



## NCHES State Coordinator Working with Parents Tip Sheet

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### Tips for Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution between Parents and Schools

#### Prior to conflict: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

- Work to establish positive, collaborative relationships from the beginning.
- TRAIN – local liaisons, advocates, support staff, include trauma-informed care

#### When conflict occurs:

- **Extend the benefit of the doubt** to the other person, whenever possible. This includes assuming the best of the other person (that both people want the student to do well and are willing to do their best to make this happen).
- **Gather all information** needed before coming to a conclusion. A single account of an issue (from the teacher, child, parent, etc.) may not convey the whole story. Speak with all relevant players to ensure a balanced and full understanding of the issue.
- **Respond to issues promptly.** Having the parent feel ignored may heighten frustration.
- Prior to a meeting, **jot down notes to keep you focused** on your main concerns to keep the meeting on track and issue-oriented.
- **Listen, listen, listen.** Sometimes a parent/teacher just wants to be heard. The act of listening in an engaged fashion without interrupting may be enough to diffuse emotion and de-escalate conflict. Use active listening skills and reflect the parent’s emotions. E.g., “I’ll bet that is frustrating for you...” or “That must be difficult for your family...”
- **Remain calm.** Do everything in your power to remain calm and not to take comments from a parent/teacher personally. Returning high emotion for high emotion will escalate conflict. Remaining cool-headed and issue-oriented will help diffuse emotion and conflict.
- **Empathize.** Understand that parents behaving in an aggressive or difficult manner often do so because of stresses and struggles with which they are dealing outside of their child’s school. Make every effort to understand the parent’s concerns and validate these concerns, when possible.
- **Establish common ground**, which may include:
  - An interest in seeing the student succeed
  - Areas/points on which you agree and can work together
- **Emphasize positives first:**
  - Affirm the child and parent when possible (the parent’s concern for his/her child, the parent’s willingness to invest in the success of his/her child, things the child does well, etc.). Remember that the parent likely is trying to advocate for the child, but may not know exactly how to do this.
  - Affirm the importance of the parent’s role in his/her child’s education.
- **Use effective communication** strategies:
  - Mind body language and tone. Communication often is described as 10% what is said and 90% *how* it is said.

- Use please, thank you, and you're welcome! 😊
- Speak in a respectful manner, even if the other person is not doing the same.
- Use "I" statements to express concerns.
- Apologize, if needed. This can take the form of humbly admitting a misstep or, at the very least, stating, "I'm sorry this happened. I'll do everything I can to help find a solution to the issue we're facing."
- Offer mutually-beneficial alternatives, when possible. This helps all involved parties to feel like they have ownership in the solution (shared decision making). Demonstrate willingness to compromise, when possible.
- Use questioning techniques to help solve problems. Ask questions such as:
  - "How can I help?"
  - "What do you think would be the best way to resolve the issue?"
  - "How can we work together to fix the problem?"
- **Avoid** "relationship breakers"
  - Crossing your arms or displaying other closed or negative body language
  - Raising your voice
  - Speaking sarcastically
  - Interrupting
- Conclude meetings with a **specific plan for follow-up**/follow-through and future communications.
- **Keep records** of communication (e.g. emails, call logs, correspondence sent to the school/home, etc.)

### If things get abusive...

- Give the other person some space by letting him/her know you'll take a quick walk to allow him/her to gather his/her thoughts and will return to finish the conversation.
- Offer to get the parent something to drink. This may be a welcome courtesy and will provide both parties some space.
- Invite another staff member to participate in meetings where conflict may occur. Ideally, this person should be trained in conflict mediation. "I will return momentarily. I would like our school counselor, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_, to join our meeting."
- Calmly but firmly state, "Please do not speak to me in this manner. I will not speak to you in this manner and ask that you treat me with the same courtesy." If the aggression continues, explain that the conversation will need to be continued when cooler heads can prevail.

