

Questions parents should ask during a parent-teacher conference



Prepare for a focused, collaborative conversation

Before the conference, review recent assignments, school communications, report cards, attendance information, and any notes your child has shared. Write down two or three priorities. These might include reading fluency, mathematics, organization, separation distress, frequent headaches before school, conflict with peers, or difficulty completing homework. Prioritizing helps you use limited meeting time effectively.

Bring neutral, concrete observations from home. Instead of saying, "My child hates reading," you might say, "My child avoids independent reading, becomes tearful after about ten minutes, and says the words look confusing." Ask whether the teacher sees the same pattern, and in which settings it occurs. Differences between home and school can be clinically and educationally informative without proving that one observer is mistaken.

Begin by asking, "What are my child's greatest strengths in your classroom?" Strengths may include curiosity, persistence, creativity, empathy, verbal reasoning, practical problem-solving, or willingness to help classmates. A strengths-based starting point reduces defensiveness and helps the team identify approaches that are motivating and realistic.

Ask about learning goals and academic progress

Parents need to know not only whether a child is "doing well," but also what the child is expected to learn and how progress is measured. Useful questions include: "What are the most important skills for this term?" "How does my child's work compare with grade-level expectations?" and "Which assessments, classroom tasks, or observations inform your view of progress?"

Ask the teacher to distinguish a skill gap from a performance concern. A child may understand a concept orally but struggle to demonstrate it in writing, or may know multiplication facts but lose accuracy under time pressure. Request specific examples of work and ask which component is most difficult: comprehension, retrieval, attention, language formulation, fine-motor output, processing speed, planning, or task initiation.

It is also helpful to ask, "What has already been tried, and how did my child respond?" Follow with, "What will you monitor to determine whether the strategy is working?" Progress monitoring is more useful when it includes an observable target, a time frame, and a person responsible for reviewing the information. If a concern remains despite classroom support, ask what the school's process is for further educational evaluation or intervention.

Explore classroom participation, attention, and executive functioning

Academic performance is influenced by executive functions such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, inhibition, planning, and sustained attention. These abilities develop over time and can be affected by sleep, stress, sensory demands, language load, classroom structure, and learning tasks. Rather than asking whether your child is simply "paying attention," ask, "When is attention strongest and weakest?" and "What happens immediately before my child disengages?"

Other useful questions are: "Does my child understand and remember multi-step directions?" "How independently does my child begin and finish work?" "Does my child ask for clarification or quietly become stuck?" and "Are transitions, noise, handwriting, timed tasks, or group work particularly difficult?" Ask what supports help, such as written directions, chunking assignments, visual

schedules, movement breaks, preferential seating, extra processing time, or opportunities to demonstrate knowledge in different formats.

These questions are not a request to prescribe a particular intervention. They help identify environmental and instructional adjustments that can be tested and evaluated. If difficulties are substantial, persistent, and seen in more than one setting, discuss the observations with the child's pediatrician or another qualified healthcare professional, who can consider medical, developmental, emotional, sleep-related, sensory, or language factors as appropriate.

Ask about social-emotional functioning and peer relationships

School well-being includes belonging, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, collaboration, and the ability to receive feedback. Ask, "Who does my child spend time with?" "Does my child initiate or maintain friendships?" and "How does my child respond when excluded, corrected, disappointed, or asked to compromise?" The teacher may notice patterns that are difficult to see outside school, including whether a child is isolated, overly dominant, eager to please, or able to repair a disagreement.

Ask how your child communicates needs and handles frustration. "What does my child do when work feels difficult?" "Does my child seek adult help, avoid the task, become disruptive, or become unusually quiet?" and "What helps my child return to learning?" Specific examples are more informative than labels such as "immature" or "anxious." Also ask whether there have been bullying concerns, repeated teasing, online social issues connected to classmates, or changes in mood or behavior.

Invite the teacher's perspective on social-emotional growth: "What is one interpersonal skill my child could practice this term?" and "How can we reinforce that skill at home?" A shared vocabulary and consistent responses can support self-regulation without shaming the child. If there is persistent school avoidance, marked distress, self-harm talk, severe aggression, or a major change in functioning, seek prompt guidance from appropriate mental-health or medical professionals in addition to contacting the school.

Discuss behavior without reducing your child to a label

Behavior is communication and context matters. Instead of asking, "Why is my child behaving badly?" try, "What behavior are you observing, how often does it occur, and in which situations?" Ask what usually precedes the behavior, what happens afterward, and whether the behavior serves an identifiable function, such as escaping a confusing task, gaining adult attention, obtaining sensory relief, or responding to social stress.

Clarify expectations and responses: "What classroom rules are hardest for my child?" "How are corrections delivered?" "What positive feedback is effective?" and "Are consequences consistent and proportionate?" Ask whether the teacher can describe successful periods as well as difficult ones. This can reveal protective factors, such as a preferred subject, a supportive peer, predictable routines, or an adult relationship that helps your child remain regulated.

Work toward a small number of observable goals. "Use a calm request for help twice daily" is easier to monitor than "improve behavior." Discuss how the child will be included in planning, since older children often have valuable insight into triggers and effective supports. Families seeking school collaboration for academic concerns may also need a parallel plan for behavior, attendance, or emotional regulation.

Ask about accommodations, interventions, and additional evaluation

If your child has a diagnosed condition, suspected learning difference, chronic illness, sensory need, or significant functional difficulty, ask how the school is addressing access to instruction. Questions include: "What barriers are interfering with participation?" "Which classroom accommodations are available?" "How will staff communicate them across subjects?" and "How will we know whether they are helping?" Accommodations change access or the way a child demonstrates learning; they do not necessarily change the learning standard.

Examples may include extended time, reduced copying demands, assistive technology, a quieter test setting, scheduled breaks, health-related access plans, explicit organizational support, or alternative response formats. The appropriate support depends on the child's needs, school policy, and applicable education law. Do not assume that a conference alone creates a formal plan; ask about the documented process, required evaluations, and the people responsible

for reviewing it.

If school and family observations suggest a persistent difficulty, ask, "What information would help determine the next step?" Educational assessment, speech-language evaluation, occupational therapy assessment, psychological testing, or medical review may be relevant in different situations. These evaluations should be guided by qualified professionals and should not be inferred from one low grade or one challenging week. Schools can address educational functioning, while healthcare professionals can assess medical and developmental contributors when indicated.

Agree on home support and a follow-up plan

End the conference with a concise summary. Ask, "What are the top one or two priorities?" "What will the teacher try?" "What can we reasonably do at home?" and "How will my child be involved?" Home support is most effective when it is specific, brief, and sustainable. Depending on the concern, it might involve reading together, practicing a routine for packing materials, using a visual checklist, praising help-seeking, or protecting sleep and predictable morning routines.

Avoid turning home into an intensive second classroom or completing work for your child. Ask the teacher how much assistance is appropriate and what independence should look like. Discuss communication preferences, such as a weekly email, school portal update, brief behavior log, or scheduled check-in. One communication channel and a defined frequency can prevent both under-communication and overwhelming daily messages.

Set a review date, usually after enough time has passed to observe whether a strategy is helping. Ask what data will be reviewed, such as assignment completion, reading accuracy, office referrals, attendance, nurse visits, self-rating, or teacher observations. If the plan is not working, revise it rather than blaming the child or family. Strong parent-teacher communication in preschool and later school years is an ongoing relationship, not a single meeting. Keep notes, thank the teacher for specific efforts, and contact the school sooner if safety or functioning worsens.