

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

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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.

"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. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist, is a professor of education at Harvard University, where, since 1972, she has studied the culture of schools, families, and communities. She is the author of eight books, including *The Good High School*, *Respect*, *I've Known Rivers*, and *Balm in Gilead*, which won the 1988 Christopher Award for "literary merit and humanitarian achievement." In 1984, she was the recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Prize Fellowship. In 1993, she was awarded Harvard's George Ledlie Prize for research that makes the "most valuable contribution to science" and is to "the benefit of mankind." She is the first African-American woman in Harvard's history to have an endowed professorship named in her honor.

Other Books

Curriculum and Teaching,

Lawrence - Lightfoot , S. (2003) *The Essential Conversation : What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* . New York : Random House . Minke , K. & Anderson , K. (2003) *Restructuring routine parent - teacher confer- ences ...*"