

3 Skills to Manage Difficult Conversations with Parents

Next time you find yourself face-to-face with an emotional or angry parent, use these 3 skills to ensure the best result for yourself, the parent, and the student.

1. Start with Heart: The first thing people look for in a crucial conversation is whether the other person is a friend or a foe. If people mistrust your motives, it doesn't matter what you say—they simply won't hear it. So, before you engage, get your heart right—check your motives. Ask yourself: "What is it that I really want long-term for myself, for the parent and student, and for our relationship?" Ensure your motives are both positive and also include the parent's perspective.

2. Fix Misunderstandings: We enter every conversation with assumptions—a story we tell ourselves about the situation. These assumptions are often negative. Parents usually come into the conversation with limited information from a child who wants to paint him or herself in the best light. And when information is missing, we tend to imagine the worst. As a result, parents usually see the educator as a villain in this story.

So, listen for misunderstandings and correct them with a contrasting statement—explain what you *don't* mean, followed by what you *do* mean. (e.g. "I don't think your child is lazy. I do want to find a way to help him succeed.") When trust is low, keep coming back to explain your motives—to reiterate that you want what the parent wants. Once you established enough trust to allow for honest, frank dialogue, move to facts.

3. Move to the Facts: The goal of dialogue is for both parents and educators to put information into a shared pool of meaning in order to find a solution. When moving to the facts—what really happened and why—you'll likely have to restate and clarify your motives again and again. Each time the parent takes offense or appears to feel unsafe, return to your shared goals and explain that you're a friend, not a foe.

These skills can help you turn disagreements into productive dialogue; to work through misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and strong attitudes; and to find common goals so you can focus on the facts and create solutions.

To learn more tips for holding crucial conversations visit crucialskills.com