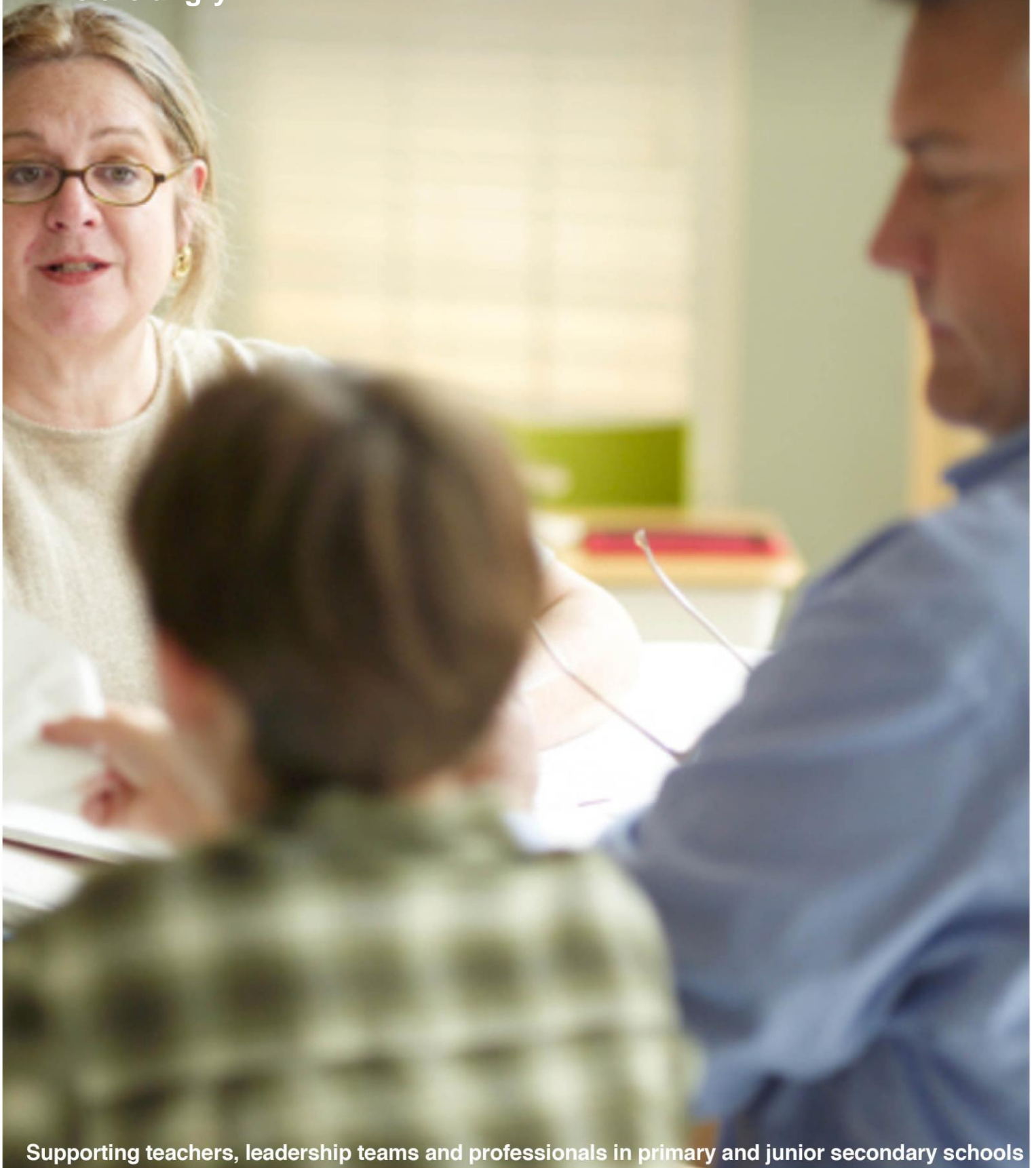


Working with  
**parents**  
who are angry



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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## Working with parents who are angry

People can become angry when they believe that they or someone close to them has been wronged. They often believe they are entitled to feel that way. At times, the level of anger might, be out of proportion to any wrongdoing.

Very angry people often have a reduced capacity to think rationally. Unless carefully planned, meetings with parents who are angry can lead to a situation of escalating anger, verbal threats or violence. In all instances, it is important to attempt to de-escalate or contain the anger and understand the basis of the parent's emotional state.

Understanding and managing another person's anger is critical in helping them to calm themselves and think clearly. The ultimate goals are to assist all involved to regulate emotions, look after everyone's personal wellbeing, improve problem solving, and avoid threats and physical violence towards staff and others in schools.

### Genuine parent concerns

While a parent's anger may arise from a legitimate concern, at other times, a parent's anger might relate to a misunderstanding.

All valid parental concerns should be addressed. Such concerns can include a child's medical condition, bullying, safety or other wellbeing issues, learning difficulties or disorders, issues of family stress or loss, or parental diagnosis of an illness.

It is reasonable for parents to expect that perceived learning difficulties and social competency issues such as bullying and other concerns about the child's safety are investigated and followed up by the school. Schools that have clear discipline and student management procedures, dedicated welfare or special education staff, focused and appropriate learning expectations, and parenting resources are usually well placed to assist.

### Why do some parents behave angrily?

Most parents are not angry all the time. Different circumstances may underpin angry behaviour such as:

- **Situation specific.** The parent believes that their rights, or their child's rights, have been unfairly dealt with, neglected or violated. In some cases their anger will have a legitimate basis, such as their child being bullied, but in other cases the anger will be less rational or an overreaction, such as wanting to sue the school because their child was accidentally kicked in the ankle (with no ongoing injury) during a soccer match.
- **Inflamed by certain triggers.** The parent is emotionally vulnerable due to other life stressors such as illness, family stress, major loss, anxiety or another medical condition.
- **Unrealistic expectations.** The parent holds unrealistic or unreasonable standards. For example, a parent who does not accept their child's diagnosis of intellectual disability may be angry because they believe teachers should be teaching their child at a higher level than the child can reasonably cope with developmentally.
- **Personality trait.** Some parents present as angry more frequently than others, and sometimes in 'waves'. These people display characteristics such as moodiness or irritability, and tend to focus on negatives. They can be inclined to be belligerent, hostile or aggressive. When anger is suppressed, a person may appear moody. Unfortunately, suppressed anger can be



expressed or directed at someone who may have little or nothing to do with the perceived problem.

- **Culturally sanctioned.** A small number of adults believe that some people deserve to be the recipient of their angry reactions. For example, the angry parent may think or say to themselves, 'This person is an idiot and deserves to be yelled at or punched.'
- **Learned behaviour.** Some adults have learnt that getting angry, shouting, making threats, and physically intimidating others can get them what they want. These people will often have poor problem-solving skills and will use anger as their first solution to a problem.

## Caution

You should always meet an angry parent with a colleague. Never meet with a parent who is displaying aggressive or violent behaviour. If a parent becomes aggressive or violent, contact a senior staff member immediately and direct all students away from the area. In some cases it may be necessary to call the police. The police may need to be called for example, if a parent is intoxicated, unwilling to calm down and leave the school, or wants to fight with a staff member.

Schools should consult relevant policy and guidelines for handling parent complaints provided by their education department or governing authority.

## In cases of alleged student sexual assault

Follow your department or governing authority guidelines. Most education departments and governing authorities have procedures regarding allegations of sexual assault in schools. The principal, in partnership with their governing authority, usually has the primary responsibility for managing the school response to allegations of student sexual assault. It is generally stated that school staff are not to investigate allegations of sexual assault, as it is a police matter to investigate allegations of crime, particularly where the alleged perpetrator is ten years of age or older. For example, in Victoria, the principal is required to consult the Education Department's Manager, Student Critical Incident Advisory Unit and the Regional Director (See the [Responding to allegations of student sexual assault: Procedures for Victorian schools](#) document).



## Strategies to assist you to work with an angry parent

It is important to remember that people who are very angry will temporarily lose the ability to think clearly and act rationally. How you respond can help to either escalate or deescalate their anger. A parent will be unable to work with you effectively until they have calmed down and are in control of their behaviours.

**REMEMBER:** You should never try and work with a parent who is displaying violent aggressive behaviour. If a parent becomes violent or aggressive contact a senior staff member immediately and direct all children from the area. The police may need to be called. See below for more information.

### General guidelines to de-escalate anger

- **Show undivided attention, speak in a soft, calm tone, and validate emotions.** Do not raise your voice. 'I can see this is a distressing issue.' Empathise to help regulate emotions. 'I understand this would be distressing and I was very cross when the teasing was brought to my attention.' Listen carefully, and respond using supportive language, 'I have spoken with (child's name) several times and he was clearly upset about being teased.'
- **Remain calm and in control.** The following techniques may help you to remain composed:
  - **Breathe deeply and slowly.**
  - **Separate yourself from the parent's anger.** This can be challenging. The parent may make statements such as, 'You're the worst teacher on this Earth'. If they do, ask yourself, 'Is this true?' The answer is no.
  - **Remember, in most cases the anger is not about you.** It typically stems from elsewhere.
  - **Consider why the parent is so angry.** Is something stressful happening in their lives that leads them to react this way? How would you respond if you believed your child was being treated unfairly? You don't need to have answers, but knowing something about what the parent is going through may help you to feel less confronted by the verbal attack and better able to work calmly with the parent.
- **If the child has been hurt (physically or emotionally) always enquire how the child is.** 'How is (name) doing today?' Perhaps add, '(Name) was very brave to tell you about the bullying. I am proud that a young child like (name) has the courage to speak up.'
- **Acknowledge and deal with emotion first, before facts, details and content** related to the issue. High emotion can escalate and restrict logical, rational thinking. Welcome parents with supportive, assertive statements such as the 'happy/glad, sorry/sad, sure/certain' approach. 'I am glad you are here. I am sorry about what happened to (child's first name) yesterday. I am sure we can sort things out.'
- **Match feeling-related words to the seriousness of the situation to help regulate emotions.** 'I can understand that you would have felt *really upset* when you were told (child's name) had been teased by a group of boys over the last 2 weeks. I also felt *cross* about this situation.'
- **Be mindful of body language and other non-verbal communication.** Do not point at the person with your fingers and hands, use slow open hand gestures, with hands by your sides or to the front of your body.



- **Use seating and standing wisely.** While classroom furniture may be adequate, it might be better with parents who are emotional to use low comfortable furniture with a coffee table to display work samples and a laptop for accessing student records. Low furniture can help reduce hostility. Standard table heights make it easier for someone who is very angry to position themselves territorially behind the table and continue to be angry. Comfortable seating in a circle or semicircle can promote more ‘open’ communication.
- **Invite parents to sit down, to help reduce anger and the likelihood of violence.** If the angry parent is standing, it is helpful to stand to the front side of the person (not directly in front or to the side). Encourage the parent to sit down. Match them in sitting or take a slight lead to model sitting down as a means for helping anger to de-escalate. If the angry parent stands, you should also slowly stand to avoid allowing the angry person to stand over you. As soon as the parent stands, invite them to sit down, unless it is apparent that their standing is helping to reduce their anger. (For some people the act of standing up may cause them to feel that their body is ‘letting-go’ of some of their anger.)
- **Admit mistakes.** Apologise if you or other staff have made a mistake, but do not apologise for something you have not done. ‘I’m sorry that happened to (name) yesterday. It seems our procedure is at fault. We need to sit down and discuss this unfortunate situation ...’ Work with the parent and other relevant parties to rectify, change or introduce a new procedure as quickly and smoothly as possible.
- **Do not accept abuse.** Provide boundaries and have a rehearsed exit statement in place:
  - ‘I can see that you’re very angry about what happened yesterday. I want to help but we can’t resolve the issue by yelling. We can discuss this calmly now, or if you prefer to come back tomorrow morning, we can discuss the situation then’.
  - ‘I can see you’re very angry right now. I’d like to try and help, so I need to ask you to take a moment and slow down so we can talk through what happened yesterday. Would you like to come with me to get a coffee or a glass of water before we sit and talk?’
- **Use the parent’s name** to maintain connection and control throughout the conversation. If you are on first-name basis with the parent, use this, otherwise use their family name and correct title. Make sure you use the correct family name—do not assume it is the same as the child’s.
- **Listen for misunderstandings.** Sometimes an issue may need to be clarified or further information sought to understand the broader perspective. If some relevant information is missing or if you think the information you have is not entirely accurate, explain this to the parent once they are calm. You can propose that further investigation will be undertaken and schedule another meeting for some time within the next 24–48 hours.
- **Build a clear picture of the issue.** It is important not to argue over minor details. If an issue needs to be debated, focus on what really matters, rather than trivial issues. Only touch on ‘debatable issues’ when high emotions have subsided.
- **Use empathic ‘active’ listening and questioning.** For example, using clarifying questions and reflective listening (paraphrasing or summarising what is being said) shows that you are attending to what is being said and acknowledging how the parent might be feeling.
- **Use language that helps to keep things in perspective.** Carefully chosen descriptive language can help to put things into perspective. For example, ‘I can understand that everyone would initially be *really angry* about what happened yesterday. Speaking with you again this morning, I still feel *very frustrated* that this issue occurred. I am *very annoyed* with the other children involved and each will be interviewed with their parents so everyone can understand the seriousness of the situation...’



- **Watch and listen to gauge if the parents are ready for further information.**
  - **If not**, then help them understand that, while this is a distressing situation, you are sure it can be sorted out together.
  - **If they are** or once the parent has calmed down, give factual information, such as, 'The year level coordinator counselled each child and a restorative conference was conducted with each student. Each child has shown remorse. I expect no repetition of this type of behavior. (Name) has indicated that he is looking forward to things getting back to usual with the boys. I am happy to explain the school's procedures, so you can understand how seriously we view any form of teasing.'



## Guidelines for meeting with an angry parent

### 1. Prepare and plan

- **Know the parent's background, if possible.** Is this person frequently angry? Understanding as much as possible about the parent, prior to a meeting, can help you to remain calm and work to de-escalate their anger and offer a framework for helpful discussion.
- **Gain facts prior to the meeting** by speaking to relevant teachers and students.
- **Meet the parent with another staff member** who has experience in handling difficult situations.
- **Plan to break the meeting into two parts.** Indicate to the parent when setting the meeting that the first part of the meeting will enable you both to identify and clarify key issues or concerns, while the second part of the meeting will be an opportunity to plan actions or changes that need to be implemented.
- **Invite the other parent, or a relative, to attend the meeting.** Enlist the support of the less angry parent, relative or family friend, by suggesting they help keep the meeting on track and solution-focused. The presence of the other parent, partner, or relative may help to calm the angry parent, but not in all cases.

### 2. Assess the risk to you and others

Assess the physical and psychological risk to yourself and those around you. Consider the parent's level of anger, whether you should meet now or later, and the safety of the location.

- a) **Determine the level of anger** to establish whether a meaningful conversation can take place. Do this quickly by watching the parent's behaviours. There are four levels of anger:
  1. **The parent is angry but has the potential to engage constructively.** They may present as mildly angry but able to speak with you without raising their voice and without being verbally aggressive (e.g. name calling).
  2. **The parent is very angry but has not lost control.** They may use a raised voice.
  3. **The parent is yelling and a little out of control.** The parent may be yelling, standing over you or behaving in a mildly aggressive way (e.g. banging their fist on the table).
  4. **The parent is displaying a high level of anger and acting aggressively.** The behaviour is preventing the meeting from starting or being productive. The parent is yelling, swearing or acting violently or appears to have the potential to become physically violent. If the parent is violent or making threats, the meeting should not start or continue, and you should use an exit strategy (see point d below).
- b) **Decide when to meet with the parent.** Once you have determined the parent's level of anger, decide whether it is safe or productive to meet now or whether it would be better to reschedule.
- c) **Do you know this parent?** If the answer is yes, you may be better able to predict how calmly the parent will be to talk through the issue with you.
  - **Is this a typical response?** If you have already encountered this parent in an angry state, use your knowledge of what does and doesn't work to decide when to meet.





- **Is this an understandable reaction?** Is the behaviour in line with the situation or is the parent overreacting?
- **Does the parent have a history of aggression or violence?** If yes, use an exit strategy (see below) and alert another staff member.
- **Do you feel comfortable meeting with the parent** as they are currently presenting? If the answer is no, use an exit strategy (see below) to reschedule the meeting or ask another staff member to join the meeting.
- **Do the police need to be called?** If yes, do so as soon as possible. It may be preferable to ask another staff member to do this so you can monitor the parent.

**d) Consider the safety and appropriateness of the location** for yourself and others.

- **Are there students present or nearby?** If yes, direct the students away from the situation. Depending on the circumstances, this may involve asking students to relocate or suggesting a more suitable location to the parent. You may require assistance from another staff member, so one of you can focus on the students and one on the parent.
- **Does another staff member know you are meeting with the parent?** If no, inform another staff member via telephone or message that you are meeting with the child's parents, and tell them the location; or relocate to a more central position where other staff are close.
- **Is another staff member close by to support you?** If no, consider rescheduling the meeting.
- **Does the room have more than one exit?** It is preferable to choose a location that has more than one exit. Since many school offices and classrooms only have one door, locating yourself close to the exit may give you several important seconds if needing to seek help. If there is only one door ensure that neither you nor the parent is sitting in a position which could potentially block the doorway.

**e) Plan exit strategies** if you do not feel safe or if you believe the meeting may not be productive. Ensure you have a practiced exit strategy. For example:

- '[Parent's name], I can see that you're very angry about the unfortunate situation that arose yesterday at school. I want to help by going through some of the details, but we can't resolve this by yelling. Can we discuss this in a calm way or would you prefer to come back tomorrow morning and discuss it then?'
- '[Parent's name], I know you're angry and I sympathise with you, as my niece had a similar situation occur in another school. However, yelling and screaming won't solve this problem. I have another meeting that I am required to attend now. Can we meet again tomorrow morning, so we can sort through the issues and resolve a course of action? I am sorry, but I have to go. I can walk with you to the front office exit, if you wish.'

### 3. During the meeting

- **Move to a safe secure quiet location** (if you are not already in one). When moving, use non-confrontational statements, such as 'I really want to help, so let's go to the meeting room where we can talk without too much interruption.'
- **Show undivided attention.** Let the parent know they have your undivided attention. Physically show this by closing or pulling the door to, moving away from work at your desk and sitting down with them. Show the parent you are interested in them and the issue and indicate that you're going to devote time to listen.



- **Let the parent know the boundaries early.** This includes:
  - **Setting time limits**, if required. 'I really want to discuss this issue with you. I have a meeting at 4pm. Let's use the next 20 minutes as productively as possible.'
  - **Setting expectations for their behaviour.** 'If there continues to be yelling I will have to stop the meeting.'
  - **Explaining the necessity of having another person there if you need them.** '[Teacher's name] will be joining us so we can all be on the same page and find a solution to the problem. [Teacher's name] has known and taught [child's name] over the last four years.'
- **Validate the parent's emotions.** Name their emotions. 'I can see you're really frustrated ... please sit down so we can talk about it.' After you validate their emotion, pause and allow the parent to speak. The parent might reply, 'Of course I'm bloody frustrated!' That's okay. Validating their emotion will allow them to feel heard.
- **Let the parent do most of the talking initially.** Allow the parent to verbally vent their anger. If you can handle it, let them vent for a few minutes. This will typically help to reduce the parent's anger. During this time it is important to say very little. However, if you feel the anger is escalating, you need to help structure the venting.

### If the parent's anger escalates

You will know a parent's anger is escalating if they raise their voice or present more and more problems. If this happens, use the following strategies:

- **Use the parent's name and speak directly to them.**
- **Deal with the key issue first.** The language you use can help structure the venting. For example, you might say, 'I understand that and I fully support those ideas. But that problem and this problem are related to the key issue, which is that [child's name] is performing much lower than expected in maths as he is often sleepy in class. I think that's the key issue we should deal with first.'
- **Empathise with the parent once they have vented.** 'I can see why you're frustrated' (listen to what they say for clues to what is behind their anger). 'You had to take the day off work to come down here. It's frustrating losing time from work, but getting [child's name] back on track with maths will help him in the long term.'
- **Pause the meeting. 'Let's refocus on the key issue.'** Sometimes there is a bombardment of statements, accusations or highly emotional questions. Slowly put your raised open palms up and say, 'We need to pause'. Leave a moment of silence, then speak calmly and briefly without being defensive. This can often be a starting point for more productive communication.
- **Use language that helps to keep things in perspective.** Carefully chosen descriptive language can help to put things into perspective, 'I can understand that anyone would initially be *angry* about what happened in the maths class yesterday. Speaking with you this morning, I feel *frustrated* that this situation has occurred. I am *cross* with the other students involved and each will be interviewed with their parents so all can understand the seriousness of the situation ...'
- **Provide an opportunity for time out.** Say, '[Parent's name], having listened to everything that has been said so far today, I think we need to pause for a moment to think about how we best proceed.' During the break, try to relax the parent, for example, 'Would you like a coffee?' The break can also provide you with additional think time.



- **Don't be intimidated by threats.** 'We are talking about the best interests of all concerned and especially [child's name]. Any intimidation or threats are serious. Please stop. If the behaviour does not stop, I will close the meeting now.' This statement can be repeated with the additional statement, 'I will ask you to leave the school'. Principals can direct a parent to leave if a parent is threatening or intimidating others. The police can be called on 000 if the wellbeing of staff, students or visitors is being threatened.
- **Let parents know there are other avenues they may wish to explore.** Within the school, school psychologists or social workers can help resolve the issue, while outside the school they can call on the district, regional or central office staff of the education department or other governing authority.

### Move the parent to problem-solving mode (if possible)

- **The parent needs to be calm to do this.** You can't move them to this stage too quickly. Some parents may be ready to engage in problem solving at this stage, others may need extra assistance. If they require extra assistance, try some of the following suggestions:
  - **'I think we need to stop for a minute.** Before we go on, we need to clarify how best to assist your daughter in the time we both have this morning.'
  - **Paraphrase and summarise to recap and focus on the issue or concern.** Identify where communication breakdown has occurred. Avoid blaming; rather, acknowledge the breakdown in communication. 'I think I misunderstood your point. This is how I see where things are at the moment and how the issue can be solved.'
  - **Brainstorm solutions.** Discuss what it would take to solve the problem. Allow the parent to provide you with their ideal solution first. 'Ideally, what would need to happen to fix this?' or 'What would be a better way to manage this?' The solution provided by the parent may not be realistic but will give you a starting point. Then talk through solutions the school can realistically implement. Do not offer more than you can achieve.
  - **Negotiate a realistic solution.** Once a number of solutions have been discussed, talk with the parent about what is the best, most realistic solution to the problem. This may not be the 'ultimate' outcome, but it must be one that both parties have the means and the desire to carry out.
  - **Generate solutions and list action points.** Record who is responsible for carrying out each action, and when each must be completed. It is important to include the actions required of all relevant parties: teacher, senior staff member, parent and child. These should all be recorded on one sheet of paper and a copy given to all present at the meeting. Ensure action points are specific with time limits and dates.
  - **Set a follow-up meeting,** if appropriate. This indicates that you have taken the parent seriously and are intending to follow through with your side of the agreed solution. A follow-up meeting will give the school the ability to recap on actions taken and remind the parent about how best to work with school staff. Some degree of education about how to engage school staff without getting too angry and emotional, especially if the reaction was out of proportion to the issue or concern, is important in helping to reduce angry episodes in the future.

### 4. Seek additional help from outside the school, if necessary

- **Consult policy and guidelines for handling parent complaints** provided by your education department or governing authority, such as ['Addressing parent concerns and complaints effectively: policy and guides'](#) in Victorian Government schools. ['Responding to concerns from parents and caregivers in DETE preschools and schools'](#) in South Australia.



- **In extreme cases**, principals may need to consult with the district, regional or central office or other governing authority for further advice on effectively addressing parents' concerns and complaints.

## School planning

In some instances, whole-school planning is needed in order to effectively manage meetings with parents. A small number of parents with very 'enmeshed' relationships with their child, personality problems or other serious mental health issues (very anxious, irrational, very angry or belligerent parents) can cause distress to you and others. Try not to take things personally—their anger, pain and drama is about them, not you.

In a small number of cases, principals may need to outline very clear parameters that indicate how the school is prepared to support a child and the ways in which a parent who is angry or has a history of being angry can interact and communicate with the school. It is always important to emphasise that the school is acting in the best interests of the child, and the wellbeing of the school community. Examples of parameters that might be set by the principal include when a parent may or may not enter a classroom or the school, and a requirement that meetings are by appointment only.

- **Establish whole-school plans.** Clear student management, effective welfare structures, specific learning difficulties provision, focused and appropriate learning expectations, and providing parenting resources can help prevent or reduce angry outbursts.
- **Teachers and principals need to be mindful that some parents can be unpredictable.** In some instances, there may be highly emotional outbursts, sustained disputes, verbal threats or physical attacks made on teachers, the principal or the school.
- **Principals need to address verbal and physical threats.** The police may need to be called. Most school principals are also required to log emergency management or critical incidents with their governing authority. Teachers and other school staff may require debriefing by psychologists and other senior education department or governing authority officers. Additional planning to prevent a repetition of the same situation may need to be undertaken.
- **If necessary, use the school's legal resources.** Most education departments and governing authorities have legal units staffed by lawyers who principals and other officers can consult.

## References

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## Psych4Schools resources

The following Psych4Schools may be resources useful:

<http://www.psych4schools.com.au/members/parents.html>

<http://www.psych4schools.com.au/members/colleagues.html>

### Communicating with parents

- [Create great working relationships with parents](#)
- [Negotiation and assertiveness techniques to use with parents](#)
- [When is support needed at a meeting](#)

### Working with challenging parents

- [Parents who behave irrationally](#)

### Creating effective working relationships

- [Looking after yourself](#)

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