



# Managing Difficult Conversations

## Module Two - Difficult Conversations with Parents

### Introduction

During this module we will explore:

- the drivers that cause parents to become frustrated
- how we can see school issues from the perspective of the parent
- what we can do to create a positive, welcoming, and inclusive environment that caters for the needs of parents as well as our students.

### Working with parents

#### Our mindset for working with parents

We bring our own mindset to any conversation. Without realising it, we might bring to our meetings with parents our ideas of 'what needs to be done,' what 'good parenting' is, or what a parent needs to do to resolve an issue. We need to reframe this with three simple statements that can change the tone and nature of any conversations with parents we might have.

#### **1. Parents trust us with the most precious thing in their life – their child.**

Parents will stop at nothing to ensure that their child is given the very best life chances that they are able to provide; and school is just one tool for providing those life chances. They may make choices that don't match our perception of how to do this, but, in their minds, they are loving and caring parents.

#### **2. To educate the whole child we need to work in partnership with the parents.**

Having parents work with us will do more to support the whole child than having them work against us. This is why it is so important to manage our conversations with parents to bring about the win we all want for the child.

#### **3. The vast majority of parents want the very best for their children.**

We need to start our conversations with the premise that all parents want the very best for their kids and then hold this belief until we are proved wrong. This colours the way we frame and structure any conversation we have with parents.



*Consider this scenario:*

*A parent feels that they are being supportive of the school by 'grounding' their child for a month following an incident in school. You know that they will not stick to this and, even if they did, it would be an inappropriate sanction. How can you keep the parent onside but change the sanction?*

You might thank the parent for their support and highlight that all sanctions should be carried through. You could then give them a couple of choices:

- i. ground the child for the weekend or
- ii. remove access to computer, X Box or whatever for a few days as a more appropriate sanction.

In order to establish this positive professional partnership, the first thing we need to do is build credibility with our parents since they are going to hand across their most treasured possession to us.

## Building credibility

Just as you wouldn't hand your car to someone who couldn't drive, you wouldn't expect a parent to hand a child across to someone whom they didn't trust to care for their child and their child's learning. In our conversations with parents, we need to quickly establish our professional credibility. Here are some effective strategies to build your credibility with your parent community:

### **1. Everybody wants to associate with a winner.**

We need to present a professional, calm and knowledgeable face to our parent community at all times.

### **2. Perception can be more powerful than reality.**

How we are perceived by our parents and pupils can be far more influential than how we actually are, so make sure you take time to influence parental perceptions of you.

### **3. We care deeply about our students, and we value the involvement of their parents.**

In order for us to be seen as a caring profession that wants to involve parents in a learning partnership, we must be seen to do all the things that support this and avoid actions that act as barriers to effective partnership working.

*Consider this scenario:*

*It is way beyond the end of the school day and a parent arrives at school reception and demands to see you. What do you do?*

We want to show we care and present a professional persona, but we also need to establish professional boundaries. You might try this: Agree to talk with the parent for five minutes (to find out what the problem is, check it isn't a safeguarding issue and identify who the best person is to deal with the problem). Redirect the parent to make a longer appointment with the correct person when school opens tomorrow.



Despite our best efforts, we will still be faced with difficult conversations with parents from time to time. So, what can we do?

### Focus on the future

Often, parents are concerned about a situation that we know very little about. Here, focus on the future and what you know about their child.

For example, *“Mr. Whyte, sadly none of us saw what happened outside the shops yesterday. Let’s work together to be sure that a situation like this one doesn’t happen in the future.”*

#### Consider this scenario:

*A parent has phoned to complain about a fight that broke out on the school bus yesterday evening. You know nothing about the incident. What do you do?*

You might start the conversation by giving the parent time and space: *“Please tell me your view of what happened”* and then focus on the future, *“Thank you for sharing that with me. I will now investigate this and call you back to talk about how we can work together to resolve this.”*

### Listen more and talk less

We are also used to providing solutions to problems, giving advice and guiding learners towards the right answers. Often, parents just need someone to listen. A caring face and a listening ear can lessen the severity of another person’s concerns.

For example, (at the start of a face-to-face meeting with a parent) *“You seem really upset about something this morning. Why don’t you tell me about it and then we can talk about how we might work together to move things forward.”*

### Use the telephone proactively, not reactively

If there is a problem and we wait for the phone to ring, we are allowing a potentially difficult situation to get worse. Positive telephone calls build credibility because it is communicating that we are in charge of the situation, we know what is going on and we are working with the parent to deal with it.

### Working with angry parents

A constructive conversation is made up of a talker and listener and these two roles swap repeatedly. However, in an argument there are often two talkers and no listeners! So, to work through a difficult conversation with an angry parent, you could try these strategies:



### 1. Use active listening

Make eye contact and say, *"I understand what you're saying,"* or *"I understand that you feel such and such."* This helps calm the other person down and helps clarify misunderstanding, often laying the groundwork for them to listen to you after they have calmed down.

### 2. Choose non-attacking words and use a polite tone

Our choice of words is important. Consider the difference *between "That's not reasonable, you are being unfair"* and *"Before we judge, let's consider each point in the argument."*

For a good sentence starter, you might try *"I need ...," "Tell me ...," "Help me ..."* Or the question *"What can we do to help?"*. Remember the importance of tone of voice and body language that we explored in Module 1.

### 3. Do not let the argument expand!

In our difficult conversations with parents, it can be tempting for either party to mention old issues from previous disputes. We want to avoid the conversation expanding beyond the original purpose. If this happens, use the 'broken record technique' - repeatedly, politely going back to the focus of the conversation. *"We are here today to talk about XYZ."*

#### The 'may be ... and' statement

A good technique here is to use a 'may be ... and' statement.

For example, during a conversation about a bullying incident, a parent adds the statement *"...and I keep phoning in to talk to Miss Jones and she never returns my calls. That woman is a waste of space!"* Here, the may be ... and statement could go like this *"that may be, and today we're here to talk about your child's bullying of child X. Let's focus on that first."*

Likewise, if a person verbally attacks you, resist the temptation to stop and defend yourself. Once you let yourself get drawn into an enlarged discussion or put on the defensive, you have lost the ability to manage and resolve the conversation.

#### Scenario - How would you respond to this?

*During a phone call with an angry parent, they state, "I don't know why I'm wasting my time talking to you, you won't do anything. The last headteacher was much better. You are useless."*

It is important here to redirect the conversation but, in this context, perhaps 'may be ... and' doesn't work so well. You could say, *"I'm here to help. Let's talk about how we can work together to move this forward."*

Despite what happens when confronting an angry parent, it's important to remember that if someone's anger seems to be threatening or getting out of control, the most prudent decision you can make is to end the conversation and never be afraid to do this. You might say, *"I can see that you are extremely upset. I want to help, but not in this way,"* or *"I am unable to help you when you shout at me"* or *"I appreciate how strongly you feel about this, so I will find someone else who is better able to help you."*

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Unless you find yourself in a vulnerable or dangerous situation, it is always best to let the angry parent talk. A good phrase to use is *"I'm sorry that happened."* This works because you're not admitting guilt and you're not suggesting any change in plan. Then, follow this up with an action sentence such as *"How can we work together to make sure this doesn't happen again?"*

## Partnerships make success

Teachers and parents in partnership make successful students!

Not all conversations with parents need to be difficult. Once we remember that the successful learning and wellbeing of our pupils will only happen if there is a successful partnership with our parents, we have taken the first steps to moving things forward.

As our relationships with parents progress and develop into positive partnerships, then it is time to invest in building this relationship further by:

- Sharing success – tell parents when things go well, as well as when things don't.
- Inviting parents into school regularly.
- Encouraging parents to be interested in their child's learning.
- Showing them the value of what you do.

This way, their conversations may well stop being 'difficult' as parents become true partners in their children's learning.

## Summary

In this module we have looked at our mindset when working with parents and given four simple statements that can change the tone and nature of any conversations we have with parents. We covered strategies for building credibility with your parent community and we also looked at ways to work with angry parents. Finally, we looked at what you can do to invest in building parental relationships. In the next module, we will cover difficult conversations with staff.

You have completed module two. Simply close this window to save your progress and click 'Questionnaire 2' to complete the accompanying questionnaire.