’ll never make it in the next grade.’ And the one that always leaves me feeling guilty and inadequate is ‘I’m sorry to tell you, your son is not living up to his potential.’ ”

I was stunned by Martha’s comments and embarrassed. I’d said those very words to a parent this afternoon. My first impulse was to launch into a long defense of myself and all my colleagues, but I decided to take another tack. “Is there anything else that bothers you?” I asked calmly.

Martha pounced on my question. “Yes! I hate it when they use teacher mumbo-jumbo that makes you feel like an idiot. ‘If you want Michael to decode phonemes and consonant blends (translation: read), then you need to spend an hour every night helping him with his reading program.’ ”

“And,” Julie added, “what parent has an hour a night after working all day and shopping and cleaning? I know that by the time I’ve fixed dinner and done the dishes and the laundry and gotten Becky into her pajamas, I’m too tired to do anything but read her one bedtime story.”

Martha nodded in agreement. “But what really galls me,” she said, “is that teachers feel no sense of responsibility to communicate with parents. I never hear from them until the problem is so serious that it would take a miracle to fix it, like when Michael was in junior high and he stopped doing his social studies homework. The teacher couldn’t be bothered to inform me of that fact until the week before report cards came out. How’s a kid supposed to make up fifteen assignments in one week?”

This was more than I could take. “Hold on,” I said. “Everything you say may be so, but please understand, teachers can have over thirty kids in a class with each one needing attention. It’s unrealistic to expect a personal call every time a student falls behind in his work.”

Very coolly, Ken asked, “What exactly is it that you parents want from teachers?”

Martha looked directly into Ken’s eyes. “Respect,” she said. “I’d like teachers to treat me and my child with the same respect they want for themselves.”

I could see the color rising in Ken’s face. “Respect?” he snapped. “What kind of respect do teachers get? Everybody dumps on us. We’re held responsible for everything that goes wrong and we get it from all sides. Parents complain about us; the kids are rude; the principal demands that we fit more and more into the curriculum; the administration pushes us to be more creative as they cut our budget for the most basic supplies; colleges are dissatisfied with us because the kids aren’t prepared to do college-level work; and business indicts us for sending them graduates who aren’t qualified for the work world. But does anyone really support education? Is anyone willing to pay teachers what they deserve? The people in this community didn’t even vote for the last bond issue.”

Julie was openmouthed. The people at the next table had turned to stare at us. I was very uncomfortable. This time Ken had gone too far. But Martha was undaunted by Ken’s outburst. “Well, I voted *for* the bond issue,” she said forcefully, “and if it were up to me, you teachers would have gotten a big raise in salary and all the money you need to buy all the supplies you need. But what Julie and I are trying to say is that we parents feel disrespected and shut out of our children’s education. It’s true, we don’t have your professional expertise, but we

have a lot to contribute—if you'd let us. *We want to help!*"

"Parents help?" Ken exploded. "Like the ones who can't even be bothered to come to a conference because they'll miss their favorite TV show? Or the ones who are too drunk or stoned to even care? Or the parents who think nothing of keeping an older kid out of school to take care of a younger one? Or the parents who pressure us to give their kids A's because Mommy and Daddy are determined to get them into an Ivy League school?"

Martha didn't back down. "Ken," she said, "you're making an unfair case against parents." She turned to me for support. "Liz, has that been your experience?"

I desperately wanted to lower the heat on this conversation, but Martha was asking for the truth and suddenly I needed to tell it. "Not exactly," I said. "I've had parents who were a joy to work with, but there are some with whom I would hesitate to bring up a problem. I told one father that his son was disruptive and that night he got a beating. And right now I have a couple who are in the middle of a custody fight. It's obvious to me that their child has some serious problems, but during the conference all they did was blame each other and try to get me to take sides. . . . I guess parents are under so much stress today and in so much pain in their personal lives that it's hard for them to focus on their kids. I find I have to listen to them and their problems before they can even begin to talk about any problems their children might have."

Martha threw up her hands. "I give up," she said. "According to you two, we parents are a self-centered, irresponsible, pathetic bunch."

"Don't take it personally," Ken said. "We're just letting off steam. Of course there are wonderful parents out there. They do their best and then some. What you're hearing are the ravings of two frustrated teachers who

care very much about your kids and who are upset because they don't always get the support they need from parents."

Everyone fell silent. Very tentatively Julie said, "I guess whenever I go to a conference, I worry about what the teacher will have to say about my child. It never occurs to me to think about what the teacher might feel or need."

"Well, in all fairness, maybe we should think about it," Martha conceded. "Liz, what exactly would you want from us parents?"

Her question caught me by surprise. I thought a moment and said, "Honest information—about how your child does at home, his interests, his worries . . . anything you could tell me that would help me to understand him better. And I guess if there are any problems, I'd want the parent to be willing to think along with me and work with me so we can end up doing what's best for the child."

Martha nodded her head approvingly. "And how about you, Ken? What do you want?"

"Feedback," Ken said. "I want to know which—if any—of my daily efforts on your kid's behalf is having an impact. What does he have to say about school? Or about me? Without some feedback, it's hard to make an intelligent decision about what he needs more of or less of."

"I don't disagree with that," Martha said.

Ken sat back in his chair and extended his arm in a courtly gesture. "Okay, Martha, the floor is all yours. You've had a few choice things to say about teachers. Suppose I turn your question back to you. What exactly would you parents want from us?"

Martha furrowed her brow. Then, speaking slowly, she said, "To me, what's most important is to leave the conference with something I can hang on to. Some picture of

my child that helps me feel good about him. I don't think teachers have any idea of the power they have or the effect of their words. Most parents have experience with only a handful of children. Teachers have hundreds of children over the course of their careers. A teacher's view of a child carries enormous weight with parents. When a teacher tells you your child is exceptional in any way—good or bad—you take it seriously. And you take the words home with you.

“I remember how irritated and disgusted I was with Michael when he was in preschool because he was so whiny and clingy and not independent and outgoing like the other four-year-olds. But the day I had a conference with his teacher, everything changed for me. She beamed at me with pleasure and said, ‘I’m so happy to meet Michael’s mother. He is such an unusually warm and loving little boy.’ Her words went inside me like a light. I had never thought of him that way before. That picture she gave me of my son rang true for me and helped me through more times than she’ll ever know.”

I was touched by Martha's story. I turned to Julie and put my hand on her arm. “How about you?” I asked. “What would you like from a parent conference, Julie?”

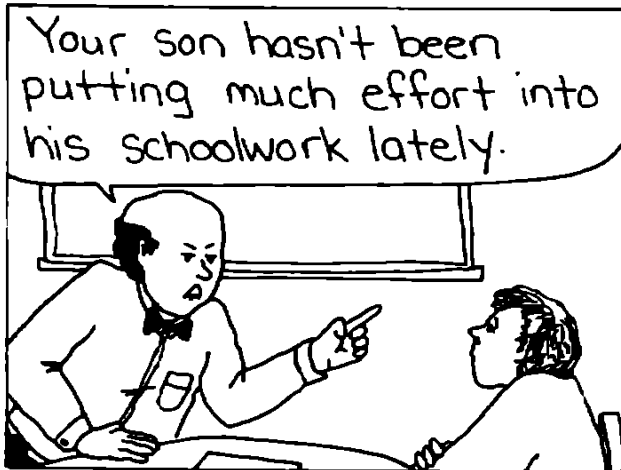
“I'd like to leave with something I can tell my child that will give her more confidence in herself. . . . Something I can repeat to Becky when she looks up at me with her big eyes and asks, ‘What did the teacher say about me?’ ”

The rest of our dinner hour went by swiftly as we spoke honestly and shared what was most important to each of us in our role as parent or teacher and how we envisioned the ideal conference—first from the parent's perspective and then from the teacher's perspective.

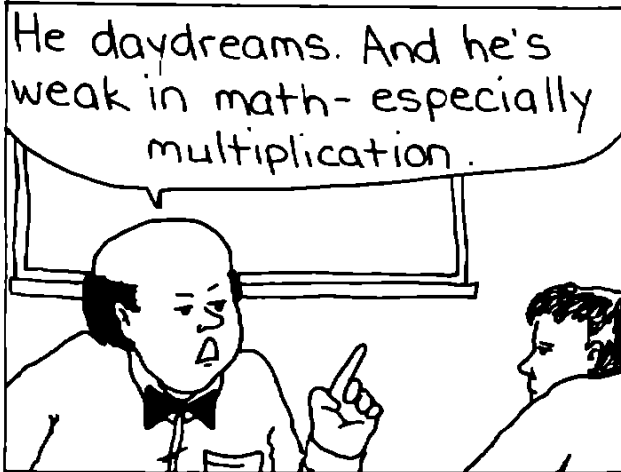
On the following pages you'll find, in cartoon form, the essence of what we said.

THE IDEAL CONFERENCE: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

INSTEAD OF STARTING WITH WHAT'S WRONG, START BY TELLING ME SOMETHING RIGHT ABOUT MY CHILD.



INSTEAD OF LISTING MY CHILD'S LIMITATIONS, POINT OUT WHAT HE NEEDS TO DO.



INSTEAD OF TELLING ME WHAT TO DO,

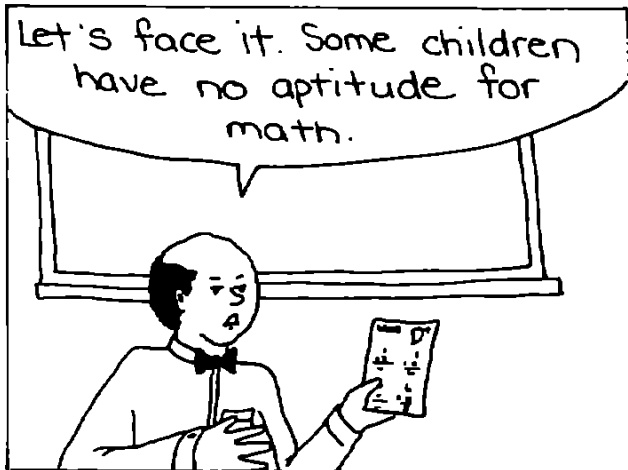


DESCRIBE WHAT HAS WORKED AT SCHOOL.

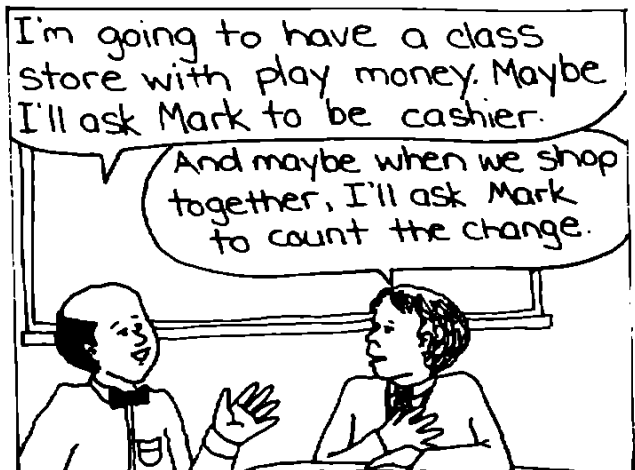


THE IDEAL CONFERENCE: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

INSTEAD OF GIVING UP ON MY CHILD,



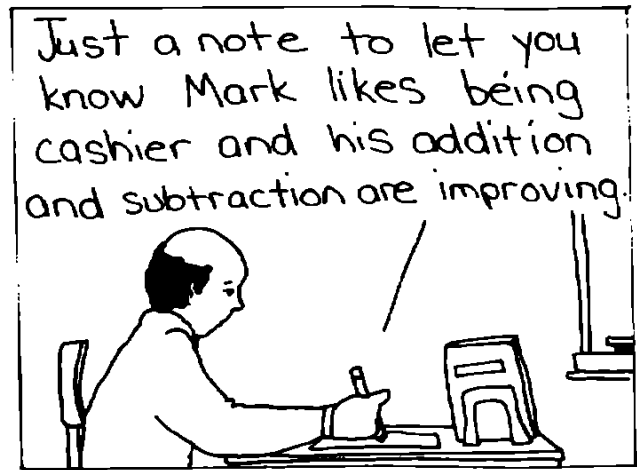
DEVELOP A PLAN WITH ME.



INSTEAD OF FORGETTING THE PLAN,



FOLLOW THROUGH AFTER THE CONFERENCE.



INSTEAD OF VIOLATING MY CONFIDENCE,



KEEP MY PERSONAL LIFE PERSONAL.



THE IDEAL CONFERENCE: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

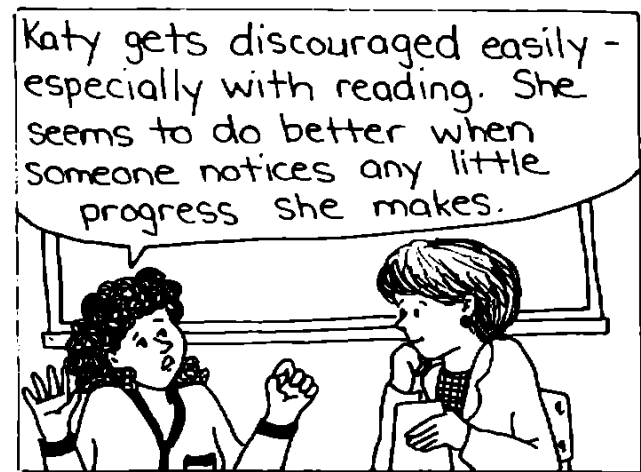
INSTEAD OF STARTING WITH WHAT'S WRONG, START BY DESCRIBING SOMETHING RIGHT.



INSTEAD OF ATTACKING ME,



DESCRIBE WHAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS.



INSTEAD OF WITHHOLDING INFORMATION,



SHARE PERTINENT INFORMATION.



THE IDEAL CONFERENCE: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

INSTEAD OF TELLING ME WHAT TO DO,



SHARE WHAT HAS WORKED AT HOME.



INSTEAD OF REFUSING TO COOPERATE,



HELP TO DEVELOP A PLAN.



INSTEAD OF FORGETTING THE PLAN,



FOLLOW THROUGH AFTER THE CONFERENCE.



After sharing our different versions of the ideal conference, we realized how remarkably similar our needs were.

- Both parents and teachers need appreciation, information, and understanding from one another.
- We both need to have our efforts acknowledged.
- We both need respect.
- We both need to work together, and to support each other, and to look for the best in each other, so that we can give that best to our children.

When it was time to go, we exchanged good-byes reluctantly. I think we were all feeling the enormity of the emotional journey we had taken in the short hour we had spent together. We had started out at opposite poles. It was parents against teachers. Us against them. Yet by the time we were ready to part company, we were all in the same place, on the same team, bound together by our common commitment to our children's progress and our determination never to give up on any child.

A Quick Reminder



THE IDEAL CONFERENCE

Instead of starting with what's wrong . . .

1. START BY DESCRIBING SOMETHING RIGHT.

Teacher: I enjoy Sam's thoughtful questions.

Parent: Sam liked the lesson you gave on rockets.

Instead of pointing out what the child hasn't done . . .

2. DESCRIBE WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS TO DO.

Teacher: Sam needs to make up all the work he missed the week he was out sick.

Parent: I think he's feeling overwhelmed. He can probably use some extra help to catch up.

Instead of withholding information . . .

3. SHARE PERTINENT INFORMATION.

Parent: He used to play outdoors when he got home. Now he just sits in front of the TV.

Teacher: I see him yawning a lot lately in class.

Instead of giving each other advice . . .

4. DESCRIBE WHAT HAS WORKED AT HOME OR IN SCHOOL.

Parent: Ever since he's been sick, he seems to do better if he takes a short break every fifteen or twenty minutes.

Teacher: I notice he has more energy after recess.

A Quick Reminder



Instead of giving up on the child . . .

5. DEVELOP A PLAN TOGETHER.

Teacher: I'll ask another student to help Sam with the work he missed. And I'll see to it that he takes more frequent breaks.

Parent: And I'll make sure he watches less TV and gets some fresh air and exercise.

Instead of ending on a negative note . . .

6. END THE CONFERENCE WITH A POSITIVE STATEMENT THAT CAN BE REPEATED TO THE CHILD.

Teacher: Tell Sam I have confidence that he'll be able to make up all his work. Also tell him that I enjoy having him in my class.

Parent: I will. I know he'll be glad to hear that.

Instead of forgetting the plan after the conference . . .

7. FOLLOW THROUGH WITH THE PLAN.

Teacher: Jeffrey has been helping Sam and he's almost all caught up. He also seems to have more energy lately.

Parent: My husband has started jogging and Sam has been joining him.

Questions from Parents



1. Is it ever a good idea for a child to be present at a conference? Sometimes I think my son might benefit from being there.

At the beginning of the conference both you and the teacher will need the freedom to talk to each other openly without having to worry about the effect your words might have upon your son. In the meantime he can wait outside the room, read in the library, or play on the playground.

However, at one point it may be useful to invite him in to be a part of the conference. Be aware of his vulnerable position. At his tender age he must now deal with two of the most powerful, significant adults in his life—at the same time! It will help if you can start by sharing with him the most positive information you've exchanged thus far. For example:

Parent: I've been telling Mrs. Fisher how much the whole family has learned from you about the rain forest, ever since you started on your project.

Teacher: And I've been telling your mother how much all the children enjoyed the pictures you brought in—especially the one of the red-eyed tree frog.

The conference could end there. But suppose there is something that needs improvement? Suppose your son procrastinates or has trouble organizing his work? Either you or the teacher can broach the problem.

Teacher: There's still a lot of work to be done before you give your final presentation to the class. Let's talk about how to go about it.

From there on in the three of you can discuss how to organize and schedule the many steps involved in completing a class project. Ideally the teacher might say: "Think it would help if I set some additional smaller deadlines for you, like when to turn in your note cards and your outline and the first draft of your report?"

Ideally you might add: "Would it help if I dropped you off at the library a few afternoons this week so you could start your research?"

Ideally your son would volunteer: "Maybe I could write down everything I have to do and put a date next to it and then check off each thing after I do it."

You'll know the three-way conference has succeeded if your child leaves feeling hopeful and motivated.

2. My daughter, Mia, is on the shy side. Last year she had a teacher who encouraged friendships in her class. This year she has a new teacher and is in a class with mostly new children. She doesn't complain, but I know she's lonely and unhappy. What's the best way to approach her teacher to enlist her help?

Be prepared. Do some thinking in advance about what the teacher might do to help your daughter connect

with other children. Is there a class activity Mia could be part of—a play or an art project? Is there some responsibility she might share with another child—hall monitor or co-editor of the class newspaper? And be sure to ask if there is anything *you* can do to help—either with the play or paper or art project. Don't press for an immediate response. The teacher will need time to consider your thoughts and possibly come up with some of her own.

3. At my last conference the teacher told me that my son, Tony, was lazy and uncooperative. I was very upset but didn't know how to respond. If it ever happens again, is there anything I can do?

It's important to be armed with a pencil and paper when you go to a conference. If the teacher says anything negative about your child, you can inquire as to what specific behavior caused him to make his judgment: "Lazy? Could you tell me what you mean by that?"

Suppose the teacher answers, "He's the only one in the art class who leaves dirty brushes and open containers of paint behind him." As you write, say aloud, "Tony needs to clean his brushes and screw the caps back on the paint jars before he leaves the art room."

Suppose the teacher persists and says, "And he's also uncooperative." Ask again, "Can you tell me what he does that makes you say that?"

If the teacher answers, "He never shuts his mouth during silent reading," again, say aloud as you write, "Tony needs to control his urge to talk during silent reading."

By translating the teacher's negative comments into a statement of *what needs to be done*, you will help point the teacher, yourself, and your son in a more positive direction.

4. This year my daughter, Lisa, who has been in special ed, was mainstreamed into a regular class. Her teacher believes in making heavy demands upon his students and has always had great success with them. He's convinced it's because of his high expectations. Lisa is a hard worker, but she's barely keeping up. Her teacher is irritated with her and she's becoming very discouraged. What can I do?

Our expectations should be strong but realistic. We do a terrible disservice to children when we insist that they can do what they're not capable of doing and urge them to "try harder." A child who hasn't mastered addition or subtraction won't be able to do multiplication or division, no matter how strong her teacher's expectations. If Lisa is overwhelmed by her teacher's demands, then you need to help him understand her present academic abilities and encourage him to break down his large goals for her into smaller, *doable* tasks so that she can experience success, *one step at a time*.

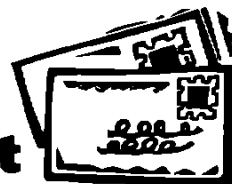
5. My son came home from school the other day looking very agitated. He said that his teacher hated him. I wasn't sure how to respond. What would you suggest?

After you acknowledge his distress, listen to what he has to tell you. Sometimes the problem can be quickly pinpointed and eased: "Oh, so you were embarrassed when she yelled at you in front of everyone for taking the stapler from her drawer. You wish she had called you over and told you quietly. . . . And I'll bet you wish you had thought to ask for permission first."

If your son can't give you a clear picture of what's going on in school and continues to complain that his

teacher hates him, then you need to speak to the teacher. Chances are she'll be able to tell you what's really going on and then the two of you can tackle the problem together. Nevertheless, if during the course of your discussion you sense, not just from her words, but from her overall attitude, that she really doesn't like your son, then trust your "gut" feeling. Take the necessary steps to get your boy's class changed. Teachers are human beings. And some teachers—for whatever reason, rational or irrational—simply don't like certain children. It's nobody's fault. But no child should have to spend his days sitting in a classroom with a teacher who dislikes him.

A Story from a Parent



THIS STORY IS FROM A PARENT OF A GIFTED CHILD WHO FOUND A way to work with a rigid teacher.

When Robin entered fifth grade, she seemed to lose all interest in school. From talking to her I got the impression she was just plain bored. According to Robin (who reads at a ninth-grade level), her teacher, Mrs. Post, insists that she read the same book as the other kids and that she *never*, under any circumstances, read ahead. I reminded her that it was still very early in the term and urged her to be patient. But I really became concerned when she started complaining about headaches and looking for any excuse to avoid going to school.

I called her teacher and made an appointment to see her. The conference did not go well. I told Mrs.

Post that I felt that Robin needed more of a challenge. Mrs. Post told me that what Robin needed was more self-control. According to her, Robin was restless and constantly distracting the other kids who were trying to do their work. I said, "Maybe she's restless because she's finished early and has time on her hands. Maybe she could be given some advanced reading materials."

Mrs. Post looked annoyed and informed me that there was no reason for Robin to be doing different work from the other children. She also let me know that she had been teaching for twenty-three years and that the district-adopted curriculum was very effective in teaching the basics. I almost said, "That's just the point. Robin knows the basics. What harm would there be in giving her some enrichment?" But I didn't. I bit my tongue, thanked her politely, and went home feeling rotten.

When I told my husband about the conference, he said, "Mrs. Post probably thinks you're one of those 'pushy' parents. Maybe you ought to speak to the principal about changing Robin's class."

I considered his suggestion seriously, but the more I thought about it, the more I felt it would be wrong to take Robin away from her friends. The next morning I awoke knowing I had to find some way to help my daughter without offending her teacher. I called my sister-in-law, who is an elementary school teacher, and told her what was going on. She muttered something about teachers who were still in the Dark Ages and then told me about the program she used with the advanced readers in her class. She recommended some book titles for Robin and mentioned a book for teachers that gave some

easy ways to evaluate the reading of a student who was doing independent work. It was called *Responding to Literature*.¹ I wrote down everything she said and then went out and bought the book.

The following week I called Mrs. Post and asked if I could see her again. She sounded cool and reserved and said that we had already had our conference. She didn't see the need for another. I told her that it was important to me to speak to her again. Finally she agreed.

When the time came, I was very nervous. I didn't want to do anything to antagonize Mrs. Post again. I started by telling her how disturbed I was to learn about Robin's "acting out" in class and how worried I was about her recent change in attitude toward school. Then I told her I'd been trying to gather some ideas that might possibly help the situation and asked if she'd like to see some of them that I had written out on this paper.

Mrs. Post didn't take the paper I held out to her. She continued to sit with her hand over her mouth. So I picked out a few of the items on my list and read them to her—like having Robin write a different ending to the book everyone was reading, or having her read other books by the same author and share what she had learned with her classmates. I also held up my copy of the book my sister-in-law had recommended—without mentioning where I'd heard about it.

Finally I said, "Mrs. Post, I'm at my wit's end. I just don't know what to do to help Robin. That's why

¹Sandra M. Simons, *Responding to Literature: Writing and Thinking Activities* (Eugene, Ore.: Spring Street Press, 1990).

I asked for another conference. I wanted to hear what you thought of all these suggestions and I also thought that with all your years of experience, you'd probably have many other ideas." Before Mrs. Post could say a word, I added, "And I'm going to speak to Robin about fooling around in class. No matter how restless she is, you shouldn't have to deal with that."

Mrs. Post continued to look at me in stony silence. Then she stood up and said, "I heard what you had to say and I will take your ideas under consideration." Then she asked if she could borrow the book (I couldn't believe it!) and thanked me for coming. We shook hands. The conference was over. That was a month ago. I have no idea what Mrs. Post is doing in class. All I know is that Robin seems to be enjoying school again. And her morning headaches have disappeared.



Questions from Teachers

1. Some parents seem to have a school phobia. They hate to come to conferences, because bad memories of their own school days come flooding back. Is there any way to help these parents feel more comfortable?

A warm, welcoming attitude is probably the best antidote to their anxieties. Some teachers have found that a table with a cloth, a pot of tea or coffee, and an adult-size chair can help create a friendly mood. Parents report that they especially appreciate a closed door. It signals respect for the private time they spend with you.

2. If parents are divorced, which one should I invite to the conference?

Invite both of them so that neither one feels ignored or shut out. It's up to the parents to decide whether they would prefer to meet with the teacher together or separately. In either case, it's important to use the conference time to focus the discussion not on their relationship but on how, singly or jointly, they can both do what's best for *their* child.

3. What can I do if a parent comes to a conference in a hostile or aggressive mood?

Resist the natural urge to "reason with" the parent's anger: Instead of "Please try to calm down, Mr. Smith. We'll get nowhere if you keep on yelling," acknowledge Mr. Smith's feelings. Let him know you understand the intensity of his emotions: "I can see how angry you are. Please come in and sit down. I want to hear what's on your mind." This kind of approach is more likely to defuse Mr. Smith's strong feelings and to enable him to tell you what's upsetting him.

You may want to consider writing down each of his grievances and reading them back to him so that he knows you understand. If, despite your best efforts, his rage persists, you can reschedule your conference: "Mr. Smith, I can see you're still very upset. I need more time to think about what you've told me. I may even want to consult with other people on the staff. When can we meet again?" At your next meeting you might want to have a third party present—either the principal, the guidance counselor, or the school psychologist.

4. Some parents have complained to me that they hear from teachers only when there's trouble. I

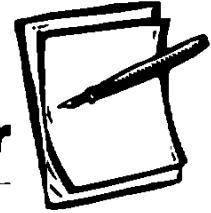
must admit they have a point. Is there any way around this?

Parents appreciate hearing a little “good news.” One teacher said he makes it his business at the beginning of the year, while the kids are still on their best behavior and just beginning their academic tasks, to call two parents a night. He highlights each student’s strengths and efforts. Then later in the year, if a problem arises, the lines of communication have already been opened and the parents are much more receptive to hearing about any problems that may have arisen.

5. How do I end a conference gracefully with a parent who goes on and on while other parents are waiting outside?

It’s important that the parent not feel that a timer has gone off and that he or she is being dismissed. You need to keep an eye on the clock and give some advance notice: “I see we have five minutes left. Is there anything else you want me to know?” If at the end of five minutes there’s still more to be explored, you might say, “I wish we had more time. Shall we talk on the phone or schedule another conference?” Have your calendar open and be ready to set another date.

A Story from a Teacher



THIS ACCOUNT WAS REPORTED BY A RESOURCE ROOM TEACHER IN an elementary school.

When Christopher Boyle was assigned to my class in second grade, I could see immediately that he was a bright, articulate boy. But it also became clear when I tested him that he had the classic signs of dyslexia. He couldn't even write his own name without leaving out letters or reversing them. What I didn't understand was why he was such a behavior problem—belligerent, moody, easily upset.

After a few weeks I decided to call his mother to see if she could help me. She was more than willing to meet with me and offered to come in that very afternoon. Almost as soon as we sat down, Mrs. Boyle described how every night Christopher would sit at his desk and try to do his homework and cry and say how dumb he was.

Suddenly I understood what was going on. He was mad because he was convinced he was dumb and was taking it out on himself and everyone else. I explained to Mrs. Boyle that Christopher was far from dumb and that he was, in fact, a very bright boy who expressed curiosity about many things, but because of his dyslexia, he had to overcome problems most children didn't have. I also told her that Christopher was applying himself in my class and that in time I believed that he would learn to read.

Mrs. Boyle seemed cheered by my assessment and asked what she could do to help. I told her that what Christopher needed from her was her under-

standing of his frustration and her confidence that, slowly but surely, he *would* make progress. I also told her that Christopher had an inquiring mind and would probably benefit from a trip to the library, where he could take out picture books on subjects that interested him.

As the term wore on, it turned out that Christopher was a hard worker. I taught him one phonetic skill at a time and showed him how to sound out words and all the tricks he could use to differentiate one letter from another. And little by little he did learn to read and spell.

All during this time I'd call his mother with progress reports and let her know that what she was doing with Christopher at home was showing in class. She did everything I recommended and more. She encouraged his interest in fish, insects, and rocks. (He was always collecting rocks and asking what they were.) She took him to museums and read books with him and talked with him about all the subjects that fascinated him.

What I did that was especially helpful to Christopher was to bring out into the open the fact that he did have a disability. The hardest thing for him was seeing other kids who were clearly not his intellectual equal read and write and spell with ease and get hundreds on tests that he failed. I wanted him to know that he was a highly intelligent person who was struggling against a learning problem called dyslexia. So I would say to him, "Christopher, it's a big challenge for you to do this spelling, because when other kids look at a *b* they see a *b*, but when you see a *b* your eyes sometimes fool you and it looks like a *d*. So it makes everything more difficult.

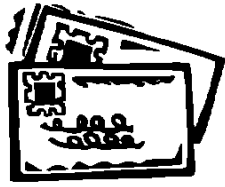
It's called dyslexia. But you've worked so hard that you've learned it all anyway."

Christopher really liked talking about his "learning problem." He'd say to the other kids, "See, I have dyslexia. When I look at the word *saw*, I see the word *was*." And he'd write a word backward on purpose, laugh, hold it up to a mirror to show how the word came out frontward, and boast that he could do "mirror writing." He was taking control of his disability, seeing it as something special and funny that he had.

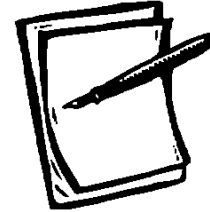
At our end-of-the-term conference his mother told me that he was like a different child at home. Much happier, much more relaxed. She described how at a family get-together Christopher was playing school with his younger cousin who was also dyslexic. The cousin was becoming agitated because he was trying to write a word and having trouble. Christopher said, "Don't worry. I used to have that problem. I can help you. Let me show you this trick."

Christopher is now in third grade. His teachers tell me he's still reading slowly, but that he always participates, always has something interesting to say, and if they give him a little extra time, he does well on his tests.

Whenever I think about Christopher, I feel good. Between his mother and me, we helped him see that his dyslexia was a challenge that he could overcome, rather than a disability that could define and defeat him.



A Parent and Teacher Story



THE PREVIOUS STORY DESCRIBED HOW TEAMWORK BETWEEN ONE parent and one teacher affected one child. This final story describes what happened when one school made a concerted effort to reach out to all the parents in a community and involve them in their children's education.

My first teaching assignment was in a rural community of 710 people. Other than a country store and a two-pump gas station, the only community activity that took place was at the school. Given this, I thought parents would flock to PTA meetings and parent conferences. Not so. On our first orientation night the auditorium was practically empty. A grand total of 15 parents showed up. Considering that we had 139 students enrolled in the school, I thought it was a terrible turnout.

The next morning I expressed my disappointment to one of my colleagues and she told me that after a while I'd get used to it. That seemed like a pretty defeatist attitude to me. At the end of our next teachers' meeting, I asked if anyone would be interested in trying to get more parents involved in school activities. A few people chuckled and shook their heads. Somebody said something about me wasting my time and the principal gave me a fatherly smile. When the meeting was over, I felt very foolish. But afterward two teachers, Margaret and Pat, came up to me and volunteered to help. I think they felt sorry for me.

The next day the three of us met after school to see if we could develop a plan. Pat told me what had

been tried before and failed: The flyers never made it home. The “telephone tree” (each teacher calling ten families) didn’t succeed because many of the parents didn’t have phones. Even the barbecue at Margaret’s house was a bust. She said she’d invited twenty-four kids and their parents, but only six people came. I had to admit that was all pretty discouraging.

Nevertheless, we decided to go ahead and plan a monthly activity that would somehow get parents more involved in the school. Our first function was a dessert social. (Brownies and cookies supplied by the home economics class and ingredients supplied by the three of us.) We mailed invitations to parents, placed flyers at the store, gas station, and volunteer fire department, and encouraged teachers to attend. The turnout was small, but at the end we recruited the help of two more teachers and eight parents. Even the principal expressed appreciation for our efforts.

The next month we hosted a “Spaghetti Feed” before the Friday night football game and had terrific results. Using the home economics room, five teachers and eight parents cooked enough spaghetti for approximately one hundred people. Granted, most of those who ate were players from both teams and their parents and relatives, but everyone had a good time. Before the evening was over, I grabbed a microphone and announced that on Monday night we were having a meeting to plan our next event and that we needed all the help we could get. Five more parents and three more teachers signed on. The wall that separated teachers and parents began to crack and crumble.

At our Monday meeting one of the parents suggested that we write a monthly newsletter to keep the community informed of school activities. The principal was so impressed with the idea that he offered to fund the postage. The school's secretary volunteered to do the typing and copying. Parents and teachers offered to meet in the school's library to fold, staple, and address the newsletters.

Those newsletters turned the tide. They became the communication link between us and the community. Teachers used them to express their concerns and so did the parents. For example, we found out that some of the parents were very worried about their teenagers driving thirty miles to a larger town on weekends to find entertainment and ending up having accidents because of drinking and driving. A few of the teachers volunteered to chaperone dances or other activities so that the kids would stay in the community.

Once the parents knew that the school wanted their input and help, they came up with ideas that went beyond our wildest expectations. They organized and sponsored a hot lunch program. (Our school had no funds to establish its own.) They hosted a carnival night and transformed the gym into an amusement park with game booths. They volunteered to help out in the classroom and became an invaluable resource. Mothers worked with children in the elementary school classes; a father taught a mini-course in mechanical drafting to the sophomores; another father, who was a chef, gave a demonstration for the home economics class. A group of parents, teachers, and students formed a "Project Graduation" committee and worked at fund-

raising all year to earn enough money to send the graduating seniors and chaperones on a chartered bus for a three-day trip to Disneyland. The seniors had a great time and the parents were relieved because their eighteen-year-olds weren't celebrating their graduation by drinking and driving.

The support and involvement of the parents inspired the teachers to do even more. When Margaret discovered that some of the parents couldn't read, she organized a reading class for them. The class was such a hit that the one evening grew into a full adult education program, where parents could also learn writing, cooking, sewing and computer skills. One of the teachers offered a night class for parents who wanted to earn their GED and that, too, was soon filled. Everyone who took the class said their children were so inspired by seeing Mom or Dad study and do homework that their grades improved.

The principal became our most enthusiastic supporter. It was his idea to institute a home visitation program for those parents whom we still hadn't reached. In our newsletter we announced that teachers would be stopping by the homes of their students for brief visits. Each teacher was given the names of approximately eight to ten students and asked to visit their parents at least once in the semester. Pat had the brilliant idea of using our own school buses for transportation. So each Thursday after school, teachers who wanted to visit a family could ride the bus with their students to their homes. At the end of the route, bus drivers would wait thirty minutes before doubling back to pick up teachers. The program was a huge success. Those

visits by the teachers seemed to mean a lot to both parents and students.

On the night of the last PTA meeting of the year, I came early because I wanted to run off some hand-outs for the parents. By the time I was finished, I heard the principal's booming voice and realized that the meeting had begun. I thought I'd slip quietly into an empty seat, but when I opened the door to the auditorium, I gasped. There wasn't an empty seat in the house. The room was packed with parents. They had turned out in full force to be part of the action at *their school*.