

10 Tips to for Teachers to Deal with Difficult Parents Effectively

by Barbara & Sue Gruber

1. Let upset parents know your goal is to help every child succeed. Look for ways to find common ground. Remind parents both of you want what's best for their child and that you want to find ways to work together.
2. Be sensitive! No matter how tense a situation becomes, always remember your student is someone's precious baby. Open your conversation with parents by acknowledging the child's strengths before you focus on areas of concern.
3. Good records that document dates, times, notes and decisions about students can be invaluable if problems arise. Keep track of communication with parents. Make a copy of your response. After making phone calls to parents to discuss problems, take a few minutes to record any important information that was discussed.
4. Be proactive! Contact parents as soon as you see academic problems or negative behavior patterns develop. You'll have a better chance to change these patterns if you catch them early. Here are some things to discuss with parents:
 - areas their child excels
 - if their child is attentive
 - where their child stands academically
 - specific difficulties
 - specific ways they can help at home
 - how well their child gets along with others
 - how long homework should take
 - allow parents to share concerns and ask questions
5. Be prepared to give specific examples to illustrate the points you make. Show parents examples of average and above average work for your grade level. White out the names on papers and use actual samples of students' work to clearly illustrate typical work for the grade level. Give parents a clear idea of exactly what your expectations are for students.
6. If a parent asks you a question that floors you, don't be put on the spot. It's fine to let parents know that you need some time to reflect on their question before you respond. Let them know that you'll get back to them in a day or two. Relax—you've just bought yourself time to explore options and perhaps bounce ideas off of a colleague before you respond to the parents.
7. Don't be afraid to end a meeting with parents who become confrontational. Sometimes, the best thing to do is to provide an opportunity for all parties to cool down and reflect on the issues at hand by bringing the meeting to a close. Set a time and date to meet again. If you feel threatened, ask your principal, vice principal or school counselor attend the next conference.
8. It's awkward when parents share too much information with you. While it's helpful to know things that directly impact a student, it can be problematic when parents disclose too much personal information. Remind parents that during the limited time you have to speak with them, that you need to focus on their child and not on them.
9. Watch for parents who hover relentlessly. Gently remind parents their child needs the space to develop social skills and gain independence. If appropriate, share other volunteer opportunities available at the school.
10. Be prepared for a worst case scenario. Read your contract or board policy and make sure you understand your rights and the steps to follow if a parent files a formal complaint.