

MANAGING CONFLICT SITUATIONS WITH PARENTS

By Joe Pece

Teaching requires excellent interpersonal skills and we are called upon to use these skills frequently, especially when dealing with parents. Conflict inevitably arises in our daily lives and from time to time we may find ourselves in conflict with a parent. But conflict can be productive. Well-managed conflict can help to clarify issues, expectations and feelings.

To handle a conflict with a parent successfully, it is important to first understand the source of the conflict. Many conflicts arise from differences in expectations, experiences, or even personality types. Letting go of ideas of right versus wrong creates the space to take a step back, so we can understand what underlying factors may be contributing to the escalation of a conflict. When those factors are taken into account, both parties are better able to appreciate each other's perspectives, helping to move toward a solution from a place of mutual understanding.

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

When working toward a solution with a parent, take time to reflect on some of these common causes of conflict and how they might be affecting your situation:

Resources

Conflicts may occur when resources are limited, for example there are not enough textbooks to go around. If a real, or perceived, lack of resources are at issue, refer the parent to the school principal.

Psychological Needs

When psychological factors such as self-esteem, feelings of belonging or happiness are threatened, people can

sometimes become aggressive. A parent who thinks that he or she has been belittled by a teacher, or who believes their child has been picked on, may lash out.

Values

People may feel personally attacked if they think their values are threatened. It is not usually the difference in values, but the fear that one set of values is being dominated that is the real issue. These conflicts can be the most difficult to resolve.

Divergent Goals

Conflict may result when a teacher and a parent have completely different goals.

A teacher who stresses drama, for example, may come into conflict with a parent who values math and science above all.

Incongruent Role Expectations and Behaviour Norms

A parent may have an expectation of a particular teaching style that is not yours. Or a parent who encourages a child to challenge authority figures may not accept the teacher's discipline of the child for "insubordination."

Incompatible Personalities

In some instances, conflicts are simply due to differing personality types.



REMEMBER

Always document your interactions with parents.

SIX STEPS FOR RESOLVING
CONFLICT

In conflict resolution, it is helpful to reflect on the issues and decide whether they are interests or positions. Interests are our needs that motivate us to act in certain ways and to make certain decisions. For example, I need order in my classroom so I create rules. A position is a stance that we adopt to meet those needs. For example, strictly enforcing the rules is the best way to ensure order in the classroom. Positions can be changed. Successful conflict resolution focuses on understanding and addressing the interests of the parties rather than their positions. Focusing on interests allows the parties to discuss the real issues. Rather than focusing on the rules and their application, focus on the real issue, which is the need for order.

Step 1

Define the problem or source of the conflict, the interest. Use active listening skills to understand the parent's concerns and perspective. Reflect on your own actions and feelings. Have you inadvertently aggravated the situation? Have you been overly sensitive and overreacted? Is there any substance to the parent's criticism? If at the end of a meeting you and the parent can agree on the problem you have achieved a lot. Document the problem(s) and communicate with the parent in writing to confirm your mutual agreement.

Step 2

Get all the information. Sometimes conflicts occur because one party is unaware of certain facts. For example, is the teacher aware that the parent's child

has a hearing disorder? Is the parent aware that the student had noted the project due date in her or his homework book? When discussing issues with parents provide opportunities to share information.

Step 3

State your goal. Be clear and specific. Instead of saying, "I want Jane to do better," explain, "I want Jane to do her math homework because I think it will improve her mark." Ask the parent for their goal. Ask if they agree with your goal. Document these goals and communicate with the parent in writing to confirm your mutual agreement on the goals.

Step 4

Develop strategies and possible solutions together. Brainstorm and decide which are practical and most likely to succeed. Decide together which strategy to use.

Step 5

Outline timelines and expectations. Agree on reasonable timelines. When should you expect the student's math mark to improve? What is a reasonable improvement – one mark or 10 marks? What should the teacher and parent do if the marks do not improve within the given time? Communicate with the parent in writing to confirm your timelines and expectations.

Step 6

Arrange for a follow-up meeting. Check to see if the parent is satisfied with the agreed actions. Make modifications to the strategy if necessary and agree upon the modifications. Take detailed notes

after each meeting/discussion to avoid repetition.

BE PROFESSIONAL AND
UNDERSTANDING

Professional assertiveness is important when addressing conflict with parents. Exercise your rights and insist on courtesy, but also try to put the situation in context and understand the parent. Review the problem and the issues involved, and respond to an upset parent with awareness and professional concern. Do not ignore an upset parent. A parent who yells may be doing so out of fear that he or she is not being heard or understood, or it may be a normal communication method for that person. Be generous and remember to treat the parent as you would like to be treated. Never tolerate rudeness, threats or abuse. **If the behaviour continues in an abusive manner, this will require assistance from an administrator.**

When conflict does arise, all educators should use the opportunity to enhance their conflict resolution skills to reduce stress and frustration.

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