

every parent is going to respond with equal enthusiasm to your outreach. Levels of involvement will vary and sometimes prove challenging to improve. That's just a fact that must be accepted. But many school leaders say they must keep delivering the most basic messages to parents.

"Send your children to school each day ready to learn, well rested, and well fed. Get them to school on time," Bane says. "None of those things take money. They don't take that much time, either. It's just about ordering your priorities. If you do this for your child at home, then you're going to be

A mindful approach to parent conflict

Nancy Rappaport

Not too long ago, I was in a meeting with teachers, administrators, and the parents of a child who was failing all his courses and refusing to do work. He was also in trouble for pushing another student during recess. The atmosphere was tense, and the parents were seething.

The father suddenly started shouting at me. I was standing by the door, and he was seated at the table. As he got more and more agitated, I realized that I seemed to be in a position of power, looming over him. I calmly sat down and talked quietly, which helped settle him down. The simple act of meeting him on his own level defused what could have become an explosive situation.

Meetings like this take place every day, with parents and educators pointing fingers at each other. One superintendent once confided to me that his job is conflict resolution—all day long. As a psychiatrist who is frequently asked to intervene when schools and parents reach an impasse, I know how tough it is for teachers, administrators, and school board members to communicate with parents, particularly when they're angry.

Too often, both sides get locked in a power struggle: It's the parents' fault! It's the teacher! It's the principal, the superintendent, the school board! Sometimes school officials determine that they need security backup to contain an unsafe situation. In worst-case scenarios, parents are arrested.

But interactions between school personnel and parents don't have to end in handcuffs. The way that school personnel respond can profoundly impact whether the "blame game" persists or whether there is true collaboration that enables parents and school professionals to work together in the best interests of the child.

In my 20 years of working with schools, I

have discovered several steps that school officials can take to de-escalate potential confrontations when parents come in breathing fire. I have seen patterns of communication that are troubling, but not too hard to fix. Here's what I've learned:

Body language matters

Sometimes when parents are irate about a perceived insult or insist that a teacher is neglecting their child or is incompetent, the school representative appears impatient. He glances at his watch repeatedly, as if he's too busy or annoyed by the parent's lengthy tirade. He might even roll his eyes. Even if the parent seems not to register or respond to these nonverbal signs, this sets a tone of disrespect that can further inflame a standoff.

Respectful listening, even if you don't agree with what the parent is saying, can help shift a parent's sense of alienation. Instead of looking at the ceiling, look parents in the eye and reflect back that you understand what they are saying. When parents feel that their concerns are being heard, they don't need to shout.

It's all in a name

This may seem obvious, but it is critical to address parents and guardians by name. I frequently begin a meeting by asking parents how they would like to be addressed. I have been in many meetings where school officials refer to parents as "Mom" or "Dad" when they are talking to them. This is impersonal and doesn't help build a collaborative relationship, which is vital to conflict resolution.

Don't point fingers

In the words of a wise superintendent I have known for many years, part of the challenge in a difficult meeting with a parent is to "flip

the responsibility without pointing the finger." This can be particularly challenging when school personnel feel it's necessary to hold a parent gently accountable. Maybe a parent is making things worse by talking about the parent-teacher conflict in front of the student. Maybe the parent is threatening to sue the school. Or maybe the parent is even encouraging the child to have an attitude.

It is helpful in these situations to describe the child's unacceptable behavior in a way that doesn't sound like the parent is being scolded. For example, the administrator can explain, "When Johnny storms out of the room, he may feel that the teacher doesn't like him, but I worry that he needs a better way of understanding his frustration without missing time from class."

Don't delay

Sometimes when educators know that the parent is volatile, they avoid arranging regular meetings. An administrator or teacher may put off direct conversations because they are time-consuming and exhausting. Trust me, this only makes things worse. When a parent is explosive and anxious, it actually helps to set up regular meetings and provide predictable structure to address the parent's concerns.

In these situations, it works better to end every meeting by making a plan for the next one. This is extremely important when a parent feels that his child is being bullied. Mobilize immediately, but make sure to schedule a follow-up session to reassure the parent that you are monitoring the situation.

Empathy, not enmity

I've been in many situations where parents storm in, accusing school officials of not doing enough to support their child. Mean-

creating opportunities for your child in school. That's involvement."

It's a first step on a continuum of involvement that school leaders can pursue to increasing effectiveness, Andes says. Eventually some parents will be involved at a more advanced level, bringing their talents and resources to contribute to their school or school system.

But what's important, he says, is to continue to reach out. "As long as parents are on the continuum of parental engagement, they are positively impacting their child." ■

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while, the teachers feel that they have been bending over backward to accommodate this student. The educators often resent the fact that they have to prove their competency to the parents.

It's only human to get defensive, but that doesn't help. When met with a verbal assault from parents, I find it's more productive to acknowledge the parents' concerns, which shows them that they are being heard. This is counterintuitive, because it's only natural for educators to want to protect themselves and correct inaccurate perceptions.

The first step is not to get defensive, but to stay calm. This communicates that the parent's outrage isn't intimidating and instead can be used as a starting point for a discussion.

Don't argue

Instead, show genuine curiosity. Ask questions: "Can you help me understand why you think I am unfair to your son?" This approach can be so much more productive than launching into a dissertation about why the parent has made a false accusation.

I find it useful to apply a technique frequently used in motivational interviewing called "roll with the resistance." Don't challenge the complaints, but rather use the person's momentum to explore their view and to develop a viable solution together. It's helpful to set up the pros and cons of the situation as a way to encourage a more rational, reflective discussion.

Calm reassurance

What do you do when parents seem to be magnifying the danger their child faces? This can happen with highly anxious and overprotective parents who tend to exaggerate peer interactions that school staffers view as rela-

tively harmless, even typical peer behavior. This is very dicey, as school personnel know that they need to be vigilant about inappropriate power dynamics and bullying. Obviously, they don't want to overlook a legitimate concern, but sometimes they genuinely feel that they have adequately investigated the incident in question. They also might believe that the child contributed to or even provoked a negative interaction with a peer, but the mere suggestion of that might further infuriate the parent.

It's essential to communicate your commitment to keeping all children safe. It's also important to let the parents know that you understand how disturbing it must be to hear about troubling events. If possible, set up a point person at the school who will check in with the parents and provide reassurance that the situation has improved. It doesn't help to try to minimize the parents' concern, as that only heightens their anxiety.

Don't call 911

Sometimes parents can become threatening. In my experience, the threats are usually verbal, not physical, but I've actually been in situations where school administrators called the police or a security officer. Clearly, safety is the first priority, but I have found that such drastic action usually backfires by shaming the parent and making it more difficult to build an alliance. I've found that if everyone can just remain calm and let the parent unload his or her concern (even at a high decibel), the parent will eventually settle down.

While volatile language can be seen as a form of intimidation, it's usually an expression of tremendous frustration. Parents may feel they can't adequately communicate their distress, so they raise their voice or pound the table. Remain compassionate but firm, which

lets the parents know there is potential over time to build a united front. A strong-willed parent who comes to understand the school's concerns can become a powerful ally.

Stay positive

It's hard to remember this when relationships are tense, but parents can get exhausted and exasperated when the only thing they hear from the school is bad news.

One way to mend frayed relationships is to give parents a call about something positive—a higher test score, a good deed, a successful day. In that same vein, I always try to end meetings—even confrontational ones—by saying something positive about the child. This helps create a spirit of collaboration and provides hope that the entire team is united in helping the student shine.

I have found over and over again that parents want their children to succeed. If we approach them with respect, curiosity, and empathy, they will become our partners. It is a delicate dance, especially when a parent is angry or anxious or disappointed with school personnel. It is hard not to take verbal assaults personally, but it's important to remain aware of our own behavior even during tense confrontations.

In the end, this mindful approach can lead to a productive collaboration that enables everyone involved to keep their eyes on the prize: The student, after all, comes first.

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