



THE PARENTS GUIDE TO PARENTS EVENINGS

It is a cold rainy night and you are tired after a hard day at work. There is a queue to see the member of staff who has been looking after your child for this year and you are desperately thinking what to say. Last parents' evening culminated in a minor dispute with the same member of staff about your child's progress, and you were left with a sense of disappointment and frustration, as you felt you had failed to put across your viewpoint and did not really take in what the staff member was saying. This was a classic failure of communication.

Parents' evenings can come twice a year (in spring and autumn) and are extremely important for your child's development. They are meetings where potential problems and solutions can be discussed, and also where feedback is given so you can leave with a sense of pride in your child's achievements, but what steps can you as parents take to get the best out the evening?

The first action parents can take is to prepare for the evening as they would for any interview. Do your homework and note down the questions you want to ask, so you don't go away saying, 'I wish I had said that'. If your partner is going as well, have a discussion about what will be said before you leave so you will both be presenting a common front; it is never good to have a parental dispute in front of the person responsible for your child.

Secondly, do not be afraid to speak out to the staff – they are professionals. Your questions and opinions will not have a negative effect on your child, even if you have had a disagreement with a member of staff. They do not bear grudges, so any visions you might have of your child being ignored and left in a corner with a dunce's cap are totally unfounded. If there is a point that needs to be made forcefully, do not do it in an aggressive manner or by raising the voice, as this will only make the staff defensive, and cloud communication between them and you.

Thirdly, to keep communications open, speak and listen assertively. Parents' evenings are not a time to get emotional, even though they do concern the person you hold most dear. Remain cool calm and connected. As parents, you have to take responsibility for your contribution to your child's education, and not be afraid to admit mistakes or ask for help when needed. You should express your thoughts and feelings honestly, with respect for the person you are talking to. Feedback should be given and received honestly and in a straightforward manner.

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Most importantly: listen carefully. Many people are too busy formulating their next statement in their heads to really listen to what is being said to them. You should listen to everything that is being said, as during the evening you will no doubt hear a number of positive things about your child. Of course, you will also be made aware of things that could be improved. Do not make this one negative comment the focus of the evening when dealing with your child later at home. Put it in context and praise your child for the many positive things that have been said, before talking about any room for improvement.

The evening's aim is to serve both parties as the school or nursery also needs feedback. It is only twice a year that there is any major contact between parents as a group and the staff. The staff wants and needs to know what they are doing right and where they too need to improve. OFSTED encourages communication between schools and parents, realising that a positive understanding of each other's needs results in better schooling. As a parent, do not be afraid to offer opinions and suggestions; you are the customer so your opinion is valued.

Finally, as the evening ends, there is just one more thing to do and that is to say thank you to the staff. They have been working very hard on behalf of your child and have given up their evening to be there. A small 'thank you' goes a long way to acknowledge their work and boost their morale. At the end of the evening everyone should go home smiling, knowing they have got the best results for the parent, school and, most importantly, the child.