

Preparing for the Student Interview

When we ask students what they think about participating in these interviews, they are forthcoming about why they clam up. Students say that when they are invited to an interview, it triggers the same feelings as being sent to the office. Even if they are sure they haven't done anything wrong, the initial feeling of anxiety is there because they don't know what to expect.

Here are some tips from students that should pave the way for more productive discussions:

- **Students aren't always sure you really care about them as people, even when you do.** Doing little things like calling them by name when you see them in the hallway or expressing appreciation for small things they do well goes a long way toward building positive relationships. Education consultant Rick Smith (2004) suggests using the 2-by-10 strategy for the most reluctant students. This involves having two-minute conversations for 10 consecutive days on a topic the student wants to talk about. This can get off to a rocky start if the student doesn't want to talk, but don't give up and don't press the student for conversation.
- **Students are sometimes anxious or suspicious about why you are asking these personal questions.** You can put them at ease by explaining your purpose and asking their permission before you start. This might sound like, "Good morning, Cassie. I'm trying to get to know my students better so I can be more helpful. I already know about things you do in class, but I can't know what you like or how you think without having a conversation with you. You could really help me out by answering a few questions. Is that OK with you?"
- **Students are sometimes concerned that they won't give the correct answers.** Early in the conversation, explain to the student that the questions you will ask are the kind you *can't* get wrong. Point out that everyone has their own way of seeing things and that you are interested in hearing how they think and feel.
- **Students sometimes want to answer, but the teacher rushes them so they lose their words or can't think.** Firing one question after another or offering your own answers when there's silence has a negative effect on communication. Remember, your job is to listen and learn and do as little talking as possible. Brief affirmations, clarifying statements, and wait time are helpful; adding too much of your point of view is not.
- **Students don't always believe that teachers sincerely want to listen to their ideas,** whether it's because of the look on the teacher's face or the teacher's attitude. People are more apt to believe your tone and body language than your words.

Body Language Matters

Here are some tips from educators about maintaining a welcoming tone and friendly body language:

- Sitting side by side or knee to knee for the interview sends a friendlier signal than placing yourself behind your desk. The library may feel like a friendlier environment than the office or classroom.
- Have you ever had someone smile at you, but their smile doesn't reach their eyes? Trust goes out the window when that happens. Leaning forward with your body, staying relaxed, making comfortable eye contact, and smiling communicate that you're listening and interested.
- Your tone of voice also projects either an inviting attitude or says you are all about getting this over with. Judgmental looks or tones can shut the conversation down fast. Your tone, words, and body language must communicate interest and respect for students' thoughts and feelings. Videoing yourself during a student interview can be an eye-opening experience that enables you to check out how you are coming across.

Because Parker got off to a bad start with Cassie the first time he tried the interview process, he thinks that inviting Daphne to the next interview will be helpful. Daphne suggests that they tag-team. She will start off by modeling a way of putting a student at ease, and then Parker can jump in with questions when it feels right. You can see the interviews in Activity 13.

Activity 13. Student Interview: Cassie's Case

Refer to the strength chart on resilience and flexibility (Appendix A, p. 167) as you read this interview. As you read the dialogue, list specific things Parker and Daphne do that

1. Relieve Cassie's stress.
2. Encourage her to think more deeply about her strengths and needs.
3. Uncover useful information for future planning.

Daphne: Hi, Cassie. I'm Daphne Stiller. My job is helping teachers figure out the best ways to support their students. Mr. West invited me to join your conversation because he thought he may have made you nervous the first time you talked. Do you mind if I sit in this time?

Cassie: No, it's OK. I was nervous.

Parker [smiling]: Sorry about that. Holding student interviews is new to me. I guess I was feeling anxious, and I passed it on to you.