Becky Reback (00:00):

Have you ever been in a parent-teacher conference where everything starts out sounding amazing? Your child is kind, your child is bright, they're engaged, they're doing well, and then the teacher says there's just one thing they would really benefit from support with.

Mary Miele (00:19):

Yes. And suddenly you're sitting there trying to figure out, wait, is this a small thing? Is this something I should have already noticed? Is this something I should be concerned with? What am I supposed to do with this?

Becky Reback (00:32):

Exactly. Even as educators with our own children, we have this feeling. Often the teacher is not delivering bad news. They're sharing an observation that can genuinely be helpful. But when you are sitting in a short conference, it can be hard to know what to ask next or how to turn a broad comment into something you can actually understand and use from your teacher.

Mary Miele (00:57):

Yeah, I totally agree. I've been there as well, and I feel like maybe the teacher says your child would benefit from more support with organization or they need to start speaking up in class or they could get started more independently. And all of those things could mean something really different depending on your child, the classroom itself, and of course the moment.

Becky Reback (01:20):

So what's the goal? The goal is not to panic or immediately assume that something is wrong. Our goal really is to get specific. What does this look like day to day? When does this happen? What is already helping? What would progress actually look like for my child?

Mary Miele (01:38):

Exactly. So today, Becky and I are going to talk with you about how to make the most of your parent-teacher conferences, how to prepare before you walk in, how to ask for clarity once you're there, and leave with a realistic plan instead of a vague feeling that you should be doing more. Hi everyone. Welcome to Be Evolved Podcast. I'm Mary Mele, the founder of Evolved, and I'm here with Becky Reback.

Becky Reback (02:12):

Hi everyone.

Mary Miele (02:13):

It's parent-teacher conference season for a lot of our families, and I think that many parents feel a version of what we just described in the opener. You want to make the most of that time, but you also do not want to walk in feeling anxious, overly intense, or kind of like you're interrogating the teacher.

Becky Reback (02:31):

Exactly. And a productive conference is not about hunting for bad news or proving that your child is perfect or trying to get every question answered in the 15 or 20 minutes that you have. A productive conference is really about getting a clearer picture on how your child is learning, how they're functioning, how they're growing in a setting that you as a parent don't get to observe every day.

Mary Miele (02:55):

Exactly. And Becky, you've sat at the table, both sides of that table as a classroom teacher, a learning specialist, an administrator, and now as a parent. A lot to offer there.

Becky Reback (03:06):

I have, I have. And one thing that I've learned is that parents who leave conferences feeling most informed are not necessarily the ones who ask the most questions, but they are asking more pointed, useful questions.

Mary Miele (03:21):

Yeah. So today we're going to break this into three parts. Know your child before you walk in. Get beneath the summary while you're there, asking those really key questions that we have for you, and then leave with one shared plan. And if you don't necessarily leave with that shared plan, we're going to give you an idea of how to write an email afterwards that's going to really shore up that plan.

Becky Reback (03:42):

Right, because a conference is not a report card moment. So in my kid's school, we actually got our report card a week before the conferences and I can read through it, but that's really just to prepare me for the conference. The point, it's an ongoing conversation and ideally an ongoing partnership around how your child learns and grows with their classroom teacher.

Mary Miele (04:04):

Exactly. So let's break this into a couple of segments. So the first segment here we're talking about is know your child before you walk in. So before that conference happens, what is the most important thing a parent can do before going into that conference?

Becky Reback (04:18):

Okay. Just as you would preparing for a meeting at work, take 10 minutes to reflect on who your child is outside of school. So we don't just want to ask ourselves are they getting their homework done, but how do they respond when something on their homework feels difficult? Do they ask for help? Do they just avoid the work altogether? Are they independent with the routines around homework that are set up in our home? Or do they need a lot of reminders? How do they respond to feedback or correction?

Mary Miele (04:52):

Yeah, so you're getting that nice picture of how you see your child at home. You're just taking a couple minutes, really listening to yourself around how is your child functioning at home as it relates to school from your perspective, you're going into this conversation with your own observations, you've kind of written them in the notes section of your phone, not just waiting for the school to tell you who your child is, you're coming in with that piece of work done already.

Becky Reback (05:19):

Exactly. You really want a full picture. A teacher sees your child in one environment, a very important environment, but it's still only one environment. The classroom, they see group work, they see transitions, recess, independent assignments, and you see a completely different side of them at home. And quite frankly, neither perspective tells the whole story on its own, but together it can be incredibly helpful. We talk about this all the time where we merge our home and school and how we have to support each other.

Mary Miele (05:53):

Yeah, exactly. So give me an example of just how come this exercise matters so much. Where can parents take it?

Becky Reback (06:00):

Yeah, absolutely. So let's say your teacher says your child sometimes struggles with transitions. If you've been seeing the same thing at home, maybe getting out the door in the morning, maybe shifting from screens to homework, or maybe on the weekends when your plans change, you have context and useful context and you know this might not just be limited to the classroom or not just limited to home. But if it's completely new information, then your questioning is going to be a little bit different. So you might want to ask a question, again, this is if it's new information, what kind of transitions are hardest? Is it moving from one subject to another? Is it moving from lunch back inside to the classroom? Is it beginning independent work? So going from that group learning lesson time to independent work? Is it ending a preferred activity? There's a lot of questions you can ask to understand when and where the breakdown is happening around transitions.

Mary Miele (06:59):

Exactly. So I just want to repeat what you said because I thought it was so important. I just want to make sure everyone really got that. It's about doing your homework ahead of time so you can understand how you understand your child. So then when a teacher gives you a comment such as your child's struggling with transitions, you either know, "Hey, I see that too," and then you might respond with that part, right? "Oh yeah, we have that issue too. "And you might get to a little more of that problem solving together part, or you might say," Huh, that's not what I see at home, so can I understand this more? And I'm going to go in and ask some questions. Where does it happen? How does it happen? Can you explain that to me a little bit more? "And allow yourself to gather more information, and then you might want to just stay in that question before you jump into ideas or solutions, try to understand it a bit more is kind of what you're saying.

Becky Reback (07:49):

Yes, absolutely. And the goal here is not to label your child, it's to understand what conditions help them function at their best and where they need more support. And by asking these questions, we can start to see a pattern and understand, oh, okay, wow, the transition trouble is really happening when they go from recess to come inside to go to math. And now I can dig in to understand is it the ending of the recess? Is it going to math? What is it about this transition that is particularly hard?

Mary Miele (08:19):

Yeah, I love that. I love that. So you also have mentioned before that something to do before the conference is to talk to your child before the conference. Can you give me some ideas on how someone would do that?

Becky Reback (08:31):

Absolutely. This is my favorite thing to do for conferences. I don't think my children agree with this, but I love to do this and it's really honestly one of the simplest things you can do as a parent, and it's probably skipped more times than it happens. But before the conference, ask your child three questions. And this is going to circle back to after the conference and engaging your child and understanding their learning and making sure that they are held accountable for what they can and can't do. So what you're going to ask your child, you're going to ask them one thing they do really well in school, something they've already improved on this year and something that still feels hard or something that they're still working on.

Mary Miele (09:14):

Yeah, I love these questions because they're really open and you're not leading with yes and no type answer. Are you having fun in math? Are you struggling in math? Yes, no. It's just going to help your child to maybe explain some context to you.

Becky Reback (09:29):

Yes. And that metacognitive, that's a big fancy word, but it's one of my favorites and helping your child learn about how they learn and learn about themselves. And the reflection is just in itself so valuable. You're helping your child, as I said, learn about themselves and build the habit of noticing their own growth and their challenges and their needs. And it also gives you a baseline before the conference. More often than not, the kids are pretty honest about what they're doing well and what they're struggling with, and you can compare what your child sees in themselves to what the teacher sees.

Mary Miele (10:02):

Absolutely. I love that. And let's say you get in there and you realize just before there were sort of two avenues that you could go. If you were understanding your child and a teacher says something that's unusual to you, you're going to ask more questions. If they say something that is the same as what you see, you guys might collaborate a little bit. But let's say now you've interviewed your child and they're telling you certain things and then it's not matching up. So what is it that they're supposed to be doing about that?

Becky Reback (10:31):

Mismatch is okay and kids are kids. They don't see everything and they have a very limited perspective. So a mismatch is fine. It's really just useful information, and it also does not mean that something or someone is wrong. So maybe your child is saying everything is great and while the teacher is telling you they're quietly avoiding difficult work, right? So this could mean a lot of things. One of it could be that your child just simply has not had enough specific constructive feedback yet, and it could also mean that they are protecting themselves and their own confidence and saving face in front of you, or it could mean that the experience that as the teacher sees it is just different from what the child sees it, and that's all perfectly okay. On the other hand, maybe your child is saying, oh, I'm terrible at writing.

(11:29):

I can't think. I can't write anything down. I can't spell. And the teacher actually says, no, she has very strong ideas and has made tremendous progress. She just gets frustrated when she has to revise. And so now this tells you that there might be a confidence issue and not really an ability issue, and you have a very specific thing to target as opposed to this big overarching, I'm really bad at writing.

Mary Miele (11:57):

Yeah. So I mean, it sounds like what you're talking about really here is just being able to discern. You're really discerning what is going on by taking the perspective of your child and the perspective of your teacher, and you're really gathering a lot of really good information. And if you do this kind of prep, you're not walking into all of this really important couple of moments with this teacher, completely cold.

Becky Reback (12:23):

Yeah,

Mary Miele (12:24):

Exactly.

Becky Reback (12:24):

And you have your own observations, you have your child's perspective, and then you know one or two things that you want to most understand. And what I think is really important about all of this is that you're not walking in telling your teacher what your child said. I always listen first and let the teacher share, and then I say to the teacher, "Well, I asked my child and this is what they're saying. Can you speak more to this or tell me more?" And then you have even more pointed questions.

Mary Miele (12:52):

100%. Conferences are short, so it doesn't even have to be the end all be all of everything. So let's actually get into that next part, our next segment here, which is really getting beneath that summary and making the most of that conversation and give everybody some tools. So let's give them a couple scenarios and the listeners will give you some options for you to navigate. If you hear this, you might try this, that kind of a thing. All right, so you're in the conference, you sit down and the teacher says, "Your child's doing great. Your child's doing so great. Everything is so great. It's so lovely. What do I do?"

Becky Reback (13:26):

Well, and first of all, enjoy the positive feedback, be happy, be excited. I think as humans, we have very hard time with receiving positive feedback, but we don't want to dismiss it, right? So if your child is kind and engaged and making progress and contributing positively to the classroom community, that really matters. And everybody has something that they're working on. And so now what we can do is ask for a clearer picture of digging a little bit deeper of what's going on.

Mary Miele (13:58):

Sure, sure. So I wouldn't ask what?

Becky Reback (14:01):

I would retire the question, is she doing well? What does that tell you? It's not a bad question. Of course, you want to know if your kid is doing well, and it comes of course from a good place, but it just invites a very short answer, a yes or a no, right? Yes, she's doing great. And then the conversation kind of ends before it really begins.

Mary Miele (14:22):

Okay, so what do you ask instead?

Becky Reback (14:24):

You want to try questions that invite examples or growth over time or show an experience. So you might ask, "Have you seen my child grow in any area since the beginning of the year?" You might ask, "What skills are students expected to be developing at this point and how is my child progressing with those?" You could certainly ask questions like, "When do you see my child most engaged in the day? When does schoolwork tend to feel most difficult for him or her? And what is one area that she or he is still developing?"

Mary Miele (15:03):

I love still developing. That makes it all feel like growth is so normal too. It's not bringing up anything super alarming on your side as a parent. So I love that. I want to repeat it. So what's one area that my child is still developing within? Just so you can know what the teacher sees in context in terms of what they're actually developing. I love that.

Becky Reback (15:29):

Yeah, because guess what? Growth is normal with every person. Every child has these things that are still growing and developing and adults too. The most helpful and productive conferences are not the ones where you leave thinking everything is perfect because I always say practice is to not make perfect. Practice makes permanent. Nothing in the world is perfect, but the best conferences are the ones that have you leaving thinking, I understand my child more clearly and I know what they're working on next.

Mary Miele (16:02):

Nice, nice. So you also talk, I know a lot about moving beyond performance and looking at progress. Can you tell us more about some ways to think about that? Let's say for example, the teacher's showing you a bunch of artifacts of work, often that happens. Here's an example of a test. Here's an example of the work my child has done. What are some things that you would teach parents about that kind of a conference?

Becky Reback (16:28):

Absolutely. So of course grades and test scores matter and they're important and we want to do well on assessments, but they don't tell you the whole picture of how the child is getting through the day. We want to understand how they're actually engaging in their academics. So a child can earn really great, strong grades, but are completely overwhelmed or completely dependent on the adult to help them or completely afraid to make a mistake. Someone else, another child may be below where they need to be, but they're showing persistence, they are showing their ability to be curious and ask questions, they're showing growth and how they actually approach their own learning. So you really want to understand the outcome and the process.

Mary Miele (17:18):

Great. So let's say they're showing me a writing, a paragraph writing and the teacher's saying, "This is where your child's at, this is what's happening here. What are some questions that I can ask?" Because a lot of times that will happen in my conferences where they'll show us work and then they'll say, "Do you have any questions?" And I find myself going, "Oh no, you explained that so well. Thank you. I know what that is, but I think what you're teaching is a bit different here because it's really an opportunity for me to get to know about the process." So let's just take that writing example. Let's say they show you a paragraph that the child's written this fall term and they're like, "This is what they were able to do, and here's the reading that we did leading up to it. What's a couple of questions that I might get at, understand my child's process even more?"

Becky Reback (18:05):

Yeah. Again, you want to understand the engagement and the experience that the child is having with the work. So regardless whether it's writing or math or whatever it is, you can ask questions about how your child approaches challenging work or what their frustration tolerance is, what happens to my child when something feels difficult to them, whether it is or isn't is different than the child feeling like it is difficult. I think a major question, one of my favorites is how independent does my child begin and complete work? And a follow-up to that is really, are they generalizing the skill that you're teaching into their own work? I ask this question of my kids' teachers every single conference. You also want to know when your child is struggling, do they know when and how to ask for help? I'm always teaching my kids, and when I was a teacher, I taught my students there was a formula to asking for help.

(19:07):

I understand X, I'm still working on Y. And that gives the teacher an understanding of what they know and what they still need to be taught. Next step of after they're asking for help is how do they actually respond to the feedback or the correction that they're given from their classroom teacher? Of course, the

big ticket item that everyone's talking about these days is executive functions. We want to understand what organization looks like for them throughout the school day. Are there times where they lose focus, where they avoid work, where they need extra prompting? Understanding all of that is really going to help you. I've kind of coined this term academics in action, so it's not just the product that you're seeing, it's how they actually engaged

Mary Miele (19:48):

In

Becky Reback (19:49):

The process along the way.

Mary Miele (19:50):

I love that. I love that. I know academics in action is such a good model that you've created in assessment. And Becky, just to make sure everyone knows, does assessments with our students here and something that we're always looking at is that academics in action piece. So we're understanding how is the student engaging with the writing, not just what's the end product of the writing? How are they actually learning something new? What's their tolerance for that? So I think it's such a good point of curiosity that parents can bring to conferences too, is just how does this actualize, not just what's the final product, what's the grade, what's the end point, but how does my student get from this point to this point? Can I understand it a bit more? That's such a good way of thinking about the actual conference itself because it's about executive functioning, resilience, self-advocacy, not just the academics itself, right?

Becky Reback (20:44):

Absolutely. And those skills matter across every subject and every single grade. You can't have the academics without those skills. So if a teacher says your child understands the material, but sometimes has trouble getting started, that's really different from saying your child does not understand the material. So the support is different. The support may need to focus on planning, task initiation, confidence, breaking work into manageable steps, all the executive functions and not just understanding content itself.

Mary Miele (21:21):

Yeah, sure. And so let's get to the last part that I always feel a little curious about. I know a lot of our families feel curious about, but it's almost like we do want to know about our child. We want to know how they're progressing. We want to know about that progress, which we've talked about, but sometimes we also just want to make sure they're okay. We want to make sure they're meeting those expectations, they're in line with their peers, they're looking to the left and looking to the right and kind of at the same level as everyone else. But often that question is hard to ask because I think you're not supposed to really ask, how is my child in comparison to everyone else? I mean, you do want to know a little bit of that. So how do you ask that question? Is my child where they should be?

Becky Reback (22:04):

Yeah, just ask it. Ask it directly. Say, "How is my child doing relative to the skills and expectations through this point in the year?" Or what academic skills are secure and what skills still need to be developed?

Mary Miele (22:17):

Anchoring on the skills. Yeah.

Becky Reback (22:18):

Yes, anchor on the skills. It's all about the skills. And if you hear that your child is not meeting expectations, what are your next questions? Well, some of them might be what's the most important skill to focus on or what support is already happening at school? I never want a teacher to come to me with a problem without something that they're trying to mitigate that problem. What is genuinely helpful for us to reinforce at home or how will we know if the support is actually working?

Mary Miele (22:46):

That's very productive. I feel much more informed going into even my own parent conference, so thank you for that. I know now how to ask those process questions, how to look at those artifacts and ask more about the process itself. And then also, of course, how to ask, is my child on point with the skills and expectations that you're asking in this course? So it just feels a lot better than sort of panicking or going home and adding a bunch of worksheets at randoms.

Becky Reback (23:13):

Yeah. More work is ever the answer, but the right support is the answer.

Mary Miele (23:19):

All right. Well, I feel like we've given a lot of really good pieces of information. I think if it's okay with you, let's go to the last segment that we're going to talk about, which is just leaving with one shared plan. So just to note also, as you're listening, we'll put a guide on our website on parent-teacher conferences, and in there we'll have additional questions that you might ask within the conference that this podcast doesn't even cover. So that will be a really good resource for you for any age group. And you can go there, you basically just give your email, and then the guide is right there in a PDF that you can grab. So a good one to do. But let's talk a little bit about leaving, because a lot of times what happens for me, and I know a lot of busy parents, is that we'll go into a conference, there'll be this amazing share of information and we kind of leave and we're both busy.

(24:07):

The teacher's busy, I'm busy, the student's busy. We're all getting a little bit of the information, but it doesn't always feel like we've closed the loop on what's possible in the next steps. So what are some strategies that we can end the conference with to make sure that we leave with one shared plan?

Becky Reback (24:27):

Sure. So I wouldn't try to decode any hidden meeting from the teacher. They have limited time. They usually have some type of broad summary because they're trying to give you a lot of information super quickly, and your job really is just to ask for a clear picture.

Mary Miele (24:45):

Okay. All right. So just give me a plan. Wha should we do? What our next steps? Give me two things we should be doing, just so you leave that meeting with a very clear understanding maybe what's one area we can support at home, what does progress look like, and when should we check in? Maybe that kind of vibe. It's like one, two, three, that's maybe a good framework, right?

Becky Reback (25:07):

Yeah. You want to understand what the full picture looks like. And if they're saying that, oh, they're still working on independence, it's like, okay, well, when does he need support? When should we step in and support at home? Can you tell me what would greater independence look like over the next two months?

Mary Miele (25:27):

Sure, exactly. So I think it's just important in terms of this last part, just for what parents will perhaps take with them. The conference sometimes can feel like a closed event. You talked about it, you heard some information, everybody goes on to their separate worlds, but instead, if you're asking the questions that we're suggesting, does it make sense to check in in four weeks? What's the best way to stay aligned with you on this? Those kinds of questions can turn the work into a more ongoing feedback loop. So it's, I think, just a really helpful component. And keeping the plan small and doable is also really key. So I guess Becky, I'll ask you just for an example, let's say you're going to go home after your parent conference, maybe you'll write a quick email to the teacher, but what are you going to do with your child?

(26:18):

Is there something after the conference that you would close the loop on to engage them at any age? Let's say you went to talk with the parents, the teacher at end, you came in, and what are you going to do to talk to your child about the information that you just received?

Becky Reback (26:33):

Yeah, and I do this even with my kid that's in my own child that's in preschool. I ask those three questions before I go into the conference and I come back with the feedback. I started early because then feedback is just normal. So the first thing is talk with your child in an age-appropriate way. You don't need to give them the full transcript of what happened in the conference. You don't need to unload every single concern, and you definitely don't want them to feel like the adults had this secret meeting. And that's why I asked them questions before, "Hey, I'm going into your conference. What's your teacher going to say about you?" So I would have a very age-appropriate conversation so your child understands exactly what was discussed at the conference.

Mary Miele (27:11):

Yeah, I think that's great. And for my teenage kids, I often give them the high lows. I'm like, "Listen, you're doing so well in this one." And I give them those process kind of feedbacks, not just you're getting an A, but wow, I really heard in history you're chiming in with questions, sounds like in math you're coming up with problems that you want to know about. You're meeting with your teacher because that ethics class is really hard, good job, those kinds of things. And then I say, "I'd like you to actually just write down in your notes section two things I want you to focus on." And I give them those two things. "This is what I think you should be really dialing in on. Let's find ways to speak up in class. Let's find ways to conquer your test in that course because it sounds really hard.

(27:57):

And then let's just keep talking about it each week and see what your ideas are. I'm sure you can come up with some ideas. "I think giving your teenage kids agency in the problem solving process is key. So really showing that you believe in them and that you know that they can find ways to improve in the areas that you've learned are important is really also very key. So you can really bring it together at that end. Not only are you the parent kind of writing an email to the teacher and saying," Hey, we're going to work on this and let's do this, "but then you're involving your child preschool all the way through at your last conference as a senior in high school, and you're just sharing like," Hey, this is the stuff that seems to be going really well, and this is the stuff that seems like you might need to work on.

(28:40):

"And as you get to that teenage life, we have a thing that says," I do, we do, you do. "At the beginning stages, the parent is very much coordinating this whole effort of school home work. And then the middle, you're working a little bit with your middle schooler. And then of course, when you're in high school, you're less the agent of change. Your child really has to be in that seat of taking charge of some of this

feedback and making it go forward. All right, well, we're going to wrap up this episode right here. And again, don't feel that you don't have an additional resource to go to because you do. Go ahead and pick up our guide that we'll have on our website. And of course, if you need support with anything going on with your children, Becky or I are very happy to talk with you about how parent conferences are going and to help you put together a support plan for whatever you're finding out.

(29:30):

But thank you, Becky, for being here today. Is there any last minute add-ons that you have to close this up?

Becky Reback (29:36):

Yeah, I think trust your child in their own reflection and share the feedback with them and be your teacher's partner and ask questions not to catch them, but to genuinely understand your child's experience in school.

Mary Miele (29:53):

Yeah, I love that. I love that. Be a partner parent. So great. Well, we'll end there. Thank you so much, Becky. Great to be with you today.

Becky Reback (30:00):

Thank you.