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LI KIDS: School conference time

Just as teachers do, parents need to prepare for those all-important meetings

BY DEBBE GEIGER
Special to Newsday

October 29, 2006

Are you ready for a sit-down with your child's teacher? If not, then start preparing for it. The annual one-on-one meetings between parents and teachers are on most school district calendars next month. And regardless of how well your child is doing in school, this is a key element of their education.

"It's important for parents because they can connect with their child's teacher and get additional information about the progress of their children in school," explains Anna Marie Weselak, president of the Chicago-based National PTA.

Despite its significance, Weselak says many parents don't realize they need to prepare for this meeting, just as the teachers do.

"Typically, it's the teacher who prepares, not the parents," says Jonie Kipling, a sixth-grade teacher at North Shore Middle School in Glen Head. "Most parents just want to hear what we have to say. We come prepared with what we are seeing with the work we have asked the student to do. Certainly, parents need that from us.

They need to know how their student is doing, and their strengths and weaknesses, and what goals can be set."

But parents have a job, too, Kipling says. "What we need from the parents is how the student is doing at home, how they are reacting to the new year and how they are handling the workload."

With so much to talk about, that 10- to 20-minute allotment of time can go

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quickly. That's why we've outlined how to ensure you make the most of your time together.

For tips on getting the most out of your parentteacher conference, turn the page.

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LI KIDS

Your parent-teacher conference is coming up. Be prepared to....Make the most of it

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When Margot Bennett of Centerport heads into her son Rory's fifth-grade classroom for her annual parent-teacher conference, she won't just sit back and listen; she's there for a two-way discussion. "I see it as an opportunity," she says. "I let them know what we're doing at home and offer any suggestions that work for me with my son. I ask what they're doing in school. It's nice when they tell you good things about your child, but I want to know what I have to work on to make it better. We have to work together."

That's the right attitude, says Andrea Libresco, an assistant professor of education at Hofstra University in Hempstead.

"The goal of both parties should be to have a clear understanding of how they can work as partners to help the child.

"They're both there to give and get information," she says. "While the teacher has student work in front of her, she's also eager to know what's going on at home. Kids behave differently at home than at school, and that's good information for the teacher. The parents are the only one who can provide it."

The parent can share if the child has experienced a loss, such as the death of a grandparent, or is going through a stressful family situation, such as a divorce, "which may explain why a child has been morose or acting out," Libresco says.

It's also important to remember that this meeting is more than just about



academics. "The conference is also about how the child feels about school, and how the child reacts to other kids," she says. "Socialization is a huge part of the elementary-education process."

Kerry Wargo of Kings Park realizes that. When she visits her children's teachers at the Holy Family Regional School in Commack, she says, "I always want to know how they are socializing and how they are interacting. I want to know, 'Are they funny in class?' I want to know because people tell me my firstgrader is so funny. You wonder what the teacher is going to say."

If you've got questions like that that you don't want to forget to ask, write them down and take them with you, says Anna Marie Weselak, president of the Chicago-based National PTA.

Here are some more suggestions:

Before the conference

- Get organized. Since it's hard to remember every issue or question you might want to raise the night

before the conference, create a folder labeled "Parent-teacher conference" to keep tests, reports or

notes you jot down as you go through your child's book bag each day or review her homework. Then

compile a list of questions based on your notes.

- Talk to your child. "Often, the child is the best source of information about what's going on in the

classroom," Libresco says. "They may say, 'I did badly in math.' That's good information to know before

you go into the meeting. You want to be apprised as much as you can." Ask your child if there are any

issues she wants you to bring up with the teacher.

During the conference

- Be on time. Conference slots are short, and the teacher needs to stay on schedule.

- Don't spend all your time talking about test scores. Instead, use the time to find out how your child

reacts to challenges, their behavior in class, and how they adapted to the school day. Ask if they are quiet or vocal and when. For example, if a child is quiet during the academic part of the day but shines during art class, Libresco says that may indicate an interest you hadn't noticed.

- Set up a way to communicate. Determine how you'll keep in touch, and keep the teacher up to date on

your progress at home. It might be in the form of a note coming home in your child's backpack, a phone

call at home or work, or via e-mail. If it's by phone, ask what time is best to call and when to expect a

phone call back.

- Be respectful. All questions are OK as long as they are asked respectfully, says Jonie Kipling, a sixth-grade teacher at North Shore Middle School in Glen Head. Parents shouldn't go on the attack. "They shouldn't yell at the teacher for too much homework. For one child, homework may take five minute For another, it may take longer. We need parents to communicate with us so we know where the child fits into that scheme, but we don't need to be yelled at."

After the conference

- Set another meeting. It's not always necessary, but if you feel didn't have enough time to cover your concerns, set a time to get together again.

- Apprise your child. Tell him what went on during the meeting, what information you gained, and what

steps you will take, together with the child and the teacher, to ensure a successful school year.

What to ask

Wondering what to ask the teacher? Use the following questions, provided by sixth-grade teacher Jonie Kipling, as a guideline:

- How is my child doing in class, academically and socially?
- Does he participate in classroom discussion?
- How does he relate to other students? Does he have friends?

- What are my child's strengths and weaknesses?
- What are we working on this year for my child?
- What goals can we set for the year?
- How can I help my child reach these goals? How can I help him or her improve?

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