

Speech Impediments

Children are now being invited to attend parent-teacher interviews.

By Heather Sokoloff

When Shayne and Steve Jose showed up for parent-teacher interviews last week at the elementary school their three daughters attend, the first question they got from a teacher was, "Where are your children?"

As is happening across the country, teachers at the school encourage parents to bring students to the semi-annual meetings so concerns can be discussed in a three-way forum called "student-led" interviews.

The practice has created a backlash among some parents who believe the 10 or 15 precious minutes they have with the teacher ought to be theirs alone.

"You want to be able to speak with an adult frankness and at an adult pace," says Karin Litzcke of Vancouver. "You don't want to worry about hurting your child's feelings."

Parents like Ms Litzcke say no matter how open they are with their offspring, bringing children to the interviews makes it awkward to ask teachers questions like why their youngster has only average marks or has trouble making friends.

Ms Jose, for example, was concerned one of her daughters was taking a while to learn to read and wanted to talk to the teacher about whether she was just a late bloomer, or needed a more serious intervention.

"I just don't think I could be completely honest with my kids there," she says. "You want your kids to know you support them 100%. So it's not always helpful for them to hear you asking those questions."

The meetings usually start with the child presenting a piece of artwork, an assignment or an essay to their parents. From there, the teacher is supposed delve into the student's achievements and setbacks – then come up with a plan, with input from parents, to address any problems.

Parents say teachers often get sidetracked by the presentations and spend too much time praising children for routine accomplishments, turning

the interview into an exercise in building the student's self-esteem.

"Parents who are involved already know the good things," says Ms Jose, of Orillia, Ont. "If I'm there, it's because I have specific issues I want to talk about."

And even when parents leave their children at home, hoping for a frank exchange between adults, they soon learn their interview is to take place in an environment that does not welcome privacy.

Candid communication is inhibited when interviews take place in classrooms with open doors while other parents wait in the hall or even, in some cases, in classrooms with other parent-teacher interviews going on at the same time.

For many parents, bringing their children to the interviews is a positive experience, even when touchy subjects come up. Parents can find out whether their children have been truthfully conveying information from the classroom, for example, says Ann Douglas, a parenting expert based in Peterborough, Ont., and author of *The Mother of All Parenting Books*.

"It forces kids to sort out these issues right then and there," Ms. Douglas says. "It's like holding a board meeting between parents, teachers and the student."

She says it's not such a bad thing if the interview ends up being little more than a time to praise the student. Her own son, a Grade-8 student with a learning disability, got a self-esteem boost when his teacher used the time to praise him in front of his parents.

Still, she acknowledges that judging from the body language of other middle-school students and their families waiting in the hall, the experience was probably as enjoyable as "the Spanish Inquisition or Purgatory".

Bringing children along also exposes them to tension between parents and teachers. In British Columbia, some teachers are using the inter-

view sessions to criticize provincial education policies – an exercise some parents say amounts to bashing the government on their time.

"It's hard for a parent to say, 'I understand your perspective, but I'd really like to talk about my student'," says Teri Watson, president of BC's provincial parent association, BC Confederacy of Parent Councils.

A Cornwall, Ont., mother recalls the last time she attended parent-teacher interviews, the teacher used a hissing buzzer to mark the end of the 15-minute meeting. "You were allowed to finish your thoughts," Michele Alexis says. "But it's always very rushed."

Ms Alexis, who is a family doctor, wishes teachers would abandon the classroom interview process, and simply call parents on the telephone at scheduled times, twice a year, to better meet the needs of working families.

"These things are held in the evening, when everyone is already tired from the day's work and rushing home to get supper done," she says. "That sets both parents and teachers up for tempers to flare or apathy to take over."

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Report Card Interpretation Tip By Christine Cox

- If you really want to know how your child is doing in school, check the adverbs and other descriptive phrases on his or her report card.
- Linger over words such as "with help", "occasionally", "generally" and "consistently".
- Your child is "sometimes" able to identify and describe elements of stories. How often is "sometimes", you should wonder. Is he keeping up with his classmates?

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