

# Family and Classroom Partnerships

A child's first teacher is his or her parents or guardians. When a child enters your classroom, you become part of the instructional team. In order for young children to flourish it is imperative to establish and cultivate a solid partnership between home and school.

## Starfall Can Help

Starfall recognizes the need for full parental or guardian participation in the education of the child. To facilitate the classroom and home connection we provide the following resources:

- ★ A Starfall.com home membership is \$35 a year (that is less than \$3/Month) and highly recommended. The website brings the skills and concepts introduced in the classroom into the home for interactive practice, play, and conversation.
- ★ Starfall.com members can access the "Teacher's Lounge." This section of the website provides parents and guardians a window into the classroom. There they can view Starfall materials and instructional methods.
- ★ Starfall lesson plans encourage teachers to observe and record valuable information revealed by the children's play during Learning Center time on an ongoing basis. These observations will inform and guide your interaction with parents.
- ★ Starfall lesson plans include assessment and observation tools which provide valuable information which will inform and guide your interaction with parents.
- ★ The daily lesson plans incorporate projects and special events to involve families.

## Strengthening Your Partnerships

Your first contact with parents or guardians is likely to occur at a school open house, enrollment, or on a home visit before the school year begins. From this moment onward it is up to you to foster trust, involvement, and positive interactions. These relationship building ideas will help you develop your partnerships throughout the year.

### *Parent & Guardian Participation*

- ★ Host a "Back to School" evening for parents and guardians at a time that is respectful of the parent/guardian's work schedule and the children's bedtime. Provide childcare for this event. Discuss your expectations for both the children and the parents during this year. Be sure to allow plenty of time for questions!
- ★ Invite parents, grandparents, and guardians to be "guest speakers" on occupations or culture. They might lead a cooking or craft project.
- ★ Encourage parents, grandparents, and guardians to volunteer or assist in the classroom periodically.
- ★ Designate a special week to each child in your class. During this week the child may bring pictures from home, special toys, pets, and even invite their parent, grandparent, or guardian to visit.

## Ongoing Informal Communication

- ★ Demonstrate to the parents that you are personally interested in them as well as their children. Greet parents personally, by name, as they drop off and pick up their children. If you have an anecdote about their child, share it.
- ★ Provide parents/guardians with your home phone number and clear “office hours” for receiving calls. Speaking directly with a parent or guardian is preferred over email to avoid misinterpretations.
- ★ Encourage parents/guardians to communicate with you immediately if they have concerns. Should this occur, be responsive to engender trust.
- ★ Display a frequently updated gallery of the children’s artwork or group projects for parents to enjoy when they visit the classroom.
- ★ Deliver Weekly Newsletters providing a snapshot of the week. Include quotes from the children, books you have read as a class, crafts you have created, and topics you have covered during the week. Identify specific links on Starfall.com for the children to visit over the weekend.
- ★ Create a bulletin board in a place where parents/guardians are sure to see it. Enrich the board with up-to-date information on your program and events. Include special community events of interest, especially in the area of parenting.

## Formal Conferences

The resources and tips outlined above will help you develop and cultivate a partnership with each child’s parents or guardians. In addition to these, be sure to Schedule formal conferences several times a year. The first formal conference should take place within the first month of school. You will learn more about the children during these conferences than you do during the school day.

Scheduled conferences build the relationship and trust between you and the parents or guardians. They develop a familiarity and comfort with the review process. This will be critical should a serious behavioral or academic growth issue arise and an intervention become necessary.

- **For behavioral issues,** make sure you have concise information about the issue that you have gathered through informal and formal assessments as well as the observation notes you have recorded while observing play during learning centers or other sources. Take time to thoughtfully reflect on your observations and prepare suggestions for parents to help them address the behavioral issue at home.
- **For academic growth issues,** gather assessments, portfolios, and samples of the child’s work. Take time to carefully analyze the data you have gathered and prepare suggestions of activities parents can employ to encourage and build the skill at home.
- Schedule a conference with other teachers or support staff (such as a speech therapist, etc.) prior to the conference to get additional input and include their recommendations in your notes.
- Encourage both parents/guardians to attend the conference. In the case of shared custody, make it a priority to meet together rather than separately so that the same information is communicated to all interested parties. Meeting together will also provide you with valuable information regarding parenting dynamics.
- Do not communicate the details of the issue by email. If an in-person meeting is not possible, a phone call is the next best option.

- If appropriate, involve the child in the first portion of the conference so he or she can share with the parents or guardians how he or she is doing in school. Provide headphones and a computer or audio book for the child to enjoy during the remainder of the conference.
- Prepare a Conference Report before the meeting. This report will include your supporting notes and recommendations gathered beforehand as well as space for you to record notes from the meeting and space to write the action plan established during the conference. Be prepared with copies for the parents or guardians to take home at the end of the meeting.

## **12 Steps for a Successful Conference**

1. Thank the parents or guardians for taking time out of their busy schedules to meet.
2. Ask: **“How do you think things are going for \_\_\_\_ so far?”**
3. Listen for valuable information about the parents’ perceptions of their children’s school experiences in the response.
4. Echo what you hear back to the parents to be sure you understood what they said. Welcome and demonstrate your appreciation for their input and advice. Reinforce your partnership and how you and they are working together to create the best learning experience for their child.

**Note:** If this is a general conference, unrelated to a behavioral or academic issue, skip to Step 11.

5. Begin with the issues. Parents and guardians know that you have requested a conference for a reason. The positives you have to share will be lost in the worry about the child’s behavior or performance.
6. Empower the parents or guardians. Ask: **“Have you experienced this problem at home? If so, what works best for you in this situation?”**
7. Listen to their suggestions and solutions.
8. Echo what you hear back to the parents to demonstrate that you have understood their response, value their efforts, and trust their parenting.
9. Often parents will look to you, as the professional, to provide suggestions and support. Share the parenting tips you have prepared, or develop ways in which you and the parents can work together to resolve the issues.
10. Formulate and document an Action Plan.
  - a. Ask: **“What will you do to help \_\_\_\_ with this issue at home?”** Write their responses down on the Conference Report.
  - b. Say: **“This is what I will do at school to help \_\_\_\_ with this issue.”** Add your responses to the Conference report.
  - c. Schedule a time to meet again to follow up on the results of the plan.
11. Share and discuss assessments, portfolios, and samples of the child’s work.
12. End the conference with all the positives about the child. Now that the potentially confronting information has been addressed the parent or guardian will be able hear and appreciate the wonderful things about their child. This is precisely the feeling you want them to carry home.
13. Provide a copy of the Conference Report to the parents or guardians.

# Conclusion

Building a partnership with parents and guardians strengthens the children's educational experiences and helps to create a collaborative learning environment in which the children will flourish. We have provided you with several suggestions, guidelines, and approaches to develop this partnership. Frequent communication is the key to a successful school year!

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