5 Strategies To Help You Work With Difficult Parents
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Being a private school leader is amazing, unrelenting, exhilarating and exhausting. Some parts of our jobs are absolutely fantastic. Like when we get to see the confident 8th Grader (that cried every day in 4th Grade) steal the show as the lead in the Spring Musical. Sometimes, it is just hanging out at recess talking to the kids about the latest video game or Tik Tok video or Netflix show that they are obsessed with. Fantastic!

There are also parts of our job that are less fantastic. Like dealing with difficult parents.

The teachers discuss them, but do everything they can to avoid them. As school leaders, we often cringe when they walk through the front door or they call us on the phone.

To be fair, not every parent is a difficult parent. In fact, the vast majority of our parents are fine, workable or great. It's just that the small percentage of difficult parents take up a disproportionate amount of our time and emotional energy. The good news is that we actually can do something about it. We actually can turn adversaries into partners. Sounds impossible, right? It's not.

It will be hard work, but these strategies will make a difference and the real winners are the students at your school. Less time dealing with difficult parents also means more time for you to spend on the fantastic parts of your job!

5 Strategies To Help You Work With Difficult Parents

1. Understand Why They Are Upset
2. Tear Down The “Wall Of Mutual Distrust”
3. Teach Your Teachers “The 5 C’s”
4. Listen And Then Validate Their Feelings
5. Have Better Parent Meetings

Strategy #1: Understand Why They Are So Upset

Have you ever wondered why some parents get so emotional and so upset? Sometimes it seems that they are disproportionately upset about what seems to you and the teacher to be a small issue. The first step in creating effective relationships with difficult parents is to understand, really understand, why they get so upset about issues involving their children. I strongly believe that there are two big reasons for this:

- They are sending their children and their money to your school.
- Our entire country has become a ratings based service industry and we are providing a service.

What they send
Think about this in terms of what the parents are sending to your school. Parents are sending their children and their money to your school. There is nothing on this planet that they care more about than their children. They also work very hard to earn the money that they pay in tuition dollars. I have three daughters and I get very emotional about my daughters even though they are all adults now. I want them to be emotionally and physically safe, I have made a huge emotional investment in their futures. I also have anxiety about their futures.

We are engaged in high stakes, emotional work. Parents are very emotional and passionate about their children. They also sometimes get emotional about their money and how hard they work for the money that they earn to pay tuition. Sometimes that emotion, passion and anxiety comes out in inappropriate ways from some parents.

Providing a service

This one might sting a little. We are shaping lives and helping children reach their full potential. We are keeping them physically and emotionally safe. We are doing very important work. We are doing exhausting, emotional work. All of that is true. But we are also providing a service.

Most teachers and school leaders do not like to think about our private school in terms of a business, but parents are sending us money and we are providing a service every day. We have become very ratings based in our country. Yelp reviews. Travelocity reviews. Does your Uber driver get 3 stars or 4 stars? In the history of our country, the voice of the consumer has never mattered more than it does today.

It is unreasonable to expect that your parents are going to rate five different services or products per day and turn off that part of their brain when it comes to school. I’m not saying that it’s right. I’m not saying that it doesn’t feel gross sometimes. I’m just saying that it’s true. Parents have very high expectations for the service that we provide. That is understandable. If we live in a society where everything is rated and reviewed, it is understandable that parents are going to let us know (sometimes loudly) when we don’t meet those expectations.

Creating effective relationships with difficult parents is hard work. It becomes a little bit easier to do that work when we understand why they get so upset.

Strategy #2: Tear Down The “Wall Of Mutual Distrust”

I want you to use your imagination. You are in your office at school and you are standing about six feet away from one of your more difficult parents. We will call her Mary. Between you and Mary is a brick wall that comes up to about your shoulders. On your side of the wall, about half of the bricks have names written on them. They are the names of some of the most difficult parents that you have dealt with over the course of your career.
You take a quick peek to look at Mary’s side of the wall and about half of the bricks have names on them. Most you don’t recognize, but you do see the names of some of your teachers, the name of your soccer coach and you see your name as well. All of the names that you don’t recognize are people from Mary’s past with whom she has had a negative experience. Her daughter’s dance instructor. Her son’s Preschool teacher. Mary’s own 3rd Grade teacher. Mary’s own 6th Grade Math teacher. The field hockey coach that Mary played for in 10th Grade.

Every brick has a name, some on your side and some on Mary’s side. You have put bricks into the wall that represent your bad experiences with and mistrust towards parents. Mary has put bricks into the wall that represent her bad experiences with and mistrust towards educators and coaches. **This is the “Wall of Mutual Distrust” and it exists between every parent and every teacher. It exists between every parent and every school leader.**

Mary has brought all of her baggage with her. You have brought all of your baggage with you. Mary has put bricks in the wall and you have put bricks in the wall. When Mary meets with one of your teachers, that teacher brings their bricks to that meeting and Mary brings her bricks to that meeting. With some parents, the wall is barely knee high. Those are the “dream parents” that you teachers love to see in carpool and at Parent-Teacher Conferences. On the other hand, some of these walls push up into the ceiling tiles and you can’t even see the other person. **The bottom line is that you and your teachers are responsible for taking bricks off of the Wall of Mutual Distrust even if the parent never takes down a single brick.**

That sounds really hard and it is. When we do hard things in life, we need a strong “why” or we will not put in the required effort. Our strong “why” in this scenario is Mary’s son and daughter. They are children in your school and they deserve the very best educational experience that your school has to offer. They deserve that even if Mary never takes down even one brick from the Wall of Mutual Distrust.

So, how can you and your teachers tear down this wall and start building better relationships with the parents at your school? Implement Strategies 3, 4 and 5.

**Strategy #3: Teach Your Teachers “The 5 C’s”**

There are hundreds of things that your teachers do every day that benefit their students. They show them love and compassion and create an emotionally safe learning environment. Your teachers help their students feel seen and heard, they help them grow socially and emotionally, all while helping them build academic skills and increase their knowledge. However, there is one thing that would benefit their students tremendously that many teachers do not spend much time doing or they avoid doing it as much as possible. Building better relationships with the parents of their students.

You are going to teach your teachers **The 5 C’s of Effective Parent Communication:** **Competence, Confidence, Care, Consistency and Collaboration.** I am going to help you with that. I have created a “Plug & Play PD” called The Top 6 Ways To Build Effective Relationships
With Difficult Parents. This is a free, 45 minute video webinar complete with guided notes and discussion questions that you can use with your teachers at a PD or maybe to just coach up an individual teacher who needs to grow in the area of parent communication. This free training contains “The 5 C’s” as well. I will cover them briefly here:

- **Competence:** Your teachers can demonstrate competence by doing a great job, keeping parents informed, giving plenty of notice and being organized.
- **Confidence:** Your teachers can earn the confidence of your parents by acting like a professional, being self-assured, friendly and assertive and by maintaining professional distance.
- **Care:** Your parents will know that their child’s teacher cares for them when they notice the little things, show respect and have a predictable mood.
- **Consistency:** Parents need regular feedback. If the teacher does not proactively create a narrative about what happens in their classroom, the parents will create that narrative.
- **Collaboration:** Teachers need to acknowledge the parent’s expertise on their knowledge of their own child and ask questions about that knowledge.

The 45 minute webinar mentioned above will teach your teachers about “The Wall of Mutual Distrust”, “The 5 C’s”, answer the question “Why are parents so emotional?” and much more. If your teachers implement these strategies, you will have less issues that escalate to where you have to get involved. Most importantly, when teachers build more effective relationships with parents, the real winners are their students.

**Strategy #4: Listen And Then Validate Their Feelings**

I believe that we are in the midst of a “listening crisis”. We have so much noise in our lives from things like work, family, church, running errands, social media, smartphones and smart watches that it makes it very difficult to give our “undivided attention” to anyone or anything.

Be honest, how difficult is it to really listen when a teacher or student or parent is talking to you? For me, it is almost impossible. I will be in my office, listening to a parent and their concerns and my smartphone will be dinging with a text, my desk phone intercom will be ringing, my walkie-talkie will be squawking and a student will be knocking at my door. Dinging, ringing, squawking and knocking, sometimes all at the same time!

You need to turn listening into your superpower. Tune out the distractions, use active listening body language, make eye contact and really listen. Someone that really listens is rare and rare things are remembered. If you were driving home from school, sitting at a red light and a baby giraffe walked past your car, you would remember that for the rest of your life. I know that sounds ridiculous, but for many parents, feeling heard often feels just as rare.

Over the last 30 years, I have had hundreds of meetings with upset parents. In about 90% of those cases, the parent just wanted to be heard and have their feelings validated. They may have walked into my office demanding that the grade be changed or the detention be taken
away or the coach be fired, but parents that feel heard and have their feelings validated often leave the meeting feeling much better. I didn’t change the grade or take away the detention or fire the coach. What I did was listen and then said, “That sounds very upsetting.” or “I am sure that it was difficult for you and your daughter when she didn’t get into the game.” or “I can see why that would be frustrating.”

Validating their feelings does not mean that you agree with what they just said. **Validating their feelings is different from validating their concerns.** You don’t have to agree with everything or anything that they say. Just listen deeply and then validate their feelings.

**Strategy #5: Have Better Parent Meetings**

As a private school leader, having meetings with upset parents is part of the job. I can honestly say that I have never looked forward to a meeting with an upset parent. That said, I have developed strategies over the years that have made these meetings much more productive and much more successful:

- Setting up the meeting
- Preparing for the meeting
- Mindset Shift
- Beginning
- Middle
- End
- Post-Meeting

**Setting up the meeting**
- Don’t allow the "ambush meeting" (Don’t let them walk up to you at the basketball game and have the meeting right there. Schedule it.)
- Time of day (Avoid the busiest times of your day when you are most likely to be interrupted and/or distracted.)
- Location (In person is always better than the phone or on Zoom. Your office or a conference room is always best.)
- Length (Max 30 minutes. If you schedule 60 minutes, it will take 60 minutes. **Be concise and run a tight meeting.**)
- Schedule 5 minutes for yourself after the meeting ends (More on that later.)

**Preparing for the meeting**
- Gather information (Talk to the teacher, get a copy of the discipline referral, gather the facts.)
- Seating logistics (Not behind desk if possible, because of the “psychological distance” this creates. A table is better and a round table is perfect.)
- Face the clock (Position a small clock behind the parents, on the wall or a shelf, so that you always know what time it is without looking at your watch.)
● Remind yourself: “Don’t argue with difficult people.” You will NOT win. They are VERY GOOD at arguing.

Mindset Shift
● Optimism ("This is going to be a productive meeting.")
● Remember the reason you are doing this hard thing (The child of these parents deserves your best).
● If you don’t have the confidence reach for the courage
● “Put on your armor” (Visualize yourself actually putting on armor. The words of this parent are arrows that will bounce off of your armor.)
● Reduce Anxiety (Do your favorite mindfulness practice shortly before the meeting.)

Beginning
● Big smile, firm handshake
● Very brief small talk (You are running a tight 30 minute meeting. Do not waste the first 10 minutes talking about the weather.)
● Let them go first if they called the meeting. (Say, “I would like to hear from you first.” or “So, I’m interested to hear your perspective, go ahead.” or some other phrase that invites the parent to speak first.)
● Don’t interrupt (This is, BY FAR, the most important part of the meeting. Even if they are saying things that are not true. Just listen and jot down some notes.)
● Remain calm. Remain calm. Remain calm. You are calm, confident and professional.
● Active listening body language
● Listening with the intent to respond is not listening.
● Don't take it personally (Remember that they are speaking from a place of fear and anxiety.
● While they are talking, take notice of your emotions as that will help you to control them.
● Let them talk, without interrupting, until they “run out of steam” and they stop talking.
● It will feel like they are talking forever, but it is rarely more than 5-10 minutes.

Middle
● You respond.
● Always start by saying, “First of all…” (See Strategy #4)
● Validate their feelings (90% of the time parents want to be heard and validated. See Strategy #4)
● Find things you can agree with
● Empathy: “I am so sorry that happened”
● Emphasize “WE” (Try to move the parent from “I and you” thinking to “we” thinking.)
● Focus on behaviors, not opinions
● Stick to facts (Only what is observable)
● Check for understanding (“So, what I am hearing you say is….“)
● Don’t be defensive (Don’t over-explain)
● Regulate your mood (What's going on on the inside is not going to show on the outside.)
• Apologize (If you or the school messed up, own it, apologize and say that we will make it better.)
• Don’t make promises you can't keep.
• Discuss the past without dwelling on it. Focus forward with 1-2 clear and actionable steps

End
• Whenever possible, offer more than one solution so that the parent has some agency to choose from among those options.
• **Agree on next steps.**
• Wrapping it up (words “Well, I want to be respectful of everyone’s time” body language “close your notebook, put down your pen, stand up, etc.)
• Thank them for coming in to meet and say what you are going to do next.

Post meeting
• Schedule next steps (Remember that you scheduled post meeting time for yourself. You will now use this time to schedule your next steps into your calendar.)
• Trust is built by keeping your promises.
• Within 24 hours, **send an email to the parent** that thanks them for coming in and briefly summarizes the agreed upon next steps. This does not need to be a “transcript” of everything that was said. This email checks for understanding, eliminates “you never said that” and keeps the focus on the future.
• Follow up with all affected employees.
• Keep your promises.

The most important parts of a meeting with an upset parent
• Let them speak first and do not interrupt.
• When they are done speaking, validate their feelings
• Keep the focus on the future and the 1-2 tangible things that are going to happen next.
• Follow through and keep your promises.

This will never be easy

Working with difficult parents will never be easy. Using these strategies will not suddenly and magically make this the best part of your job. However, using these strategies will make this **easier.** Below, I have listed some resources that will help you to implement these strategies with your teachers. If your teachers are using “The 5 C’s” and you are using these strategies, you will find that partnerships will improve and the number of difficult meetings with upset parents will decrease.

The bottom line is that this is going to be hard work and it is going to take time. Finally, remember why we are doing this hard and emotional work. It is not so that we can have fewer meetings with parents. We are doing this so that the students at your school can be happier and more successful and that is the most important reason of all.
Resources

- [Click here](#) for the 45 minute webinar “6 Ways to Build Effective Relationships With Difficult Parents”
- [Click here](#) for the Guided Notes and Discussion Questions for “6 Ways to Build Effective Relationships With Difficult Parents”
- [Click here](#) to listen to Episode 2: The Top 5 Ways To Build Effective Relationships With Difficult Parents (The Private School Leader Podcast)
- [Click here](#) to listen to Episode 18: How To Have A Successful Meeting With An Upset Parent (The Private School Leader Podcast)
- [Click here](#) for Hopes and Fears: Working With Today’s Independent School Parents by Robert Evans and Michael Thompson (This is an affiliate link. If you purchase through this link, at no additional cost to you, I receive a commission of 4% of the price of the book to help defray the costs of the podcast and the website. You don’t have to use this link if you prefer to purchase the book directly from Amazon or another vendor.)
- [Click here](#) for a bunch of free resources for you and your teachers.
- [Click here](#) to listen to The Private School Leader Podcast