



Building Partnerships Between Families, Schools, and Communities

CONVERSATION GUIDE

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Positive communication is the single most important key to developing a partnership between families and professionals. This is so because communication lies at the heart of all other forms of partnership.

On the whole, families typically prefer informal and frequent communication with professionals over formal and infrequent communication. To be an effective communicator you need to understand family systems; this means identifying family preferences. You will also need to know and practice specific communications-based strategies – written, telephone, and technology based. In addition, you will need skills for planning, carrying out, and following up on face-to-face interactions. Most of all, you will need to recognize that families usually want to be and can become your reliable allies.

We hope you will use this document as a guide to a natural and relaxed conversation with families. If you follow our guide, trying to move away from *interviewing* families and toward *conversing* with them instead, you will want to use as much spontaneity as possible – just as you do with your friends or family when you have conversations with them.

Conversations are more enlightening when questions or issues are open-ended. That means that you will not follow a strict order of questions; rather, you will be sensitive to the family's lead, following the issues that they are most interested in addressing. We hope you will *go with their flow* rather than with the order of questions/probes that you will find here.

Family Characteristics

- ◆ Who are the member's of your family? Who lives together in your home? Who is interested in supporting _____'s education?

- ◆ We all have certain cultural characteristics that especially influence our families. These might be related to the part of the country where we grew up, or to our jobs, religion, race, or financial resources. I've always considered one of the major cultural influences on my family to be _____. How do you characterize your family's culture?

- ◆ What are the most important things that parents should teach their children? What are the most important things that schools should teach children?

- ◆ Has any particular type of advice about how people ought to live their lives been handed down through the generations for your family? What is it, and do you think it has implications for _____'s educational program?

- ◆ Are there issues related to your family's financial resources that are important for the school to take into account?

- ◆ What is one of the major strengths for your family?

- ◆ Are there particular challenges or struggles that your family is having right now that might influence _____'s educational program?

Personal Characteristics

- ◆ I'm eager to get to know _____. Tell me about _____'s typical day and especially about the things that _____ most likes and dislikes about the day.

- ◆ What things seem to be going especially well for _____?

- ◆ What are some of the particular challenges _____ is facing now?

- ◆ So much of _____'s day is spent in school. How do you feel things are going for _____ at school?
- ◆ How do _____'s strengths and needs influence schoolwork? How do _____'s strengths and needs influence _____'s relationships with classmates?
- ◆ Do any particular health concerns of family members influence your daily and weekly routines? What do you want to tell me about them?
- ◆ Which people [family members, neighbors, clubs, etc.] are most available to participate in school activities and to help _____ with homework?

Special Challenges

- ◆ All families face times when things seem to be a bit easier and other times when things seem to be more difficult. Is your family facing any particular challenges that impact the time, energy, and resources that you can invest in _____'s educational program? What do you want to tell me about them?
- ◆ On a long-term basis, are there family issues or circumstances that make life more challenging? Do you feel comfortable sharing these with me?

Family Interaction

- ◆ How do you and your spouse share parental roles? Given this pattern, what are your preferences for how you participate this year in _____'s educational program?
- ◆ Sometimes in families there are adults who take on some parental responsibilities even though they are not actually parents. Are there people like that involved with _____? Who are they? What do they do? How might we best involve them in his or her educational program?
- ◆ What do you find to be the most and least enjoyable aspects of interacting with _____? Given those aspects, how can we best ensure that we respect your preferences as we offer educational activities for you and _____ to do in your home?

- ◆ Over time, has there been a fairly consistent pattern for your parental responsibilities or has this changed because of some kind of special circumstances? If it has changed, what is the change and why did it occur?
- ◆ What are the most and least enjoyable ways that your other children interact with _____?
- ◆ In what ways might _____'s brothers and sisters provide educational support to _____?
- ◆ What challenges are your other children experiencing that are taking a large amount of your family's time, energy and resources right now?
- ◆ Who is in your extended family? How often do you see them?
- ◆ In what ways have extended family members provided you with support and assistance in raising _____?
- ◆ Do you think your extended family members would be interested in having additional information, about how they might best support _____? What information would be helpful, and how do you want to share it with them?
- ◆ Would you like us to extend an invitation to your extended family to participate in educational conferences or school events?

Family Functions

- ◆ In what ways does _____ particularly like to have affection expressed by family members toward him or her?
- ◆ How important do you think it is to express affection to _____ and your other children?
- ◆ Are there other people outside of the family on whom _____ depends for affection?

- ◆ Standing in _____'s shoes, how do you think _____ sees himself or herself in terms of personal strengths and weaknesses?
- ◆ What are your family beliefs about how to best help your family members feel good about themselves?
- ◆ What have been some school experiences in the past that have particularly helped _____ feel good about himself or herself?
- ◆ What have been some school experiences in the past that have had a negative impact on _____'s self-esteem?
- ◆ What do you think are the most significant ways that we can work together to support _____ to develop stronger self-esteem?
- ◆ To what extent do family economics influence the kind of support that you can provide to _____?
- ◆ Has _____ required more or fewer economic resources than other family members?
- ◆ Are there any special celebrations associated with your religion that are important for us to consider as part of _____'s educational program?
- ◆ What is a typical day like in your family?
- ◆ What are the most challenging aspects of the day?
- ◆ Do you have time built in throughout the day for relaxation and rest?
- ◆ As a family, do you divide the daily tasks related to meeting each individual's needs?
- ◆ What tasks does _____ assume, and how can we work together to teach him or her skills that make the family's daily routines easier?
- ◆ As a family, what do you do for fun?

- ◆ What recreation or leisure skills might _____ learn at school that would make family recreation and leisure more enjoyable?
- ◆ Whom does _____ hang out with when he or she is not at school?
- ◆ What are your perspectives on _____'s friendship network? What would be an ideal friendship network for _____?
- ◆ How do you characterize the extent to which your family friends support _____?
- ◆ Of all the teachers who have worked with _____, who had an especially good relationship with him or her and you? What can we learn from that situation that we incorporate into the school year?
- ◆ In what ways do you most enjoy participating with _____ in his or her educational program?
- ◆ There are many different ways that we could communicate throughout the school year; such as through home visits, school conferences, telephone calls, notes, or a notebook. What are your preferences for communication? What do you think will work best for you and your family?
- ◆ In terms of _____'s vocational development, are there family members or friends who might be especially good resources in helping to create job opportunities for _____? How might we best capitalize upon their contributions?
- ◆ Tell me about _____'s early years. What stands out in terms of your happiest memories? What about your most troublesome memories?
- ◆ Did _____ participate in an early childhood program? What did you think of the program?
- ◆ What have been the highs and lows of _____'s educational experiences?
- ◆ How do you think _____ is or has been best prepared for his or her future by school experiences?

- ◆ Try to create a picture in your mind of an ideal situation for _____ when he or she is an adult. Describe that situation to me. What are your hopes for his or her future?
- ◆ When you look to the future, what are your greatest concerns for _____?
- ◆ As you look ahead to adolescence, what do you anticipate to be the easiest and most difficult aspects?
- ◆ Now that _____ is a teenager, how would you describe the highs and lows of adolescence?
- ◆ How does _____'s adolescence compare with the adolescence of his or her brothers and/or sisters?
- ◆ What do you see as the priorities that need to be addressed in school to best prepare _____ for life as an adult?
- ◆ Now don't give me a name, but please just describe a situation that was really difficult when a teacher was not especially helpful at all to _____ and your family? What can I learn from that situation to make sure that I don't repeat any of it?
- ◆ What do you see _____ doing after graduating from high school in terms of where he or she works and lives? Does _____ have the same vision for himself or herself?

Collaborating with families to meet their basic needs may not seem to be the same as educating their children, but it remains an important role for all educators. The reason is simple. The more you and other educators support families to address their critical, basic, personal, and family needs, the more likely it is that they will devote time and energy to their children's educational needs -- and, of course, the more likely it is that you and they will develop an empowered and empowering relationship.

TAKE STOCK: A checklist to encourage parent involvement

- ◆ Is there a place for parents to park at night when they visit the school?
- ◆ Is the school open after school hours for visits or meetings?
- ◆ Do office personnel greet parents (in person or on the phone) in a friendly, courteous way?
- ◆ Do posted signs warmly welcome parents and visitors?
- ◆ Are there directions (posted or verbal) for parents and visitors to find their way around the school?
- ◆ Is there an orientation class for the incoming students and their families?
- ◆ Is there a program for helping mid-year transfer students and their families to settle in the school? (For example, is a staff member assigned to be their “host”?)
- ◆ Are there regular social occasions or events where parents and school staff can get to know each other?
- ◆ Does the principal have clearly posted office hours when parents and students can drop in to talk?
- ◆ Does the school permit parents to observe in class?
- ◆ Does the school have an “Open Door” policy where parents are welcome at any time during the school day?
- ◆ Is there a school newsletter with up-to-date information about holidays, special events, etc.?
- ◆ Does the school send home a calendar listing dates of parent-teacher conferences, report cards, holiday schedules, and major events?

- ◆ Does the school send home a directory of key PTA representatives and school personnel, with phone numbers?
- ◆ Does the school hold annual back-to-school nights/open houses?
- ◆ Does the school have a hot line for parents and students to deal with emergencies, rumors, and other “burning questions”?
- ◆ Do school policies encourage all teachers to communicate frequently with parents about their curriculum plans, expectations for homework, grading policies, and how they should help?
- ◆ Do parents know where to go with their concerns or complaints?
- ◆ Does the principal review all the school’s written communications, including report card format and how tests results are reported, to make sure they respect the parent’s adult status and yet remain easy to understand?
- ◆ Are parents informed of their rights? This includes access to school records, due process in disciplinary actions and participation in special education?
- ◆ Does the school require at least one parent/teacher conference each year for each student?
- ◆ Does the school offer to set up teacher-parent conferences upon request?
- ◆ Does the school provide in-service training or other opportunities to help teachers communicate or collaborate with parents?
- ◆ Is there an early warning policy where teachers promptly consult with parents if a child is falling behind or having social behavior problems?
- ◆ Does the school inform parents right away if a student doesn’t show up for school? Are parents promptly consulted if there is a pattern of unexcused absences?

- ◆ If the school needs to develop a new policy or program, is there a mechanism for obtaining parent input?
- ◆ Is there a parent-teacher organization that meets at least once a month?
- ◆ Is there a policy for informing non-custodial parents about their children's performance and school events?
- ◆ Do teachers sometimes meet outside school hours with parents who have jobs and cannot easily get away during the working day?
- ◆ Does the school hold evening and weekend events for its families so that employed parents can come to see the school?
- ◆ Are written materials provided in Spanish, Arabic or other non-English languages prominent at the school?
- ◆ Are parents informed at the beginning of the year how they can reach the teacher?
- ◆ Do the teachers tell parents about the good things, as well as the challenges?
- ◆ Does the teacher try to communicate at least once a month with each family?
- ◆ Does the teacher talk to parents in person or on the phone, in addition to sending written messages?
- ◆ Does the teacher give parents regular opportunities to see their child's written work?
- ◆ Does the teacher let parents know of expectations for homework, grading policies, and how parents can help?
- ◆ Does the teacher let parents know what information about the child is needed to help teachers do a better job (e.g., family stress or major changes in family, -- illness, birth, death, divorce, etc.)?
- ◆ In suggesting ways that parents can help at home, does the teacher take into account a student's particular background, culture and family situation?