

10 Tips to Help Deal with Difficult Parents Effectively

By Barbara Gruber and Sue Gruber
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IT'S natural for parents to want the best for their child. Unfortunately, almost every teacher is faced with an irate parent at some time. Dealing with an angry or unreasonable parent is upsetting and time consuming. It can be easy for them to make excuses and blame others for their child's troubles.

Here are some tips to help you resolve difficult situations with parents:

1. Let upset parents know that your goal is to help every child succeed.

Look for ways to find common ground. Tell parents that both of you want what's best for their child and that you want to find ways to

work together. When parents look at the big picture and realize that you are on the same side, you can begin to work together to help their child succeed.

2. Be sensitive!

No matter how tense a situation becomes, remember that your student is someone's precious baby. Open your conversation by acknowledging the child's strengths before you focus on areas of concern.

3. Good records that document dates, times, notes, and decisions about students can be invaluable.

Make a set of parent communication folders by labeling file folders

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with the names of your students and staple a few blank sheets of paper inside each folder. Use these folders to jot details of important conversations and keep notes from parents organized.

Inside each folder, write the date, name of the parent with whom you spoke, and actions that need to be taken.

Make sure to date notes you receive from parents. If you respond to a parent's note in writing, make a copy of your response and staple it to the parent's note.

After making phone calls to parents to discuss problems, record important information that was discussed. Parent Communication Files come in handy if you ever need to document how you've involved and informed parents after an incident.

4. Be proactive!

Contact parents as soon as you see academic problems or negative behavior patterns develop. You'll have a better chance to change these patterns if you catch them early.

Discuss with parents:

- Areas where their child excels;
- If their child is attentive during lessons;
- Where their child stands academically;
- Specific difficulties;
- Specific ways parents can help their child at home;

- How well their child gets along with classmates; and

- How long homework should take to complete.

Allow parents to share their concerns and ask questions, and if you are unsure what a parent asks about, request specific examples.

5. Be prepared to give specific examples.

White out names and use actual samples of students' work to illustrate typical work for the grade level. This gives parents a clear idea of what you expect in your class.

6. If a parent asks you a question that floors you, don't be put on the spot.

It's fine to let parents know that you need some time to reflect on their question before you respond. Let them know that you'll get back to them in a day or two. You can buy time to explore options and perhaps bounce ideas off of a colleague before you respond.

7. Don't be afraid to end a meeting with parents who become confrontational.

Sometimes, the best thing to do is to provide an opportunity for all parties to cool down and reflect on the issues. Set a time and date to meet again. If you feel threatened, ask your principal, vice principal, or school counselor to attend the next conference. ►

8. It's awkward when parents share too much information with you.

While it's helpful to know things that directly impact a student, it can be problematic when parents disclose too much personal information. It's not your job to be their therapist. Remind parents that during the limited time you have you need to focus on their child.

9. Sometimes neighborhood issues spill over into the classroom.

Don't let yourself get dragged into disputes between families of children in your class.

Problems escalate quickly if it's perceived that you're siding with other parents.

When parents begin to share information about neighborhood squabbles, jump in and tell them that it's information that you don't need to hear.

Let parents know that you're receptive to their thoughts and ideas about their child, but you must stay out of personal issues between the families.

10. Watch for parents who hover relentlessly.

I had a parent who expected to volunteer in my classroom all day every day. I let her know that her daughter needed the space to develop social skills and gain independence. Then I told her about all of the other volunteer opportunities available at the school. Before long she was busy helping in the library and active in the PTA.

11. Be prepared for a worst-case scenario.

Read your contract or board policy and make sure you understand your rights and the steps to follow if a parent files a formal complaint.

Managing difficult parents can be one of the hardest parts about teaching. It's easy to dwell on negativity and question your skills as a teacher. Instead of worrying about how parents perceive you, approach them and offer them the opportunity to join you as you help their child have the best year possible. ed



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