Understanding the Psychology Behind Parent-Teacher Conferences

Primary Resource: Mann, Gilmore, Robertson, Kennedy-Wood, & Maia-Pike (2024). Little things mean a lot: Parent perspectives on positive teacher-parent communication when students have disability.

Additional Resources for Further Reading:

- Sanchez-Horn (2005). School experiences then and now: Are parents' perceptions of their own school experiences related to their perceptions of their child's middle school?
- Đorđević, Glumbić, Memišević, Brojčin, & Krstov (2022). Parent-teacher interactions, family stress, well-being, and parental depression as contributing factors to parental involvement mechanisms in education of children with autism.

Core Topics & Summary

Psychology of Interviews: Fear of Negative Evaluation Interviews—including parent conferences—activate universal evaluation anxiety. The structure itself (power imbalance, time limit, formal setting) triggers a nervous system response in parents, regardless of the teacher's intentions (Sanchez-Horn, 2005).

School Biography: When Past Pain Shows Up Parents bring their own school histories into conferences. For many—especially from low-income and marginalized communities—school was a place of shame, tracking, discrimination, or exclusion. Non-engagement often protects them from re-experiencing that harm (Sanchez-Horn, 2005).

Four Moves to Bridge the Gap

1. **Redesign Structure** – Agenda in advance, side-by-side seating, 2–3 minutes reserved for parent questions (Mann et al., 2024)
2. **Lead with Strength** – Specific genuine strengths, plain language (no jargon), ask parents' expertise first (Mann et al., 2024)
3. **Acknowledge the Elephant** – Name that school meetings haven't always been positive; offer explicit reassurance (trauma-informed practice; Zhai & Guo, 2025)
4. **The Little Things: Building Relationship in the Everyday** – Informal day-to-day communication (warm greetings, brief positive updates, genuine smiles, vulnerability) is MORE powerful than formal meetings. Regular brief updates, showing vulnerability, remembering names, and genuine presence builds trust and signals that the teacher truly sees and cares about the child (Mann et al., 2024).

Autism & Disabilities: Two Evidence-Based Instructional Strategies Parents of children with autism report significantly lower involvement due to stress, child's emotional regulation challenges, and lower subjective well-being—not lack of care (Đorđević et al., 2022).

Two DI/UDL-aligned strategies strengthen partnership:

- **Visual Supports & Structured Routines** – Use across all learners; reduces anxiety; gives parents concrete tools to use at home
- **Intentional Scaffolding with Gradual Independence** – Break tasks into steps; fade support gradually; builds independence without shame

Reflection Questions for Peers

1. **Think about a time you felt evaluated or judged in a high-stakes situation.** How did that experience shape your behavior in the moment? What does this teach you about the parents walking into your conferences?
2. **Consider a parent who seems "disengaged" or "difficult."** What if their behavior is rooted in past harm or survival, not apathy? How might this reframe shift how you approach them?
3. **Which of the four moves resonates most with you, and which feels most challenging?** What one small change could you implement in your next placement/teaching position to test it?

References

Đorđević, M., Glumbić, N., Memišević, H., Brojčin, B., & Krstov, A. (2022). Parent-teacher interactions, family stress, well-being, and parental depression as contributing factors to parental involvement mechanisms in education of children with autism. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 68(6), 838–849. https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2021.1896962

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Sanchez-Horn, R. M. (2005). *School experiences then and now: Are parents' perceptions of their own school experiences related to their perceptions of their child's middle school?* [Master's thesis, University of South Florida]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Zhai, L., & Guo, C. (2025). Teachers' emotional labor in parent-teacher interactions: Key elements and theoretical logic from a grounded theory approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1639197. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1639197