

Making the most of parent-teacher conferences

In October, teachers in elementary and middle school to meet with families and check in about how learning is going in the classroom.

These can be a very quick way to touch base — or they could be an opportunity to open up avenues of conversation that center the power of evidence-based learning.

Here are 2 simple questions you could ask your children’s teacher:

WHAT TO ASK	ENCOURAGING SIGNS	PROBLEMATIC SIGNS
“Is my child doing better, about the same, or worse than what’s expected for their grade level?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— You are shown reading data, writing samples, and math tests to demonstrate your child’s progress.— You are told which lesson or which specific skills your student has mastered and whether that is inline with grade expectations. (https://achievethecore.org)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— The question is avoided and your child is complemented for qualities unrelated to their learning, e.g. being “a pleasure to have in class.”— You are told to disregard test scores, or given an “A-Z” level— You are told to “wait and see” or that they will probably improve next year.
“How can I be a partner in learning at home?”	You are given examples of simple evidence-based instructional strategies (e.g. study with notecards, or practice spelling words with long vowel sounds) to supplement what’s being taught during the school day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— You are asked to do things that do not relate to the areas where growth is needed, or things that are not based on evidence.— You receive comments that seem to indicate that your child’s learning challenges are somehow your fault.

When you are at parent-teacher conferences, look for evidence of these best practices:

1. *Direct, clear instruction* from the teacher before tasks are assigned
2. *Spaced and retrieval practice*, in which students study topics over time, allowing time to forget and then recall information, spacing it out instead of cramming before a quiz or a test (especially for math, science and history). Knowledge stored in long-term memory is the key to understanding what we read, as well as creativity and critical thinking.
3. *Incorporating vocabulary* (and morphology) into every subject
4. *Plenty of time practicing foundational skills*, like spelling and multiplication. Many of the skills children learn in school must be taught and practiced over years in order to master. This is different from learning to walk and talk.
5. *Employing both images and text* to help brains process information better

Worksheet for parents

Areas of strength:

Main areas of concern:

Instruction that is working and not working:

Essential test scores (such as DIBELS/Star):

Things I need more explanation on, from school:

Record of documents and/or requests

DATE	DOCUMENT REQUESTED	TO/FROM WHOM	RESPONSE DATE