

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH CHALLENGING PARENTS

*Kathy Flores, M.Ed.
Behavior Specialist
San Lorenzo Unified School District*

We have all felt the stress and frustration of being in meetings with parents who are challenging to work with...parents who are angry, hostile and defensive. While there is no magic bullet for dealing with such people, there are effective strategies and approaches that can be used which have proven effective with such parents. Getting your team on-board with these approaches will increase your chances of having civil and productive meetings, potentially improve strained working relations with these parents, and ultimately benefit the student as well.

The points that follow highlight the main considerations to be aware of:

1. Start out the meeting on a positive note – have each team member communicate something positive about the child, even if it's only to emphasize that everyone present likes and cares about that child, and is there in the child's best interest to address the identified problems.
2. Avoid making the child the problem (separate the behaviors from the child). Make it clear that the child is not the problem – the problem is the problem. Clarify that the team's goal is to creatively address the problem together.
3. Identify each side's interests (concerns, needs, fears, and desires) – start with the parents' interests and write them down on chart paper.
4. Brainstorm and explore options for meeting those interests – write down ideas.
5. Be aware of legitimate class and cultural differences which can contribute to differences in perspective and point of view, and which may potentially contribute to conflicts and misunderstandings.
6. Be acutely aware of legitimate limitations imposed by low socioeconomic status (transportation or childcare issues, for example). Avoid being judgmental and imposing your own class or cultural norms on another family's experience.
7. Suspend reactivity:
 - Avoid lashing back in anger or frustration
 - Avoid automatically giving in if you do not agree

8. Maintain mental balance and focus and a calm, friendly, professional demeanor (step outside yourself, “go to the balcony” and see the scene in a detached way).
9. Diffuse negative emotions:
 - Listen without judgment
 - Remain calm and composed
 - Restate their concerns
 - Acknowledge their feelings and the points they have made
 - Try to find points to agree on
 - Show them respect (even if it is not being shown to you)
 - Don't get drawn into an argument or become adversarial
10. Use good communication skills:
 - Seek first to understand – probe to find out what lies behind their point of view (“Tell me more. Please help me understand why you want that.”)
 - Use words that communicate your desire to solve the problem as a team (for example “partnership,” “team,” etc).
 - Reach, don't preach. Be willing to learn from the parents. Don't assume or communicate that you know it all and are there to educate them.
 - Listen more than you talk.
 - As much as possible, try to keep the tone positive and proactive.
11. Engage in joint-problem solving (“soft on the people, hard on the problem”).
 - a. Be willing to step out of your own comfort zone and do what needs to be done for the good of the child.
 - b. Be open to new ideas and new ways of looking at a child or situation.
 - c. Stay focused on the child's strengths as a way to solve the problems.
 - d. Avoid pathologizing or judging either the child or the family.
12. Find a way to build a bridge between their interests and yours to create a mutually satisfying solution or plan.

SOME CHALLENGING SCENARIOS WITH PARENTS

1. An African American father of a hyperactive 8 year old boy with mild learning disabilities shows up for an IEP meeting. He is slumped over in his chair and fails to make eye contact with the staff present, communicating withdrawal and defensiveness. He is clearly angry and discouraged with his son's behavior and academic struggles, and with repeatedly being called to come to the school to discuss these problems. He expresses resistance to suggestions that a positive incentive system be implemented to acknowledge his son's efforts to improve, saying that the boy should do what adults tell him to do and shouldn't need to be rewarded for doing what he should be doing. What are some important things to know about this parent's cultural norms? What might be some effective ways of addressing his concerns?

2. An Anglo American set of parents are meeting with school staff to discuss their son's behavior. The boy is 10 years old and extremely hyperactive and impulsive. The parents are resistant to the notion that their child may be ADHD, and become very angry when a staff person suggests that they should take him to a doctor for a diagnosis. When the issue of medication is brought up, the parents become even more upset, saying, "Everybody just wants to put our kid on drugs to make their lives easier!" How can these parents concerns be acknowledged? What can be said to open pathways of communication?

3. A Latino mother comes to a meeting at the teacher's request with her 9 year old daughter and 3 year old son to discuss concerns about the girl's academic progress and lack of homework completion. The mother speaks only Spanish, and since the teacher has not arranged for a translator, the teacher suggests that the girl act as translator for her mother. There is considerable tension on the part of the girl and her mother, but the girl obediently complies. What mistakes were made in this situation? What would it help the teacher to know about the girl's home situation and the family's cultural norms? How could the teacher demonstrate sensitivity to the girl and her mother in this meeting?

4. A Vietnamese mother with 4 young children comes to a meeting at the school at the request of the principal and 2 of the children's teachers. They confront the mother about small bruises and other marks on the children's arms, legs and foreheads. They are prepared to make a CPS report. The mother is distraught, and the children deny any abuse. What would it help to know about this family's culture before making assumptions of abuse? How could this situation be handled in a more culturally sensitive way?

5. A set of parents show up with their 9 year old son for a meeting with their son's teacher to discuss his school behavior and academic performance. The teacher immediately begins to tell the parents about all the things that their son does wrong. The parents become visibly defensive and frustrated. Their response is to criticize the teacher's teaching techniques and classroom management. The teacher counters with a laundry list of the things that she thinks the parents should be doing at home to improve the situation. The parents begin to raise their voices in anger. The boy looks like he wishes he could disappear.
How could have the teacher started the meeting in order to ensure that it would be more positive and productive? How could she have responded to any critical comments? How could she include the boy in the meeting in a productive way?

TIPS FOR DEALING SUCCESSFULLY WITH PARENTS

1. Seek first to understand.
2. Empathize.
3. Start with something positive.
4. Show you like their kid.
5. Work to develop a partnership.
6. Reach, don't preach.
7. Be aware of and respect cultural differences.
8. Other issues:
 - The Sticky, Tricky Issue of Meds
 - Discipline Practices
 - Lack of Follow-through
 - The Overwhelmed Parent(s)
 - The Pushy Parent(s)
 - The Negative Parent(s)