

Is it time to give Parents' evening a miss?



Parents' evening is an ordeal for all concerned and has little value – there must be a better way, says Glynis Kozma

You have rushed home after a stressful day at work, grabbed a sandwich, force-fed your children and given your partner strict instructions to be home early. Yes, you are off to a parents' evening to squat on dinky chairs, read the graffiti on the desks and discover . . . well, not very much.

As dutiful parents, we sign-up for parents' evenings. Would anyone dare not? Yet are they really necessary?

Take Lita. She is fuming because her child's school allocates parents one of two afternoons with only a week's notice; she has to book both days off work until she knows which. Is it surprising that the most caring parents wonder whether there is any value in arranging busy lives for a five-minute chat with the teacher, often to be told nothing new? Kelly remembers one meeting: "It was spectacularly uninformative. My son's teacher said that he was doing fine — then spent 15 minutes discussing her thyroid condition."

I emerged from my daughter's school ready to throttle any teacher who mentioned, ever, that my daughter was quiet. Oh yes? From Year 1 to Year 13, this was the comment that I heard time and again. Other than that, I'd been told that she was working well and on target. I don't remember one single occasion when I was told anything I didn't already know. At best, it showed my daughter that I was interested in her education, and I gained an impression of her teachers.

Kim, who is a governor at her daughter's primary school, is more positive: "We never had an issue with parents' evenings. I work from home and had a choice of times: 3.30pm to 5.30pm, or 6pm to 8pm. The children were allowed to watch TV in the dining hall." She agrees that if she had more than one child and no relatives near by, it could be trickier.

Lindsay's three daughters were educated at grammar and independent schools. "I found the evenings valuable, mainly so that I could put faces to names, but also to check out the teachers. It was my only contact with them and they always explained targets very carefully."

What do the teachers think? Who would envy a secondary schoolteacher who arrives at school before 8am, teaches 200 children in a day, meets 30 parents and does not leave until 10pm? Their main gripe is that the parents they most want to see never attend. Then there are the parents who think that they can have 20 minutes of a teacher's time as little Harry is such a problem at home — and what is the school doing to do about it?

As a former teacher, I used to find myself searching for new ways of saying, "He's doing well. No problems", 30 times over. I livened up one meeting inadvertently by enthusing over a boy's exercise book while his parents looked bemused and asked if the book was his — the handwriting appeared different. "Oh yes," I said explaining that his handwriting had improved so much. They left glowing. I checked the book: right parents, wrong exercise book.

So does the traditional parents' evening need rethinking to meet parents' working lives and available technology? At the click of a mouse parents can log online to view their child's attendance, punctuality, behaviour, targets and progress.

Many parents feel that there is an imbalance between the effort required of them to attend and the amount of time and information they are given. But are you brave enough not to go? The implication, if you do not, is that you are uninterested and uncaring.

A friend tore herself to bits last week when she realised work would make her late for parents' evening. Her daughters are 6 and 4, and happy, Her husband was attending anyway. Why the stress? "I don't want the teacher to think I don't care," she told me.

Do parents' evenings do little more than pay lip-service to parents who are already monitoring their child's progress? Would it not be better for schools to treat pupils and parents as individuals rather than to invite 300 of them to one evening for what is often little more than organised chaos?

If there is an issue that a parent or a teacher thinks needs to be discussed, arrange that meeting. If schools want to display the pupils' work, have an open day. But spare working parents wasted leave, indigestion and a search for babysitters, only to be told: "He's doing fine. Did I tell you I'm off to Morocco next term?"

The do's and don'ts

- **Do . . .**
Be on time.
Be polite even if you disagree with the teacher Make notes of the main points you want to discuss, so you won't forget.
Ask for another appointment if there are issues you need to discuss.
Ask what you can do to help at home.
- **Don't . . .**
Discuss any big issues that can't be covered in five to ten minutes.
Be afraid to say you don't understand jargon: teachers shouldn't assume you do.
Allow the teacher to set the agenda — if there is something you want to discuss and it won't take long, raise it.
Criticise other teachers.
Take wriggling, chatty siblings if you can possibly arrange childcare.
Paint your child as an angel — they may be, but on the other hand . . .

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