



Negotiation and assertive techniques with parents

Negotiation skills and assertive communication will assist you to be persuasive when talking with parents. These skills all require practice to become part of your communication style.

Use a set of guiding principles

A set of guiding principles, such as the ones below, allow flexibility but also provide valid, logical foundations for discussions. Finding common ground in discussions based on common principles leads to improved communication.

For yourself

- Anticipate issues, know your parents, do your research and plan.
- Deal with emotions and understand *everyone* can feel vulnerable in a school setting.
- Know how to remain calm and practice relaxation techniques, see the Psych4Schools website for relaxation activities, which can help lower your level of nervous energy.
- Find out what the parent's concerns are and what they know, rather than telling them everything you know about their child resulting in the parents becoming defensive about your conclusions, suggestions, recommendations or solutions.
- Use language effectively, such as supportive and assertive language.

For the child

- Focus on the individual needs and welfare of the child.
- Generally whatever the school knows about the child, the parents have a right to know. (Exemptions may occur for example when the parent is a perpetrator of harm or abuse).
- Along with academic issues, social competency and organisational issues can arise throughout schooling. For example, bullying, attendance issues, the child lacking confidence.
- Focus on broad, comprehensive learning and on the child's strengths and interests.
- Consider whether the child requires further review by other teachers or other professionals.

For the parent

- Parents, like many adults, will not always follow procedures.
- Parents can bring emotional 'baggage,' make poor interpretations, or over-rely or fully believe only what their child has told them.
- Clarify whether the parent wants real change or just wants to vent and complain.
- A small number of parents with very 'enmeshed' relationships with their child, personality problems or other serious mental health issues can cause distress to you and others. Try not to take things personally, their anger, pain and drama is about them, not you.
- Have clear student management, effective welfare structures, specific learning difficulties provision, focused and appropriate learning expectations, and parenting resources in place.

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Caution

Teachers and principals need to be mindful that some parents can be unpredictable in meetings. In some instances there may be highly emotional outbursts or occasionally sustained parent dispute, verbal threats or physical attacks made on teachers, the principal or the school.

Often thoughtful planning and in some instances whole-school planning is needed in order to manage meetings with parents effectively. Examples include:

- the child has been treated unfairly at school, bullied, or a discrepancy exists between current and previous school assessments and reporting
- parents who have a 'special needs' child who are in denial over the child's condition
- a parent or family with unresolved grief or a history of trauma
- a family with a history of violence or feuding with others
- one or both parents who are drug addicted or under the influence of alcohol
- a parent or family members who are involved in crime
- a family with a history of intervention and conflict with welfare and protection agencies
- parents with personality problems and other serious mental health issues
- parents who are in dispute with one another
- parents who are very anxious, irrational, angry, belligerent and aggressive.

Caution regarding a genuine concern by a parent

All valid parent concerns should to be addressed. Such concerns include, but are not limited to, a child's medical condition, safety, other wellbeing issues, learning difficulties, disorders, family stress or major loss, or parental diagnosis of anxiety or a medical condition.

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

While classroom teachers will successfully conduct a variety of meetings with parents, some meetings should not be attempted on your own. There are a number of meetings where colleagues, the principal or other consultants such as the school psychologist should be present. See the Psych4Schools document, '*When support is needed at a meeting*' before embarking on meetings that may not be suitable for you to conduct without support or thorough preparation and planning. Some meetings may be best left to more experienced staff such as principals, student welfare coordinators and psychologists.

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Assertive communication techniques

Assertive communication aims to assist all parties to achieve a 'win-win' situation without either party losing face or feeling intimidated. Assertive communication techniques are designed to counter hostility and anger and help all parties arrive at a sensible and logical solution or conclusion.

1. The 'power' of your communication is based on:

- understanding the concerns of the parent/s
- the strength of your relationship with the child and the parent
- whether you have the 'expertise' or authority and knowledge to assist
- having clear assessment data and plans of action in place, resources or other 'experts' to assist
- the communication style you choose to use.

2. If someone wants your instant attention:

- appraise their request
- decide if you can attend now or later
- if later, explain that now is not a good time and state when you can speak to them
- if now, acknowledge the request 'Just a moment, I'll settle the class to work first ...'
- direct them to an appropriate space
- speak briefly, redirect them to an available senior staff member, or set an appointment.

3. Don't be ambushed by parents who have 'set' agendas

There are several tactics that 'difficult' parents might use. These include but are not limited to the following:

- attempting to set a meeting agenda based on half-truths or accusations
- using threats, coercion or bullying
- setting unreasonable time limits or unreasonable expectations on you and others

These situations require you to be assertive about when and who will meet, what agenda items are appropriate, and the likely time frames that might be required to address identified issues.

4. Use managing skills and supportive, assertive statements

- **Welcome using the 'happy/glad, sorry/sad, sure/certain' approach.** 'I am glad you are here. I am sorry about what happened to (use the child's first name) yesterday. I am sure we can sort things out. Note: If a child had been hurt physically or emotionally always enquire how the child is. 'How is (name) doing today?'

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- **Use selective ignoring** 'I noticed you mentioned... and I agree with that ...' you choose the part of the parent's statement that is correct and an accurate account, while selectively ignoring other incorrect or erroneous information. This allows you to establish common ground with the parent but helps focus the discussion on matters that need to be discussed, while politely letting other matters that don't need discussion to be ignored.
- **'It's not a question of...'** is a statement that assertively disagrees without causing too much offence to the parent. This assertive statement re-labels what occurred without necessarily disagreeing with the content of what was said or recounted by the parent. 'Your daughter was observed by two teachers to throw the rocks onto the home's roof. 'It's not a question of ... whether your daughter was sufficiently monitored by teachers on yard duty...' Your daughter broke a school rule. Luckily for your daughter the owner of the house is pursuing replacement for the broken window and the roof damage through her own insurer.'
- **Learn to say 'no'**. Recognise your limits and say 'no' when you need to and can. There will be occasions when you will be entitled to say 'no', particularly when dealing with parents who may be making an unreasonable demand upon you. Before you say 'no' however, consider the validity and appropriateness of the request. If you can't say 'no', consider offering a less time consuming, short-term or simpler solution.
- **'We need to pause for a moment and refocus on the key issue...'** Sometimes there is a bombardment of varying 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.

5. Compartmentalise issues.

Break big issues into smaller, manageable parts. Asking others to use specifics, rather than sweeping generalisations can do this. Generalisations tend to use words such as 'all' or 'every'. Ask others to outline specific concerns, or specific times in the past where an incident has occurred, for example, 'You mentioned that you saw *everyone* take Jack's bag. Can you name which student or students initially took the bag?'

6. Smile, when appropriate.

Often a little grin can show empathy and give a sense of hope.

7. Use appropriate non-verbal communication.

Ensure it matches your verbal communication.

8. Use "I" messages

- a. Start with 'I' followed by a statement of your feeling
'I feel frustrated...'
- b. State a tangible situation (Be specific)
'When you come into my classroom and try to talk to me after class has started...'
- c. Include an explanation of effect, or why the situation leads to the feelings
'Because I can't talk with you and teach the class at the same time.'
- d. You can include a statement of a preferable alternative

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'I would prefer it if you could make a time for us to talk either before or after school.'

Note All words following the statement 'I feel' should be emotions. Do not use labels, generalisations, or 'careless' language such as 'bitchy behaviour', 'unsafe child'.

9. Use the broken record technique.

Repeating a clear statement of intention helps to avoid being side tracked, reduce baiting, irrelevant logic, and badgering by others. It also demonstrates a determination that you need to be listened to.

10. Be simple and direct with statements of intent or want.

You need to be clear in your mind about what you want to express (feelings and words) to the other person.

11. Escalate and be persistent.

Say it twice or a little firmer (without raising your voice or shouting), but you need to restate what it is that you want in one or two short simple sentences.

12. Use silence.

When appropriate silence can emphasise a point or allow time to reflect.

13. Use skills that help contain the focus of the meeting, such as

- **paraphrase and summarise.** Restating information clearly, logically and simply as a way of assisting all present to understand what has been said, and what needs to be done.
- **advising, directing and instructing.** Once a common understanding has been reached it might be appropriate to advise parents about what the school will do and suggest to the parents what they might do.

14. Provide opportunities for time out for yourself and the parent during the meeting.

Say, 'I would like to break here briefly before providing options about how to best proceed.' During the break, try to relax the person, for example, 'Would you like me to make us a coffee each?' The break can also provide you with additional think time.

15. Pause or break frequently and redirect if moving away from set goals.

'I think we need to stop here for a minute. Before we go on, we need to clarify how to best assist your daughter.'

16. Identify where communication breakdown has occurred.

Paraphrase and summarize to re-cap 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.'

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17. Don't be influenced or intimidated by threats.

'We are talking about the best interests of all concerned and especially your child. Any intimidation or threats are serious. Please stop. If the (intimating or threatening) 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.

18. Never use direct threats.

Let parents know there are other avenues they may wish to explore within the school through meeting school psychologists or social workers to help resolve the issue, or outside the school such as district, regional or central office of the education department or other governing authority.

19. Use your professional power base as effectively and wisely as possible.

For teachers, this covers your professional:

- **Relationship** with the child and the parent. The stronger the relationship, the more leverage you have with the parents.
- **Expertise** in curriculum, teaching, knowledge of child development, student management, learning difficulties, and other pedagogical issues.
- **Confident personal attributes**, personality, problem solving skills and communication style.

For principals and coordinators, this includes the above, plus the professional power that resides in your administrative position, particularly as a principal. These are:

- **Legitimate** power as a line manager in charge of and responsible for the wellbeing and learning of all children and others in the school.
- **Reward** power. It gives you a capacity to authorise and endorse particular courses of action. It allows you expect others to meet their expectations as teachers or parents to improve growth, wellbeing and learning in children.
- **Exerting influence** or coercive power that allows you authority to appropriately direct, instruct, or implement procedures that are in the best needs of all staff, children and parents.

20. Conclude the meeting

Do this by restating the decision or outcomes, and try to finish on a positive note.

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Key steps to talking and negotiating with parents

Some issues in schools may need to be negotiated as a means for developing working relationships or to make a case for a particular course of action.

Step 1: Build a strong working relationship with the parents and know them as best you can.

- Deal with their emotions first before dealing with other issues.
- Establish what the parent knows about their child and the issue at hand.
- Where possible separate the child from the behaviour, issue or concern.
- Learn how to accept and acknowledge your errors and receive criticism comfortably.

Step 2: Focus on the individual needs and welfare of the student.

- Is the parent willing to work for change, or just venting and complaining?
- Establish what is in the student's best interests, the parent's concerns, the level of significance of the issues and possible long-term impact.
- Do not dwell on positions or solutions at this point.
- Also consider the interests of other students, staff and parents.

Step 3: Insist that discussion around key issues is based on some objective criteria, evidence, agreed value or procedure, and clear reasoning underpins the thinking leading to a decision or outcome.

- Whilst people are generally rational beings they can also engage in thinking errors such as, all-or-nothing-thinking, mind reading, and emotional reasoning. See <http://powerstates.com/10-cognitive-thinking-errors> for an explanation of ten common thinking errors. Listen for thinking errors as a means for shaping rational discussion, for example, 'While listening to you speaking, it sounds like you are telling yourself that the very worst thing is going to happen at school camp (catastrophising thinking), without considering other positive possibilities that may be more likely.'
- It is important to ask for the reasoning or thinking behind a statement, decision or position of others if they are not thinking fairly and logically or you are 'lost' by their thinking.
- You may also need to pre-empt or carefully interrupt before someone takes a fixed position or unreasonable stand, for example, 'Before we start to set that thought in concrete, let me go back over this key point and clearly explain....'

Step 4: Remain calm and generate several possibilities and options before deciding what to do.

- Articulate the best course of action, or the two best possibilities, but not five different options.

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Step 5: Help others to work towards setting realistic outcomes and goals. If a negotiated and wise agreement can't be found, either re-convene the meeting, make an interim decision, or make your considered decision.

- Do not feel forced to agree to a decision you are not fully comfortable with. Instead arrange a follow-up meeting. Offering a follow-up meeting, even if it is not taken up shows that you are still open minded or willing to talk through issues.
- A follow-up meeting can help ensure change and acceptance. It can also help ensure that any emotions have settled or issues have now been resolved or some action has been taken if common ground can't be fully found.

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