



# The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other

By Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

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## The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other By Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

With the insights she has gleaned from her close and subtle observation of parent-teacher conferences, renowned Harvard University professor Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot has written a wise, useful book about the ways in which parents and teachers can make the most of their essential conversation—the dialogue between the most vital people in a child’s life.

“The essential conversation” is the crucial exchange that occurs between parents and teachers—a dialogue that takes place more than one hundred million times a year across our country and is both mirror of and metaphor for the larger cultural forces that define family-school relationships and shape the development of our children. Participating in this twice-yearly ritual, so friendly and benign in its apparent goals, parents and teachers are often wracked with anxiety. In a meeting marked by decorum and politeness, they frequently exhibit wariness and assume defensive postures. Even though the conversation appears to be focused on the student, adults may find themselves playing out their own childhood histories, insecurities, and fears.

Through vivid portraits and parables, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot captures the dynamics of this complex, intense relationship from the perspective of both parents and teachers. She also identifies new principles and practices for improving family-school relationships. In a voice that combines the passion of a mother, the skepticism of a social scientist, and the keen understanding of one of our nation’s most admired educators, Lawrence-Lightfoot offers penetrating analysis and an urgent call to arms for all those who want to act in the best interests of their children.

For parents and teachers who seek productive dialogues and collaborative alliances in support of the learning and growth of their children, this book will offer valuable insights, incisive lessons, and deft guidance on how to communicate more effectively. In **The Essential Conversation**, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot brings scholarship, warmth, and wisdom to an immensely important cultural subject—the way we raise our children.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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## **The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other** By Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

On the surface, this book is about that most ordinary of human encounters—the parent/teacher meeting—that takes place more than 100 million times a year, usually in uncomfortable, undersized chairs. Beneath the smooth surface of this mostly polite exchange, according to Harvard education professor Lawrence-Lightfoot, lurk ancestral ghosts and ancient psychological themes, a turbulent mix of fears, anxieties, drives and biases that both parties bring to the table. Add to this the vectors of race, class, gender, culture and language, and you have a set of complex and passionate dynamics that often have as much to do with the adults' desires and needs as with those of the children. Parents and teachers have a lot to learn from each other, says Lawrence-Lightfoot, and these essential conversations are a crucial if neglected aspect of children's educational success. As in her previous works, *Worlds Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools* and *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture*, Lawrence-Lightfoot draws readers in with elegant prose and carefully drawn narrative portraits. Curiously, she does not feature any male elementary school teachers; their inclusion could have made the discussions of gender and power even more thought provoking and complex. But this is a minor shortcoming in an otherwise significant and thoughtfully rendered exploration of a social ritual many adults commonly experience but seldom examine. Anyone who has ever sat through a parent/teacher conference, on either side of the tiny table, will find much to consider in these pages.

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From [Booklist](#)

For every parent who has ever suffered the anxiety of a parent-teacher conference, this book is an incredibly honest and insightful look at the undercurrents in this essential relationship between a child's parents and teachers. Lawrence-Lightfoot, Harvard professor of education, explores the dynamics at work in the parent-teacher conference, from the subtle institutional barriers that make parents feel unwelcome to the defensiveness of teachers who feel their competence is being challenged. The author draws on her own experiences as a student and a parent as well as narratives from an economic and racial cross section of parents and teachers. She begins by exploring the reverberations of the parents' and teachers' own past experiences as students and how that experience haunts the present. She explores often unacknowledged or even unrecognized psychological and social factors, including the different dynamics at work in conferences at poor inner-city schools versus wealthy suburban ones. Lawrence-Lightfoot also offers much useful advice here for both parents and teachers on achieving the cooperation needed to reach the common goal of educating children. *Vanessa Bush*

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### Review

“Here is a book that will help us all understand what happens when children leave home in order to learn at school: One world meets another, and as a consequence the young witness their elders in an instructive encounter of great significance—all of which is told forthrightly and thoughtfully in an enormously important volume (one soon to be a classic in the literature of education) that will be of continuing value to its readers.”

—Robert Coles, author of *Children of Crisis and Lives of Moral Leadership*

“To the parents: This treasure of a book is full of wisdom and insight. You should put it on your nightstand and read a little each night before you go to sleep, because in another part of your home is a child who is

your heart, your dreams, and your positive future. Parents and teachers need to work in unison for the benefit of our children and our world. In *The Essential Conversation*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot gives us the vision and shows us the way.”

—Bill Cosby, author of *Fatherhood*

“Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot has demonstrated again her instinct for the telling specificity that offers not only insight into matters of broad social concern but also reason for hope. In precise and luminous prose she connects our deepest passions and painful memories to the conversations that will determine our children’s futures.”

—Mary Catherine Bateson, author of *Composing a Life*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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