



About LD

Home**About NCLD**our mission,
programs & services**Our World**news & insights
about LD**About LD**

- LD Basics
- LD Fast Facts
- Early Warning Signs
- Common Warning Signs
- Legal Rights
- In Depth Info
- Tips for Parents
- Tips for Teachers

Find Helplocate local & national
programs & services**Research News**strategies & instruction
that work**Get Ready
to Read!**our early literacy
screening initiative**Get Involved**your legislative
action center**Press Room**

info, stats & support

**Support
Our Work**

how & why to donate

Contact Us**Share This Page****Site Map****Disclaimer****Sign Up For News**Quick Tip Finder

Effective Parent-Teacher Partnerships

All too often, parents and teachers find themselves embroiled in disagreements about how best to help children with special learning needs. Children are always winners when teachers and parents work together effectively. This partnership will insure that problems can be addressed quickly and that the needs of parents, school personnel, and students are reflected in any decision-making process.

A wonderful first step in building this relationship is the parent-teacher conference. Such a meeting, held at the beginning of the school semester, can enable parents and teachers to overview hopes and expectations for the academic year and to overcome potential barriers to communication. Equally important is to create a plan for regular and ongoing contact that will insure that concerns are addressed before they turn into problems.

1. The key to any successful partnership is to establish a relationship of mutual respect and appreciation. An occasional note, informal meeting, or conversation can go a long way toward fostering a productive relationship.

2. By agreeing upon a system for regular and ongoing communication, parents and teachers can best monitor progress and address unexpected needs in a timely manner. Parents and teachers should agree upon a "best time" to meet or speak, or choose to communicate in writing.

3. Parents are well advised to learn about the system within which teachers must do their job and that sometimes compromises their ability to pay closer attention to students with special needs. Parents are encouraged to ask how they can help teachers to overcome obstacles and to promote positive change.

4. Teachers can help parents become active partners in supporting learning by sharing information about class routines. Notifying parents about grading criteria, homework and test schedules, projects, and class trips is very useful, as is establishing guidelines for ways in which parents can help with checking work and studying.

5. Parents should inform teachers about possible factors at home that either pose obstacles to learning or that might enhance the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. Family stressors and a student's participation in extra-curricular activities might impact upon school performance.

6. Teachers should inform parents about rules and regulations for the classroom as well as the school community. Parents might be asked to provide feedback regarding behavioral expectations and discipline guidelines at the onset of the school year.

7. Parents may not always be able to assess the workings of the classroom from homework assignments and test grades. Teachers should provide parents with an overview of content area instruction and teaching style. Parents should seek information about classroom routines.

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8. Parents are "experts" when it comes to their own children. By providing information to teachers about past positive (and negative) school experiences, teachers can take advantage of what is already known to be good practice with these children. Parents should highlight activities that have been successful in increasing motivation and improving performance. Mention situations that have caused frustration and resulted in underachievement or inappropriate behavior.

9. Just as students are unique learners, parents and teachers have unique characteristics and styles of working with children.

10. Parents and teachers should remind each other that one way to promote success in school is to insure that students feel "special" about their learning. Children should be praised for even small successes. Efforts should be made to afford children opportunities to be increasingly self-sufficient and to maintain high expectations for school success.

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