



Teacher will

Don't think of parents' evenings as an ordeal. They are a perfect opportunity for building relationships and discovering how you can contribute to your child's 'other life', says teacher **Robert Watts**

Is there a more unsettling phrase in the English language than parents' evening? Were two words ever combined to such terrifying effect? No one looks forward to parents' evening.

As a (relatively angelic) child, I always suspected that my teacher was secretly amassing a dossier of damaging information on me, ready to suddenly divulge it to my horrified mother. As a (relatively exhausted) teacher, I remember conducting one particularly late interview whilst lying prostrate on my back across two of my pupils' desks. And as a (relatively new) parent, I am already living in fear of my first parents' evening faux pas.

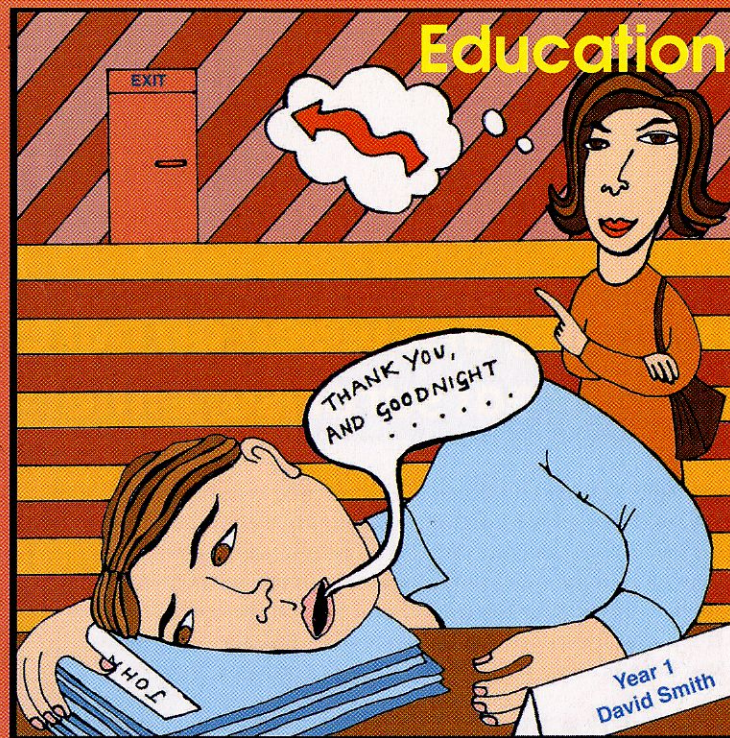
After all, the event is a potential minefield. 'Once we'd finished looking at all Rebecca's work, we started flicking through some of the other children's books that were on the table,' confides mother of two Andrea Sutcliffe. 'I looked up and realised that the other parents were watching me in horror. What made it worse was that my husband carried on, commenting that "all these other kids aren't as good as our Becky"!'

So what should you expect from that all-important meeting, and how can you avoid the pitfalls and make the most of it?

Lorraine Manford, head teacher of Normand Croft Community School, in Fulham, west London, believes that the aims of a parents' evening should be 'to look at the progress the children have made over a term and to involve parents in their children's learning throughout the whole year.'

The discussion should cover three main areas of children's experience at school: academic progress, attitudes to learning and general behaviour. Most schools schedule three parents' evenings during the year, one for each term.

'Each has a different purpose,' explains Lorraine. 'The one at the beginning of the year is to set out for parents what it is like to be in the class: to explain routines, to set expectations, to have a look at examples of children's work and to meet all the adults involved in the children's learning, such as teacher assistants. In February we talk more about how much the children have



see you now

progressed since September and we address any minor worries. The final parents' evening is likely to focus on the child's end-of-year report.'

Clearly, non-attendance at a parents' evening will not only cause concern at the school, but will also give your child the message that you do not value her education. If you cannot attend on that particular night, your child's teacher may be happy to suggest an alternative. But do remember that teachers have many pressures on their time and are often tired at the end of the day. If possible, both parents should attend the meeting: even within a brief 10 minutes, a lot of information about your child can be shared.

Making the most of the meeting

Remember that you and the teacher have a shared aim: you both want what is best for your child. You should aim to come away from the meeting with a clear idea of what it is that your child needs to do in order to make progress with her work.

Before

A date to dread

Many children will naturally be anxious about their teacher meeting their parents: their two worlds, home and school, are suddenly colliding and they might reasonably expect the collision to cause some damage. Stress levels can be particularly high at the end of the school year, when children know that their parents are about to receive a written report on What They've Been Getting

Up To. Emphasise to your child that you are interested in seeing her schoolwork and the progress she has made, and reassure her that she's not in trouble. 'Before going in to the meeting, be positive and be very supportive towards your child,' suggests Lorraine. 'It's quite a stressful thing for children knowing that their parents will be discussing their work. If it's the end-of-year meeting, ask for a copy of the report to read before you see the teacher so you can discuss what's in it.'

No surprises

If parents have any particular concerns about their child's progress then teachers should be made aware of these concerns as soon as possible and another meeting should be scheduled. Remember that at a parents' evening you are likely to be allocated a 10-minute appointment and there may be other parents in the room: clearly this is not the time to suddenly raise the subject of your daughter's deep-rooted hatred of the horrid boy who sits behind her. 'Nothing discussed on parents' evening should come as a great surprise, either for you or for the teacher,' says Lorraine. 'Parents who have a bee in their bonnet should make an appointment for another meeting either before or after parents' evening.'

A problem shared

If you have tried unsuccessfully to meet the teacher beforehand and you need to raise an awkward issue, try to do it in a way that demonstrates that you regard this as a shared problem and not one that should be blamed on the teacher or school. If, for

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example, you are concerned that your child is unhappy in school because of other members of the class, ask the teacher for her perspective on the issue rather than issuing an ultimatum. It may be a minor issue, such as seating arrangements, that has been overlooked by the teacher and that can be easily rectified. If it is a more serious matter, the teacher will appreciate that you have brought it to her attention in a sensitive way.

Don't take this personally, but...

While sorting out the personality conflicts on Blue Table comes as part of the job for a teacher, being informed that she is the reason why young Jack dreads coming to school is another matter. Your child's teacher will be rightly concerned to hear that she's been wiped off your daughter's Christmas card list, so tread carefully.

Generalised complaints are hard to deal with, so try to explain exactly what the problem is, quoting specific incidents if possible. Research shows that teachers make an average of over 2,000 decisions and responses in each school day: you try doing that without offending anyone! There is likely to be an innocent explanation for the falling-out, and do remember that complaints are common among parents and children. However, if you feel you need to, you can make an appointment to see the headteacher and discuss things further with her.

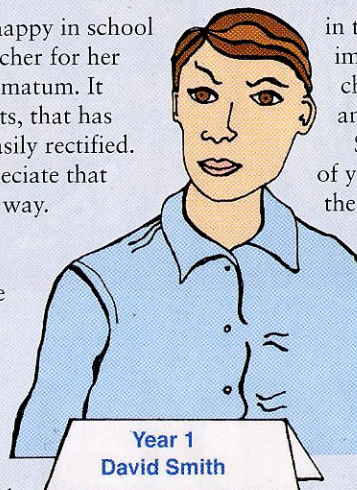
During

At ease

When your turn comes, introduce yourself to the teacher with a smile, preferably using your first name. She will be likely to respond in kind, which will set you both at ease. Try to be positive from the start – find something to praise about the teacher and the way she handles the class. Also, be prepared to offer a subtle reminder of which member of her class is your nearest and dearest – 'I've just been reading some of Melissa's stories...' – because meeting a large number of parents at once can be something of an identity parade for teachers.

So why can't she be in top group?

Try not to be preoccupied with comparing your child's progress with that of other children in the class: 'Parents like to see how their children are faring against a benchmark of other children,' says Lorraine. 'But they need to appreciate their own individual child and the progress that has been made, without looking at it



in terms of comparison or competition.' Most importantly, find out how you can support your child's learning at home, and make written notes of any specific suggestions the teacher makes.

Similarly, making comparisons between the efforts of your offspring – 'Our Jamie was writing novels by the time he was her age!' – can be unhelpful. If you suggest that Child Number 2 is failing to keep pace with Child Number 1, teachers will feel that you are making implicit criticisms of their performance, while siblings may become locked into a bitter rivalry.

Thank you and good night

Last appointment of the evening? Spare a thought for the stressed-out teacher, who may have already met 15 sets of parents in two hours:

'Sometimes the last appointment seems to be the one that goes on longest,' says Lorraine. 'We have to clear out parents by a certain time: some teachers will have been in school since 7.30am and parents' evening goes on until 7pm. So when the school keeper comes round jangling the keys, that usually means it's time to go!'

After

Accentuate the positive

'Make sure you praise your child for the work she's done – it's really important that the children feel confident about their work,' says Lorraine. 'If all they receive is negative feedback then they're not going to feel good about coming to school to learn the next day. Emphasise the positive parts of the report even if there are some negatives as well.'

Target setting

Try to come away with a clear idea of the areas in which your child needs to make progress, rather than where she stands in relation to other pupils. These targets may be social as well as academic. For example, she may need to learn to share with classmates. Also, make sure that you are clear about your strategies for supporting your child at home, and think carefully about how you are going to communicate targets for improvement to your child so that she gets positively motivated.

