



Strategies to support the anxious parent in meetings (Now included in *Overprotective 'helicopter' parent* ebooklet)

Step 1: Plan for the meeting

- **Where possible contact the parents following an issue** or incident before the child does. Calmly explain what occurred, and if appropriate, detail the various interpretations a child might incorrectly make about what happened. Set the meeting time and place as soon as practical.
- **Invite a senior staff member to the meeting.** This will help ensure that the parent feels the school is taking his or her concerns seriously. If you are a young and inexperienced teacher dealing with an anxious middle-aged 'professional', you may feel more confident with a more experienced senior staff member present. In addition to the potential support you will receive from another staff member, you will have a witness about what was discussed and planned.
- **If possible, meet with both parents and/or another adult**, who is involved in the child's life, such as a grandparent. This helps to ensure messages are clearly understood and provides support to the parent away from the school, and may help improve objectivity for the parent during and following the meeting. Consider whether you may feel 'out-numbered', if so invite an experienced senior staff member to be present.
- **Should the child be present at the meeting?** If you believe the child should be present then you should decide when the child is to be present at the meeting. At school, the teacher usually remains verbally in charge of the child throughout the meeting.

Step 2: At the beginning and throughout the meeting

- **Be warm, friendly, open and welcoming.** Offer tea, coffee or water. Plan ahead if other staff members need to be present. Arrange for them to be available a few minutes beforehand rather than asking the parent to wait while you locate them.
- **Limit distractions.** Move to a space where you will not be distracted. If the parent has a toddler present, take a minute or two to settle the young child with appropriate toys, construction materials or texta pens and paper. Try to have all present relaxed before starting a meeting, by talking about the child's strengths and thanking everyone for taking the time to attend.
- **Establish common ground.** Indicate that you are keen to work with the parent to ensure that the best outcome for the child is implemented. Acknowledge the child's strengths and the 'big picture' before focusing on areas of concern.
- **Maintain a diary or file of all data**, written notes, statements, telephone calls and notes of interview, including dates and times of all incidents. Keep track of all communication so that actions and information are clearly noted. Also have on hand test results and current work samples.
- **Take notes during your meeting.** Note taking indicates you are taking any concerns seriously. It also establishes a record of what was discussed and agreed upon. Record the date and time on your notes and who was present.

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Step 3: Clarify the issue (there may be multiple issues)

Some anxious parents will present you with the solution rather than the issue, such as ‘I want my child to stay down.’ Ask parents to explain what led them to this conclusion in order to understand their reasoning and to identify the issue or issues. If there is merit in the parent’s argument, don’t be afraid to defer the meeting to another time when appropriate senior staff can be available and you have had more time to think and consult about the issue.

- **Avoid being overwhelmed by issues**, concerns, various positions and statements.
 - **Deal with issues one at a time.** List each issue the parent presents. Repeat the issues and have the parent prioritise them. Work through each issue one at a time.
 - **Separate the child from the behaviour.** This can be helpful as it de-personalises the issues. For example, the child is not a ‘naughty child’ or a ‘dyslexic child’, rather he or she is a child who has misbehaved, or who has a diagnosis of dyslexia. Separating the child from his or her behaviours or diagnosis provides you with more room to suggest and implement change, as it is easier to change the child’s behaviours than the child.
 - **Segment the issues.** Break big issues into smaller manageable chunks. Ask the parents to use specifics, rather than sweeping generalisations. Generalisations tend to include words such as ‘all’ or ‘every’. Ask the parent to outline his or her specific concerns, or specific times in the past where an incident occurred.
 - **Refrain from arguing over positions.** Focus on the issues and the concerns, and the impact on the child’s individual needs, welfare and learning.
 - **Resist taking things too personally.** An anxious parents’ dialogue may be hurtful or upsetting but try to remind yourself that it is driven by their anxiety. Not everyone in the world shares the same temperament or predispositions as you. Debrief with a colleague later if required.
 - **Understand and empathise with the parent’s perspective.** Put yourself in the parent’s shoes in order to understand their perspective no matter how difficult this seems to be. Understanding a perspective doesn’t require you to condone or agree with the position. Your understanding will demonstrate your intention to collaborate to resolve the issue.
 - **Identify the source of the issue.** While talking to the parent, ask, ‘When did you first feel or think this?’ Understanding the origin of the issue may make it easier to generate suggestions that will reduce the parent’s anxiety. For example, a Year K or Prep teacher may have mentioned the possibility of a child repeating a year many years ago for a child who is now in Year 7 and is only just below the appropriate standard. You can now more confidently reassure that repeating is now is not an appropriate solution that needs to be applied.
 - **Allow parents the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback.** Break the meeting into two parts and ask for questions or feedback. It is important to let parents know that you are listening to their concerns. At the halfway point during the meeting, help to focus thinking and clarify what has been said. For example, you might say, ‘we’ve talked about this and this. Are there one or two key questions you would like to ask?’ ‘Is there anything that needs to be clarified? If not, now let us complete the second part of our meeting.’

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Step 4: Offer a realistic perspective

- **Respectfully ask about the role the parent has played.** Often anxious parents will exaggerate negative consequences and minimise their responsibility. For example, a parent might refer to his or her child as ‘badly injured’ a day or two after a soccer ball hit the child’s ankle at school. After the school’s first aid officer checked the ankle and decided whether an ice pack was to be applied, what was the follow-up by the parents? If the child was ‘badly injured’, as the parents claim, did they have the child seen by a medical professional? Did a doctor order an X-ray? Is the child attending school today?
- **Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of implementing a specific intervention to reduce the level of risk to the child.** For example, if the parent wants to bring in a rule to ban running in the playground ask, ‘What are the advantages and disadvantages of banning running at school?’ Firstly, list all the points the parent makes. When the parent agrees the list is complete, encourage the parent to evaluate each point. Determine together whether the advantages of banning running outweigh the disadvantages?
- **It might be helpful to ask respectfully, ‘What is the likelihood of that happening?’** Examine the likelihood of the worst event occurring. Discuss the answer, and assist the parents to reach a realistic answer. You may also want to ask the parent, ‘Let’s say that ... happened. What would be the worst thing that could result from this?’ Then examine what the most likely event and solution might be.

Step 5: Educate the parent about the issue

This step builds on the previous step and can be used to help provide a realistic perspective as well as assist the parents to move forward in a helpful way. You can educate the parents in a number of ways, depending on the issue, for example:

- **Provide samples of the child’s work, drawings and test results as evidence of the child’s actual academic abilities.** This strategy is particularly helpful for the parents who incorrectly believe their child is under-achieving or over-achieving.
- **Bring the child into the meeting, if relevant.** If the parents do not believe the account provided by the school, meet with the parents and decide when to bring in the child. Usually a child will not lie in front of a teacher, however, if the child doesn’t tell the truth teachers usually have the know-how to encourage the child to reflect on the situation and ‘remember what really happened’. This allows the teacher to later point out to the parents where there may have been a level of miscommunication or misinterpretation by a child who has yet to develop maturity in perspective. Remember, children lie for a reason. Also see the e-Booklet, ‘Children who tell lies’ as it becomes available on the website.
- **Educate the parent about appropriate expectations at the child’s year level,** including academic expectations, as well as social and motor skills and speech capabilities. Remind parents that children’s brains are not fully developed until around age 25 years with the executive functioning areas in the frontal cortex responsible for making good decisions the last area to fully mature.
- **Educate parents about the types of independence and the resilience that the child requires to face the challenges he or she will likely meet at this age.** As a department or year level brainstorm the types of issues that parents are usually anxious or concerned about.
- **Provide advice to parents about websites, information sheets, handouts, books or other written material on the topic of concern.** In Australia, useful websites about child development and expected behaviours can be found at <http://raisingchildren.net.au/>

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- **Provide the parent with strategies to assist the child at home.** For example, if a parent is concerned about the child's spelling, provide a list of frequently used words and three or four strategies to help the child. Strategies might include the 'Look, say, cover, write, check' approach, or spell by analogy (for example if you can spell 'came' then you can spell 'tame' and 'same'). Suggest the list is divided into groups of five or ten words for the child to practise weekly over the next three to six months.

Step 6: Finishing the meeting

- **Reinforce the parent's helpful actions.** While the parent is talking, make a note of all the positive behaviours they are displaying that will assist with the child's issue. Repeat these positive behaviours to the parent, specifically reinforcing with the parents the importance of their child 'having a go' and taking safe risks, and assisting the child to develop positive coping skills.
- **Develop and record an action plan with the parents.** Give a draft copy of the plan to the parents at the end of the meeting. The draft plan may outline the realistic steps you are going to take to assist the child, and the realistic steps the parent has agreed to implement. You may want to set a date for a future meeting to review the child's progress and to ensure both parties are following the plan once it is fully drawn up.
- **Maintain communication with parents.** Parents who feel informed, who have the opportunity to share their concerns, and who believe there is a plan to assist their child, will experience reduced anxiety. This can be done through:
 - **Regular meetings** - Offer regular meetings with the parent. Set appropriate limits on the time, frequency and duration of meeting. For example, schedule a meeting for 10 or 15 minutes before class once every month until the end of term to track the child's progress.
 - **Communication books** – Can be used for daily communication between parents and the school for students who have special or additional needs. It may be necessary to have some guidelines about communication books as expectations can become unrealistic. Sometimes use of dot points or tick boxes on a checklist may be useful in reducing misinterpretation that can occur in long-winded communication.
 - **Formal written communication.** Provide information to parents in various modes, for example, through notes on a parent noticeboard, parent emails, or newsletters posted outside the room.

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