

Complex Interactions with Parents: Can We Even Talk to Each Other?

Horizon School Division Professional Development Day

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Presented by Alyson Worrall, PhD (Educ), R. Psych.

Step 1: Don't Catch the Red!

- Resist the urge to defend (fight) or go passive (freeze or flee).
- Turn down (if you can, turn off) your own alarm system (stress reaction).
- Stay in your window of tolerance



Ways to Do This:

- ☐ Drop your shoulders and take a slow breath in
- ☐ Avoid crossing your arms
- ☐ Utilize self-talk to remind yourself that you are not in danger:
 - *I am safe. This person is just venting with words.*
 - *This might be scary, but I can handle it. I've handled worse.*
 - *It's my job to stay calm and listen*
- ☐ Offer an immediate appreciation/warm gesture to the person
 - *I'm glad to see you.*
 - *I appreciate the time you have taken to meet with me.*

Step 2: Listen and Learn!

- Collect information. Do not move into problem-solving mode.
- Allow the person to get everything out on the table (exhaust the laundry list!)



Ways to Do this:

- ☐ Use an open probe such as:
 - *What would you like to tell me?*
 - *Tell me what you are concerned about.*
 - *I am interested; Please tell me what you would like me to know about your concern*
- ☐ When there is silence, make sure the person has finished venting. Ask:
 - *Is there anything else you'd like me to know about x?*
 - *Do you have any other concerns?*

Silence does not mean it is your turn to talk or to launch into problem-solving. Remain curious and allow the person to express everything they believe you need to know about the issue.

USEFUL TIPS!

- ✓ Do not interrupt the speaker. You will get your turn to talk in step 4.
- ✓ Look interested when the person is sharing and maintain open body language.
- ✓ Take very brief notes indicating to the person that you want to be sure not to miss anything later.
- ✓ Show appreciation for the person sharing their concerns. E.g., *Thank you for telling me about this. I appreciate your taking the time to help me understand the situation.*

CAUTION: You are not required to tolerate verbal abuse. If the person is being abusive, you have the right to end the interview and suggest rescheduling for another time. Get someone else involved (e.g., refer the person to your administration).

If during the venting, the person is not being verbally abusive but seems to be attacking you, use the fogging technique to deflect the attack and indicate that you are still listening. The fogging technique requires you to find a grain of truth in what is being said and to acknowledge it. Then, stop talking! Do not move into defensive mode!

Example:

Parent: My child says they can't understand anything you say because you talk too fast and don't allow enough time for them to think!

Possible Response: Yes, I do talk fast sometimes. Thanks for letting me know how it affects your child.

Step 3: Repeat Back, Often!



Ways to Show You Are Listening (Paraphrasing)

- ☐ If I am hearing you correctly, you are telling me that _____
- ☐ What you really want me to know is _____
- ☐ Two of the issues you are telling me about are ___ and ___.
Am I getting that right?
- ☐ You've shared a lot of information with me. I understand that you are concerned about _____

Step 4: Power Sharing: Ask!

- Ask before you share your point of view. The person may not want to hear it. Expressing their concerns and being heard might be all they wanted.
- Invite problem solving. What would be a good way for the two of you to work together to resolve their concerns.
- Brainstorm solutions. Try to get at least three on the table.
- Express appreciation that the person is working to help solve the problem.



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Solutions need to be ones where both parties gain. Sometimes, a proposed solutions cannot work within the confines of the institution. They should also be specific as to who will do what, when it will be done, how long it will be done for, who else will provide support to enact the solution, and so on. Make sure the plan is written down. It is easy for you to forget what you agreed to, but be assured the parent won't forget!

Note: If the person is not willing to engage in problem-solving or keeps interrupting when you are sharing your point of view, then it is possible all they wanted was to be heard. You can politely end the conversation and thank them for making you aware of their concerns. **Remember, you do not have to stay in the room with a person who is angry and/or you do not feel safe!**

Step 5: Leave on a Good Note!

Suggested parting statements:

- *I appreciate your help in working to solve this issue for your child's benefit.*
- *I am glad that you felt able to be honest about your concerns and worked with me to resolve them.*
- *Thank you for the time you took to meet with me today and to express your concerns.*



Once the encounter is finished, take some time to reflect on your experience. Focus on the positives and what you did well. Later, you can analyze the encounter to determine what you could do better or even more smoothly. It can also be useful to debrief the session with another person. However, in doing so, keep the person's dignity intact and do not directly identify them. For example, a debriefing might look something like this:

Yesterday, I had a difficult encounter with the parent of one of my students. I felt intimidated and worked really hard to stay grounded. It was hard to listen to the laundry list of concerns they had regarding my work, but I kept reminding myself that I was doing my best and they were focused on the welfare of their child. Eventually, we came to an agreement on what to do that we could both feel good about. It was really emotionally draining to work with this parent. However, I think I have a better understanding of their point of view now

Step 6: Follow Up!

After a difficult encounter, it is natural to want to put it behind you. However, contacting the parent a week or so after the event to see if the solution is working or to ask for feedback on how they see the situation now signals to the parent that you took them seriously, listened carefully, and are committed to working with them for the benefit of their child. It also can forestall future difficult encounters!