

# Working with parents

who behave irrationally



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

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## Working with parents who behave irrationally

Teachers and other school staff, who deal with irrational behaviour from parents can often feel bewildered, hurt and intimidated, especially by unexpected verbal attacks and hostile confrontation.

It may take one or more hostile and unsettling interactions or several debriefings with other colleagues before you realise the parent is behaving irrationally, and that you need to develop an effective, planned approach to manage future interactions.

### Who are they?

These parents tend to present to the school in a heightened emotional state. They are often already worked up over an issue or, 'primed' to go on the attack in response to certain triggers. Typically, they blame or verbally abuse school staff with statements based on half-truths, misinformation or pieces of information that are used out of context.

Sometimes there is a historical reason for parent hostility, such as a belief that a child's previous teacher was slow to act or did not appropriately address the learning or safety needs of their child. At times their confrontations with school staff will involve unpredictable and bewildering behaviour. This may occur despite efforts by school staff to remedy the child's needs and apologise to the parent.

Three different circumstances may underpin the irrational behaviour of a parent.

- Situation specific – the person believes or feels their rights or their child's rights have been neglected or violated in some way or a wrong has been done against them or someone close to them. They can become quite angry, reducing their capacity to think rationally.
- Inflamed by certain triggers – the person is emotionally vulnerable due to other life stressors such as family stress or major loss, or anxiety or a medical condition.
- Personality trait – some people present as irrational more frequently than others, sometimes in 'waves' or most of the time. They may display characteristics such as poor reasoning and unclear thinking, a lack of sound judgement and consequently make illogical statements. Their beliefs may be significantly different from your own and therefore it can be hard to understand why they act, feel and think in ways that are inflexible, unrealistic, absolute or 'black-and-white'.

### Finding common ground

It is very difficult to find common ground with these parents; so, unless carefully planned, meetings can be time-consuming and unproductive.

Highly irrational reactions indicate hyper-arousal; that is, the sympathetic nervous system has been activated, as it would be in live combat. In other words, this is the fight aspect of the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. The person who is behaving irrationally needs to calm down before they can process information. Indicating that you hear what the irrational parent is saying may help to calm them to some degree. When the person is calm, there is some hope that they will listen to your point of view and respond reasonably.

As a teacher or principal you are generally not in the best position to directly change or challenge the thinking of a parent who is behaving irrationally, but you may be able to help them to become calmer and more rational in regard to assisting and supporting their child at school.



## Should I be meeting this parent?

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 to conduct without support or thorough preparation and planning. More experienced staff such as principals, heads of school, student welfare coordinators and psychologists may best conduct some meetings.

## When to seek additional help outside the school

In a small number of cases, parents who are behaving irrationally will continue to talk around and around in circles in a bewildering way or refuse to commit themselves, despite their participation in what seems to be an emerging or clear plan or set of 'agreed' goals. They may indicate that they don't wish to respect or abide by usual school, education department or other education authorities' procedures or protocols. They may make unreasonable and unworkable demands, for example demanding that certain staff or teachers are not to speak to their child at school.

In a small number of cases, principals may need to outline very clear parameters that indicate how the school is prepared to support the child and the ways in which the parent can interact and communicate with the school. It is important to always emphasise that the school is acting in the best interests of the child along with the wellbeing of the school community. The parameters that might be set by the principal may state for instance, when a parent may or may not enter a classroom or the school, and require all meetings to be by appointment.

In extreme cases principals can consult with the district, regional or central office or other governing authority for further advice on addressing parents' concerns and complaints effectively. In addition, consult policy and guidelines that your education department or governing authority may provide, such as the guidance provided by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *'Addressing parent concerns and complaints effectively: policy and guides'*, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/pcschoolinformation.htm> or in South Australia the resource pack for managing complaints and challenging situations <http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/RespondingtoConcerns.pdf>

## Caution regarding a genuine concern by a parent

All valid parent concerns should 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 are usually well placed to assist.



## Strategies to consider when working with a parent who is behaving irrationally

### Preparation and planning

- **Know the person's background, if possible.** Is this person usually irrational about a range of matters or is it confined to a specific issue? Where possible, enquire about the parent with staff members who have had previous contact, with the intention of learning about issues that have triggered an irrational response from this parent. Understanding as much as possible about the parent, prior to the meeting, may help you to establish some common ground.
- **Gain the facts prior to the meeting** by speaking to relevant teachers and students.
- **Meet the parent with another staff member.** If you have concerns about the likely success of a meeting, ask another staff member to be present or request support from someone who has experience in handling difficult situations.
- **Break the meeting into two parts.** Indicate to the parent over the phone or when seeing them at school that the first meeting will enable you both to identify and clarify the main issues or concerns; while the next meeting will enable you to plan any actions or changes that may need to be implemented.
- **Invite the more rational parent or relative to attend the meeting.** Explain the goals of the two meetings to all present and enlist the support of the other more rational parent, relative or family friend, by suggesting they help keep the meeting solution focused and on track.
- **Senior school staff should discuss the need for a whole-school briefing.** Whole-school briefings and management plans provide information to all staff about possible triggers to avoid and strategies that might assist and support the child and parent to help avoid further upsets or incidents.

### Productive approaches when meeting

- **Try to relax the parent.** Meet the parent in a warm and welcoming manner. Ensure you know their full name, shake their hand (unless there is a religious or cultural reason not to) and indicate that you wish to hear the parent's concerns. If the parent is distressed or upset, acknowledge that you can see the issue is upsetting and agree that it is important to identify the concerns and work through the issues. If they are angry, thank them for sharing their concerns with you and tell them you understand that the issue needs to be resolved.
- **Encourage the parent to focus on what they want.** Very often an irrational parent has not thought about what they want, just what they don't want. Ask the parent, 'What would you like to see happen? What would you like to be different for your child? What would you like us to do differently?' This is often a productive way to direct discussion.
- **Avoid arguing over things that don't really matter.** Use a conciliatory approach and draw upon additional relevant information, factual information and evidence-based procedures, school or department policies and values-based programs to help shape the way forward or to help resolve an issue that is hindering progress.
- **Avoid defensive responses where you feel you have to justify all your actions.** Try to model an open and solution-focused approach. Look for physical signs that the parent may be relaxing a little, such as shoulders dropping, uncrossed arms, slower and clearer speech or tone of voice. Model this non-verbal behaviour to the parent. Indicate that you are flexible and open



to their thinking. Refer to the Psych4Schools document, *'Negotiation and assertive techniques with parents'*, and use suggested guiding principles and objective criteria in forming decisions and suggestions.

- **Listen for thinking errors.** 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), without considering more likely positive possibilities.'
- **Use written words, as spoken words may not work alone.** Use dot points or write two or three words on a sheet of paper for the parent to see, to help 'ground' the parent, to assist them to think about or see the situation more clearly, and to demonstrate that you are action- or solution-orientated.
- **Set very clear goals.** People who behave irrationally tend to think that you are 'all talk'. Record two or three actions to demonstrate your commitment to common goals. Ensure the goals are carefully directed to meeting the needs of the child or the area of conflict. Consider recording written minutes, listing the goals and actions set at the meeting.
- **Be very careful about your use of language.** The parent who is behaving irrationally may not 'hear' everything you say, instead focussing on certain words. Be very careful about using words that may be misinterpreted out of context. For example, the word 'bitchy', to describe the behaviour of a group of girls may be turned against you with the accusation, 'You said my daughter is a bitch. I heard you.' Terms or labels such as, 'unsafe', as in 'The child was demonstrating unsafe behaviours', may be used against you with an accusation that 'You said my child was 'unsafe' at school.'
- **Use skills that will 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 what the school is planning to do and suggest to parents what they might do.

### Short breaks or pauses to assist thinking

- **Provide opportunities for time away** 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 offer to make coffee for you both. The break can also provide you with additional think-time.
- **Pause or break frequently and redirect if moving away from set goals.** Say, for example, 'I think we need to stop here for a minute. Before we go on, we need to clarify how to best assist your daughter in these situations.'
- **Identify where communication breakdown has occurred.** Avoid blaming; rather, acknowledge the breakdown in communication. Paraphrase and summarise to recap and focus on the issue or concern.



## Try to establish common ground

### If the parent is able to calm down and talk rationally with you:

- **Show how their child is being supported.** Use an individual learning plan, work samples, diagrams or one-page management plans. If possible, indicate areas showing improvement.
- **Show the parent the common ground.** It is often very difficult for the parent to find common ground. Take them through the main factual points. Draft up a plan of action on paper in front of the parent to highlight and show the areas of common agreement.
- **Focus on the child's best interests.** It may mitigate the situation if you encourage the parent to clearly focus on what all parties can do to directly serve their child's best interests, stressing the importance of being in partnership with the school to assist the child. When such parents feel they have participated in developing a clear plan to address their concerns and to benefit their child, they are likely to become more cooperative.
- **Reconvene with further support** if the meeting is unproductive. Brief the principal, deputy or assistant principal, curriculum specialist or other professional in preparation for the next meeting.
- **Avoid being defensive.** Although it is natural to feel unsettled or hurt and to want to be defensive, this is not productive and is likely to escalate the antagonism.
- **Ensure agreed school action plans are implemented.**

### If the parent is behaving highly irrationally:

- **Use a calm steady voice.**
- **Give an indication that you've heard their point.** Summarising what the parent is saying to you can do this. For example 'You're very upset because you think I've acted unfairly in sending William to detention. I appreciate that this was unexpected and it upset you.'
- **Ask for the reasoning or thinking behind a statement,** decision or position of the parent if they are not thinking fairly and logically or you are 'lost' by their thinking.
- **Pre-empt or carefully interrupt** before the parent 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....'
- **Delay any discussion of the problem until the parent has calmed down,** as anger can reduce rational thinking and problem-solving behaviour. When the person is calm, there is some hope that they will listen to your point of view and respond reasonably. This may mean the meeting will need to end and be rescheduled when the parent is calm. See the Psych4Schools ebooklet, '*Working with parents who are angry*' for a range of strategies for dealing with anger when it becomes available on the website.

## Threats to involve third parties

- **If the parent threatens to go to the police or similar body about a trivial matter,** stop the meeting and ask for the principal or deputy or assistant principal to be present. If you are very clear about the sequence of events and what any teachers or students have observed (witnessed), and if there is no apparent serious harm or injury to the child, then, with other



senior staff present, carefully take the parents through what has happened. Indicate that there will be appropriate follow-up with all concerned and further meetings with students involved to work towards repairing or redressing the situation.

- **If the school has not yet had time to properly investigate what has occurred**, indicate that the school will be following up at the first available opportunity; appropriate components of the school, classroom or student behaviour management plan will be invoked; and the parents will be invited to another meeting within the next 24 to 48 hours. Indicate that at this second meeting you will be better placed to discuss the involvement of a third party such as police or another agency. Suggest that the parents may wish to bring an advocate so matters can be clearly addressed.
- **Let parents know there are other avenues they may wish to explore** within the school, for example, meeting with school psychologists or social workers to help resolve the issue, or outside the school such as district, regional or central office staff of the education department or other governing authority.
- **If the parent threatens to take you to a court**, the education department or other authority, the School Board of Education, or the Human Rights Commission:
  - avoid panicking
  - inform your principal (or the principal may wish to consult a senior colleague)
  - have the school call in an objective professional to assist or to consult
  - inform the appropriate senior officer on the school board or education department
  - 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
  - maintain communication and consultation with your employer/education department or governing body and cooperate with statutory bodies if they become involved.

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