

getting along with the



GROWN-UPS

Expert ideas for solving your toughest parent problems. **By Cheli Cerra, M.Ed. & Ruth Jacoby, Ed.D.**

Let's face it—getting along with parents can sometimes be tough. But a little tact can go a long way. Good communication skills are important in *any* profession, but for the successful teacher, they're essential. Drawn from our new book, *Teacher Talk!* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), here are some snapshots of typical conflicts with parents, paired with action plans to help you head off potential problems before they arise or successfully deal

with them if they do. As you practice these skills and become a better communicator, you will find parents responding more positively to your confidence, abilities, and willingness to establish a friendly rapport.

The parent who... is over-zealous at open house.

You carefully go over your notes and scan the entire classroom. Everything is

in order. You have taken time to plan well, and you are certain this open house will go smoothly. You've barely started your presentation when you see a hand go up. You politely answer the father's question regarding his daughter. A few minutes later, he has another question focused on his child. Again, you politely answer his query. Pretty soon, you see the same parent's hand go up again and again, along with a question pertaining *only* to his daughter. >>

the grown-ups

→ **ACTION PLAN:** Take back control of the meeting and address the concerns of the overzealous parent by first connecting with him and then setting limits:

“I understand your concerns. Tonight, however, we are pressed for time and have a lot to cover. Let’s get together after the meeting and set up a time, convenient for both of us, when we can talk.”

If others share the concern of the overzealous parent, open up the subsequent meeting to anyone who would like to attend. You can also provide a hand-out that details your contact information and schedule of availability. Announce that you will follow up about when and where the meeting will take place, or have the parents individually contact you as needed. (If you send out a meeting announcement, do so within 24 hours after the open house with the exact date, time, and agenda.) Then go back to your open house presentation and stick to it!

The parent who... wants to tell you how to teach.

Your student’s mother has scheduled a meeting for this afternoon, but she has given you no indication what she wants to talk about. Your student is doing very well academically and socially, so you don’t have a clue as to the topic. At the appointed time, Mom enters your classroom, sits down, and begins to tell you that she feels you need to present your class lessons in a different way and that your curriculum could be improved.

→ **ACTION PLAN:** Listen first. Count to 10 and remember you are the professional. Do *not* become defensive, even if it feels like the parent is questioning your ability to teach.

Before all meetings with parents, make sure you have the teacher’s editions of the textbooks, the grade-level objectives, and the state standards. (Also have available state and district Web site addresses where she can go for further information.) Explain how you teach—such as with direct instruction, small groups, and so on—and review the homework policy. Support your choice of techniques with research materials

and make copies of the material that addresses her concern or question. Invite the parent to see you in action. She may understand your processes more after she sees you at work. If none of these tactics help, ask an administrator, grade-level chair, or department head to assist you with handling this parent.

The parent who... wants to talk daily.

It happens every morning like clock-work. The children have already come into the classroom, the beginning bell is just a couple of minutes away, and... there she is at your door: Mrs. Talker. She is pleasant but insistent as she catches your eye and smilingly demands your attention: “This will only take a second”—but of course, it never does. The topic doesn’t really matter either—she just wants to chat. Always the professional, you give her your attention. By the third day, however, you begin to resent the daily intrusion and realize you have a problem on your hands.

→ **ACTION PLAN:** Let Mrs. Talker know that you would like to give her the attention she deserves, but you cannot do so just before the start of school. Give her several options, times when you can *both* meet and set a time for the conference. If you’re subtle but insistent, Mrs. Talker should take the hint.

The parent who... never gets involved.

No matter what you send home—an invitation, a request for volunteers, a notification of an event—the parent never responds, never participates, and never gets involved. You are concerned for the student as well as for the parent. How do you approach him or her with this concern?

→ **ACTION PLAN:** A voice-to-voice telephone call is an immediate must. Keep calling until you speak directly with the parent. (Even try the work and cell phone numbers written on the emergency contact form.) Invite the student’s parent to come into the classroom by

asking, “What is a good time for you to come in to school? I’d like for you to attend our special presentation—it’s something I think you’d want to see.” If scheduling is a problem because, for example, the father works from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., ask if he can take time to eat lunch with his child or arrive to work a little later so that he can meet with you in the morning. Plan this in advance so that he can inform his boss or make any necessary special arrangements to attend the presentation at school. Sometimes parents can arrange to work during their lunch hour and arrive later to work in order to attend a school performance or a parent-teacher meeting.

The parent who... always brings her kid late.

One of your students is consistently brought late to school. Not only does he miss the morning drill, but usually at least 20 minutes of instruction. When he finally arrives, the classroom routine is interrupted by the parent’s apology and excuses, and you must take time away from the other students to help the child get his day started. You realize the parent is having a difficult time at home.

→ **ACTION PLAN:** Tell the parent that you’d like to meet with her to work out a solution to the problem of her son’s chronic tardiness.

At the meeting, listen to the parent to find out the real reason for her son’s tardiness. Often the parent simply hasn’t figured out the morning routine. You can offer advice on how to get everything done in a timely manner, such as making a chart with morning chores, adjusting the clock ahead by 10 minutes, or setting time limits for tasks to be finished by using an alarm clock. Other helpful tips include doing some of the necessary tasks the night before, such as laying out clothes, which will eliminate indecision and arguments in the morning; checking all schoolwork and placing it in the backpack; or having lunch made or putting lunch money in the backpack.

Sometimes a parent needs not only

TAKE THE QUIZ! How well do you talk to parents?

- 1 I am comfortable speaking with parents.
True False
- 2 I listen more than I talk.
True False
- 3 I value parent input.
True False
- 4 I do not mind if an administrator sits in on a parent conference.
True False
- 5 I do not believe that I know more than parents do.
True False
- 6 I anticipate and welcome questions.
True False
- 7 I research solutions and methods when I do not know the answers.
True False
- 8 I respect the opinion of parents.
True False
- 9 I don't feel uncomfortable when people are in my classroom.
True False
- 10 I communicate frequently with parents.
True False

HERE'S HOW TO SCORE YOURSELF:

Count up the number of 'True' answers.

■ If you scored 8 or higher, you are well on your way to becoming an effective communicator.

■ If you scored 4-7, you may want to rethink your approaches regarding the areas in which you are weak.

■ If you scored below 4, you'll want to study and practice the techniques and tips addressed in this article.

For even more expert assistance, check out the authors' new book, [Teacher Talk! The Art of Effective Communication](#) (Jossey-Bass, 2005).



advice, but just someone to talk to. You, the teacher, can help by being sympathetic and offering practical ideas. That's all it may take to solve the problem.

The parent who... thinks you assign too much homework.

Mrs. Skills comes into your classroom without warning, visibly upset. "You are giving out just too much homework," she fumes. "Really, it is ridiculous what he has to do. I don't have time for it. I work all day and come home late. By the time I feed him, he has only half an hour to do his homework before bedtime. He has enough school all day. Why does he have to do more? Are you not doing your job? Is that why you have to give out so much homework? Just what is the reason? I'd like an answer!"

➔ **ACTION PLAN:** Although you need to address this parent's concern, now is not the time, as she is too upset and you can't leave your class.

Let her know you welcome the opportunity to talk with her, but that you cannot do so at the moment. Ask her to leave a telephone number where she ➔➔

1/3 Square Right

the grown-ups

can be reached and assure her that you will call to set up a meeting as soon as possible. When you do meet, arrange to have another teacher, the school counselor, or an administrator present. Explain that you assign only enough homework to show parents what the child did in class that day, and to help him review new concepts covered in class. This keeps the parent informed and helps the student organize his time and create a routine for sharing what he has learned during the day with his parent.

You may suggest the possibility that the child didn't understand what was being taught, so it took him longer than the other children to complete the homework. If this is the case, you may want to sit with the parent and come up with possible reasons why the child is not completing his work. Develop a plan that will assist the child in improving his skills and finishing the homework. If the child goes to an after-school program, for instance, suggest ways that the staff could work with him on academics. If there is still a problem, offer to cooperate with the parent to create a homework schedule so the activities the child has to do at home get done in a timely fashion and so he has free time left before bed.

WIN
A copy of the parent-training program **PASSPort to Success!** See page 68.

The parent who... is upset with her child's grades.

The day after report cards go home, Mrs. Smith calls you, clearly upset. "My child received straight As on her last report card," she says. "Now it's mostly Bs and Cs. What is going on? Why didn't you let me know? We need to meet immediately to discuss this. I am sick and tired of the school system failing our children."

→ **ACTION PLAN:** Don't let the parent's overreaction cause you to hyperventilate. Always have available your grade book and the child's portfolio. Explain the information in them. Discuss what you have witnessed in class. Perhaps the child has missed homework assignments. Listen to the unhappy parent, letting her speak without interruption, then



Secrets to positive parent interactions

- **BE SWIFT:** Inform parents before behaviors or situations escalate.
- **BE OPEN:** Listen to what the parent has to say. The more you listen, the more the parent will reveal.
- **BE UNFLAPPABLE:** Be slow to anger. You must always act in a responsible and tactful manner.
- **BE LUCID:** Conflict comes about because of the inability to communicate clearly and effectively.
- **BE MOTIVATING:** Negative words are draining. Positive words are uplifting.
- **BE CALM:** Do not react to an angry parent; the less said the better.
- **BE COMPASSIONATE:** A parent's protestations may be masking frustration.
- **BE A PLANNER:** Have problem-solving strategies ready to present to parents.
- **BE SLOW TO SPEAK:** Speak your words in due time. Make sure that what comes out of your mouth is what you intended to say.

explore ideas to solve the situation together. You might want to share tips on how to study, or how to get organized so all assignments are completed on schedule, or give her the names of Web sites (e.g., www.edhelper.com) where she can get practice worksheets for her child.

Remind her that you too care about her daughter succeeding. □

BOTH AUTHORS ARE MIAMI-BASED EDUCATORS WITH MORE THAN 48 YEARS OF COMBINED EXPERIENCE. **CHELI CERRA, M.ED.**, IS THE FOUNDER OF EDUVILLE, INC., WHICH PROVIDES RESOURCES TO HELP CHILDREN ACHIEVE THEIR BEST. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT HER WEB SITE AT [HTTP://WWW.EDUVILLE.COM](http://WWW.EDUVILLE.COM). **RUTH JACOBY, ED.D.** IS THE FOUNDED PRINCIPAL OF SOMERSET ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOLS.



1/3
Vertical
Left