

The Immigrant Parent at Parent-Teacher Conferences

Preparation is not a bad idea

By **Kat Avila** | Published on LatinoLA: October 17, 2011



I was role-playing as an elementary school teacher. This was to help an immigrant mom prepare for a parent-teacher conference. She practiced asking questions to get the information she needed from the teacher.

These questions included "Is my child a good student?" and "Does my child follow the classroom rules?" They are simple and straightforward. But they are a challenge to ask for parents with limited English-speaking

abilities.

If the child of immigrants has problems in school, the parents may not hear about it. Children sometimes don't feel comfortable talking openly about their problems. Also, news from the school may not reach the parents due to a language barrier or mischievous students. Children know their parents are not familiar with the inner workings of U.S. schools.

When I worked with junior-high at-risk kids, I called in a translator to help me talk with an immigrant mom. This mom had aspirations that her daughter would go to college. I knew the student had the potential. But not if her daughter stayed in my class, I said through the translator.

The mother had not known there were problems. I was the first teacher she had been able to really talk to. After this session, I had hopes the mother would find a way to stay involved in her daughter's education. (Later when I saw the bill, I found out the translator wasn't free.)

When a child has problems, the child isn't always to blame. It may be the teacher's misperceptions. The parent-teacher conference then becomes a potential minefield. The best strategy is to obtain as much information as possible. You want to understand the teacher's side of things.

An American classroom can be run very differently from what immigrants are used to. It's not just the language of instruction or the style of communication. Schools have mysterious "detention rooms." They have "incentive programs" where using the restroom is a "privilege" that has to be paid for with "good behavior tickets."

Immigrant children are frequently thrown into U.S. schools in a sink-or-swim fashion. Their first year, without their buddies or parental support, can be very confusing and heartbreaking. Children may get in trouble in class simply for doing what a "good" student in their country would do.

The children have to learn to call their U.S. teachers by their names, not to use a generic title like "Teacher." They learn to look their teacher in the eye to show they are paying attention, not to look down as is polite in many cultures. They learn to speak up in class, instead of remaining silent and modest about what they know.

They learn that their teachers like to use the word "DON'T" a lot: DON'T be noisy! DON'T be messy! DON'T cheat! It sounds overly negative to children who are brought up in cultures that

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are more group-directed: Let us ALL listen better. Let us ALL be neat. Let us ALL be honest.

On top of the cultural differences, the immigrant child might have to endure an inexperienced teacher or even a garden-variety racist. While most teachers are caring and hardworking people, there are some who should just find a different profession.

Parents talking to teachers, and teachers talking to parents. A lot of information can be gleaned from the parent-teacher conference. A prepared and involved parent can make a big difference in their children's academic lives.

Kat is still thrilled about paying only one dollar for the used hardcover dictionary she bought at the library bookstore. What a great deal! And the money from the store's sales is used for buying needed books for the library.

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