

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Parent-teacher interviews

How to maximize face time with your child's teacher

Parent-teacher interviews can make both parties anxious and frustrated. Savvy parents and teachers show you how to get the most out of your 15 minutes

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From Monday's Globe and Mail Published on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009 7:29PM EST Last updated on Tuesday, Nov. 24, 2009 3:25AM EST

Do come with specific questions – and expect to be asked a few.

"Sometimes it's detective work" when parents don't bring critical questions or relevant information to tackle a problem to the table, says Susan Roy, a teacher at Nelson Mandela Park Public School in Toronto. So Richmond, B.C., dad Byron Stevens goes through his son John's planner in the weeks leading up to the interview to familiarize himself with the 13-year-old's assignments and class events. But don't ask a question if you're not ready to hear the answer, cautions Kathy Buckworth, a Toronto mother of six and author of *The BlackBerry Diaries: Adventures in Modern Motherhood*. When one of her son's teachers highlighted behavioural problems, Ms. Buckworth asked for a severity rating from one to 10. "I said, 'Honestly, he's a little boy... how bad is he?' And she said, 'Uh, 20.' "

Don't judge the teacher – or assume the teacher is judging you.

Interviews can make parents feel exposed, as though the teacher is judging them based on what the child is like at school. This puts them on the defensive. "Unfortunately, some [parents] are trying to camouflage the difficulties they experience in their parenting [and] project it on the teacher," says Marie-Laure Hansson, a special education teacher at Dunning-Foubert Elementary School in Ottawa. She says parents sometimes blame the teacher for a child's difficulties. To avoid this, some parents grill their children for details first. "I always ask the kids before I go if I'm going to hear anything they haven't told me," says Leslie Garrett, a London, Ont.-based writer and mother of three. "It prepares you for it so when a teacher says it, you tend not to take it so personally."

Do arrive on time and identify yourself.

Teachers have limited time, usually 15 minutes. If the teacher is backed up, rejigging your schedule can get you a better interview later, says Annikki Desmarais, a mom of four in Toronto. "I've tried to help the teacher out and say, 'Look, I understand you have another appointment in five minutes, do you want to reschedule our[s]?' " And be clear about which child you're there for – identity mix-ups happen more often than you'd think. When Linda Cameron, an associate professor at University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, sat down in a high-school interview for one of her kids, the teacher was talking about another student. "[It] was upsetting because this child they were talking to me about was quite horrible."

Don't behave worse than the kids in the class.

For one thing, the classroom is no place to cruise for a date, says Erin Fenlong, a teacher at Smiths Falls District Collegiate Institute southwest of Ottawa. Once, when she told a male parent it had been a slow interview night, he replied, "Well, what are you doing tomorrow night? I wouldn't want you to be bored two nights in a row," she recalls. "I panicked, I was sweating. I thought 'Oh my goodness,

I'm in this classroom by myself.'" A colleague of hers had a parent arrive at the interview drunk, her painfully embarrassed son in tow. Swearing also doesn't help, Ms. Roy adds. Unfortunately, these encounters are not rare, Prof. Cameron says, "They're not funny; they're actually quite pathetic."

Do lose the confrontational approach.

Teachers have to tread carefully to make the conference as measured as possible; parents should do the same. If you have a problem, you should air it – but consider both perspectives first. Ms. Buckworth suggests hearing out the teacher before launching into your concern. "I think it's more important to listen to the teacher instead of sharing information back to them," she says. "The teacher spends eight hours a day with these kids, they know what they know." The biggest parent-teacher tensions come from confusion, often fuelled by nonsensical standardized report cards, Prof. Cameron says. You won't make progress unless you're on the same page. "The most important reason for parent teacher interviews, both on behalf of parents and teachers, is to advocate and communicate."