

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO



STICKY SITUATIONS

Solutions and strategies for teaching's unexpected challenges. **By Dana Truby**

Do you ever feel like some days you just can't win? Trouble seems to find you: A parent yells at you in front of the kids, a field trip falls apart when your sixth graders run rampant through the art museum, or a precocious second grader has his own interpretation of the concept "Show and Tell." We've all been there. They never seem to cover this in teacher training, do they?

But get a group of teachers together, and in addition to those "Carl is finally reading at grade level" boasts, you'll

start to hear about it. Handling upset parents, unexpected kid behavior, and touchy school politics are some of the toughest parts of the job.

It never hurts to have an emergency plan or two tucked away and a few tried-and-true strategies you can count on. That's why we posed a batch of sticky classroom situations to communication experts and seasoned teachers and asked them for their best advice on keeping cool while cleaning up the mess. Who couldn't use a little help with that?

STICKY SITUATION #1:

A parent volunteer is gossiping about your students.

Mrs. G. is a great help in your classroom. She makes photocopies, works on your Web site, and sings likes an angel. She also tells her neighbors Kendra is on Ritalin, Lindsey might get left back, and everything else she overhears. Good grief.

→ **QUICK CLEAN UP:** Call Mrs. G. right away, say Cheli Cerra and Ruth Jacoby, former teachers and authors >>

sticky situations

of *Teacher Talk: The Art of Effective Communication*. But before you do, jot down a quick script of what you want to say. Be clear and firm without alienating her. Try telling her that you appreciate everything she does, and so do the children, but it is important that she respect the confidentiality of the classroom. If she did “accidentally” talk about a child, it’s important that she never do so again. Let her know the consequences: She will no longer be welcome as a volunteer.

→ **LONG-TERM STRATEGY:** Work with your school to develop behavior guidelines for volunteers that strongly emphasize confidentiality. Have volunteers read and sign them at the beginning of the year, suggest Cerra and Jacoby.

STICKY SITUATION #2:

Several colleagues invite you to join in their daily gripe sessions.

Every day, Mary, Elaine, and Bob eat lunch together and dish on the latest “inane” faculty meeting, new teacher mess-up, or kid misbehavior. You want to fit in, but it really brings you down.

→ **QUICK CLEAN UP:** Tell the chatters you wish you could stick around but you have *so* much work. Then use your few free minutes on things that uplift you. Go for a spring walk, read 15 pages of that bestseller you tucked away, or catch up on paperwork. If you do join in once in a while, consistently redirect the conversation to more positive subjects and they just may get the message.

→ **LONG-TERM STRATEGY:** If you find yourself frequently socializing with a group whose teaching you don’t admire, it’s time to re-evaluate, says Yvonne Bender, author of *The Tactful Teacher*. Seek out more like-minded colleagues even if they teach another grade.

STICKY SITUATION #3:

A parent thinks the classic novel you assigned is racist.

Your eighth graders are reading Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and you

have plans to screen the 1962 film in class. But Shane’s dad is really upset about it, and now you are not sure what to do.

→ **QUICK CLEAN UP:** Invite Shane’s dad in for a conference or find a quiet time to talk on the phone and ask him to explain how he sees it. Listen openly, even if you don’t agree. “Parents want to be heard, and know that someone is on their side,” advises child psychologist Samantha Howie of Upper Dublin, Pennsylvania.

“Afterwards, you can share why you chose the novel and how you are approaching it with your students.” Look for solutions. Would Shane’s dad like to observe and perhaps contribute to the discussion? Could you offer another book as an alternate reading choice?

→ **LONG-TERM STRATEGY:** You can preempt many problems by keeping parents informed. When they know and trust you, they are less likely to go on the offensive. Send home a letter to parents *before* your students embark



In the hot seat? Here’s how to keep your cool

1 STAY OBJECTIVE: When a parent or administrator is upset, it’s hard to keep calm, says Yvonne Bender, author of *The Tactful Teacher*. We all get angry at times. The trick is to refuse to return the anger.

2 LISTEN ACTIVELY: Let the person have their say. Try to see his or her point of view and reflect it back. For example, “I can see why that would have upset you.”

3 LOOK FOR COMMON GROUND: If your goal is resolving a problem, you must be willing to compromise. Focus on finding a mutually-acceptable solution, not on finding a way to “win.”

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on highly-charged subjects of study. Share your plans and your perspective and offer parents the opportunity to give feedback. Laying the groundwork can go a long way towards gaining families' support.

STICKY SITUATION #4:

Your substitute reports that your students behaved like wild monkeys while you were out.

As if the stomach flu weren't bad enough, you come back from a sick day and find out your students were hellions. Even worse, poor Miss K. had to bring the principal in to control them.

→ **QUICK CLEAN UP:** Talk to Miss K. and your principal and get the whole story. Apologize and let your principal know that you have a plan to keep this from happening again. Then face the real culprits and have a stern heart-to-heart.

→ **LONG-TERM STRATEGY:** Early on, share your expectations for behavior with your class, says Kenneth Shore, author of *Elementary Teacher's Discipline Problem Solver*. "Let your students know that your classroom rules are in full effect when there is a 'guest teacher' and you expect their best behavior." Also, you might have students evaluate their own behavior after each substitute day. It's a good way of holding them accountable for their own actions.

STICKY SITUATION #5:

One of your students tells his peers they are going to Hell.

Justin is well-behaved and devout. Perhaps too devout. He keeps proselytizing to his classmates. If they don't respond, he tells them their prospects for Heaven are extremely unlikely.

→ **QUICK CLEAN UP:** "I would talk to the child privately," says veteran third-grade teacher Julie Kirkpatrick-Carroll, who has faced a similar situation. "Explain that while you understand his religious beliefs are very important to him, it's not okay to make others feel bad if they

don't share the same belief." Next step: Call his parents and share the conversation you had with Justin, so there is no possible misunderstanding.

→ **LONG-TERM STRATEGY:** "With kids, action speaks louder than words," says Dana Williams, columnist for *Teaching Tolerance* (www.tolerance.org). Give equal time to all of your students' cultural beliefs and special days. Model the respect for cultural difference you want to see. At the same time you might want to take some time for a history lesson on the separation of church and state.

STICKY SITUATION #6:

A parent complains to you about one of your colleagues.

You loved having Sarah in your class last year. But neither Sarah nor her mother are too happy with her current teacher and you're the one hearing about it. Worse, you think some of the

complaints they have are quite valid. → **QUICK CLEAN UP:** "Do not take sides," says Laurie Puhn, a communication expert and author of *Instant Persuasion: How to Change Your Words to Change Your Life*. "This is not your conflict. Maintain your neutrality and yet be supportive." Teacher Kirkpatrick-Carroll suggests helping Sarah's mom express her thoughts. "I would ask her what she feels is the best way for her child to be a successful learner, then I'd send her right to the child's teacher."

→ **LONG-TERM STRATEGY:** It's a good idea to mention your conversation to your colleague, but keep it simple. Say "Sarah's mom came to see me about how Sarah's doing. I told her she needed to talk to you." After that, hold your tongue, advises Puhn. "Don't give advice unless you are asked for it. This shows the other person you are trying to be helpful, not critical." And who wouldn't appreciate that! □

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AMY MILLER.

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