

WORK & FAMILY

When You Think Your Child's Teacher Is a Bad Fit

Parents must decide whether to stay on the sidelines or intervene, with both options carrying some risk



ILLUSTRATION: GWENDA KAZCOR

By Sue Shellenbarger

Sept. 16, 2019 5:30 am ET

As millions of young children settle into a new year in elementary school, many parents are wondering nervously: Is the new teacher a good fit?

Reading emotional signals from the under-10 set isn't easy. Is that stomachache that's bothering your child caused by the new teacher? Is classroom anxiety the reason she's sad, tense or bouncing off the walls?

No one wants to be that helicopter parent who swoops in and rescues a youngster from any adversity. But no parent wants to stand by while a child suffers harm because of a bad teacher, either. The best path for parents requires patience, and the communication skills needed to figure out what's actually happening in the classroom and work with the teacher to solve problems.

Riding out a year with a stressful teacher can sometimes help a child learn to deal with challenges. Carol Lloyd was worried when her daughter, Tallulah, was assigned an elementary

school teacher several years ago with a reputation for yelling and humiliating students. She decided not to intervene. “You want your kids to be resilient and good problem-solvers, and to know they can survive in difficult situations,” Ms. Lloyd says.

She encouraged Tallulah to try to get along with the teacher and do the best work she could, and she survived the year unharmed. Some classmates weren’t so lucky. One developed a math phobia and needed tutoring help after the teacher criticized her harshly for making mistakes, says Ms. Lloyd, editorial director of GreatSchools in Oakland, Calif., a nonprofit provider of school ratings and other resources for parents.

It’s important to act, however, if a parent sees that a child is at risk of emotional damage.

Clinical psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore counseled a parent whose son was getting scolded a lot by a new teacher, even though he hadn’t had trouble before. The mother asked for a meeting, but it was a disaster. In the child’s presence, she says the teacher ranted on and on about what a terrible person he was and kept going even after he burst into tears, leaving the mother unnerved. She took the problem to the principal, who moved her son to a different class.

Regardless of the cause, the teacher’s classroom wasn’t emotionally safe, says Dr. Kennedy-Moore, author of “Kid Confidence.” She adds, “She was blind to the child’s pain.”

In most cases, Dr. Kennedy-Moore advises against rushing to change a child’s classroom. “Be very careful about removing a child from a situation, because the message you’re giving a child is, ‘This is too hard for you to deal with. You can’t handle it,’ ” Dr. Kennedy-Moore says. “In life, we’re going to have to deal with all kinds of people, and children need to know that.”

Principals invest a lot of time behind the scenes matching students with teachers and trying to create balanced classes, says Nora Carr, a Greensboro, N.C., school administrator. Many schools face a teacher shortage, giving administrators less flexibility in resolving staffing problems.

Teachers’ reputations can be misleading. Amy Behrens tells of one teacher rumored to be both the best and worst teacher ever. “He works well with kids who can handle his brusque manner and intensive work. But for kids who get hurt by a brusque manner and a little sarcasm, he doesn’t work so well,” says Ms. Behrens, a Newton, Mass., parent coach and educator.

And first impressions aren’t always accurate. When Ryan Darcy first met one of his son’s past teachers, she seemed very laid-back. He wasn’t sure she’d be a good fit for his son, who is energetic and eager to learn. He soon realized she was great with students, however, and his son thrived in her class, says Mr. Darcy of Coventry, Conn.

If your child comes home upset or scared, ask what he’s feeling, Ms. Behrens says. Try to figure out exactly what upset him: Was it the teacher’s words, actions or facial expressions? And what was happening in the classroom before that? “Your child may have just given you the punchline,



Ryan Darcy wondered at first whether a teacher at his oldest son's school would be a good fit, but soon saw that she was great with children. Here he sits with his wife, Lindsay Darcy, and sons, left to right: Austin, 3; Graham, 5; and Nolan, 8. PHOTO: DARCY FAMILY

and not the 12 things that led up to that,” Dr. Kennedy-Moore says.

Consider the possibility that your child is misunderstanding the teacher—mistaking jokes for ridicule, or confusing encouragement to not give up on getting the answer independently with an unwillingness to help.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How would you act if your child had a teacher you don't love? Join the conversation below.

A
diffic
ult
teach
er
can

provide an opportunity to help your child internalize your family's values and standards. If your child struggles with a teacher who insists on perfect work, explain why you think perfectionism isn't healthy, Dr. Kennedy-Moore says. Then, offer a different viewpoint, like encouraging your child not to let a fear of mistakes get in the way of his excitement about learning.

If your child's problems persist for more than a few days, ask the teacher for a meeting. Start the conversation on an upbeat note, by saying something positive about the class or acknowledging that the beginning of the year can be hectic. Then, describe in concrete detail the problems you're seeing at home and trace possible causes.

Consider acknowledging, “I wasn't there, so I don't know exactly what happened, but this is what I heard,” Dr. Kennedy-Moore says. Aim to understand the teacher's goals and to work together.

If your efforts with the teacher fail and you escalate the problem to the principal, be prepared to calmly describe specific teacher behaviors and the impact on students, Dr. Carr says.

If you're worried about a difficult teacher's impact on future classes, consider telling the principal what you've observed after the school year is over and asking if training or coaching might be available, Ms. Behrens says.



Oscar Rosenberg of Miami says taking a respectful approach paid off when asking his son's teachers for help. Shown here with his wife, Michelle Zambrana, and Abe, 3. PHOTO: OSCAR ROSENBERG

Not all parent-teacher issues are personality-driven. Oscar Rosenberg hesitated to complain to the teacher when his 4-year-old son, Abe, started coming home from preschool with his lunch untouched. "I didn't want to be just another one of those parents who complain or whine," he says. But he also wanted Abe to develop healthy eating habits, so he asked for a meeting.

He began on a positive note, saying he knows children are easily distracted in a cafeteria with other students. He asked questions to understand the staffing challenges and time pressure the teachers faced, then described his concern. Soon, his son started coming home with his lunch

mostly eaten, says Mr. Rosenberg, an assistant organizer for Miami Dads, a South Florida support and networking group. “Being kinder to the teacher gave us an edge,” he says.

If Your Child Dislikes a New Teacher

DO

- * Give the teacher a chance to earn your trust by attending open houses and reading handouts.
- * Ask your child in detail about specific behavior by the teacher that upset her.
- * Try to understand the teacher’s challenges and goals before making a judgment.
- * Hold open the possibility of working with the teacher to solve any problem.
- * Set an example of proactive, cooperative behavior.

DON’T

- * Believe everything you hear about a teacher.
- * Complain about the teacher in your child’s presence.
- * Go public with criticism of a teacher via gossip or social media.
- * Go over a teacher’s head to the principal right away.
- * Get angry or threaten a teacher or school official.

Write to Sue Shellenbarger at sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com

MORE WORK & FAMILY

- Find Your Zen, Then Crush Your Job Interview **October 21, 2019**
- You Can Overcome a Long Gap in Your Résumé **October 14, 2019**
- The Dangers of Hiring for Cultural Fit **September 23, 2019**
- Your Expense Report Is a Window Into Your Soul **September 9, 2019**
- Why We Should Teach Kids to Call the Robot ‘It’ **August 26, 2019**

