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TEACH

EDUCATION FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

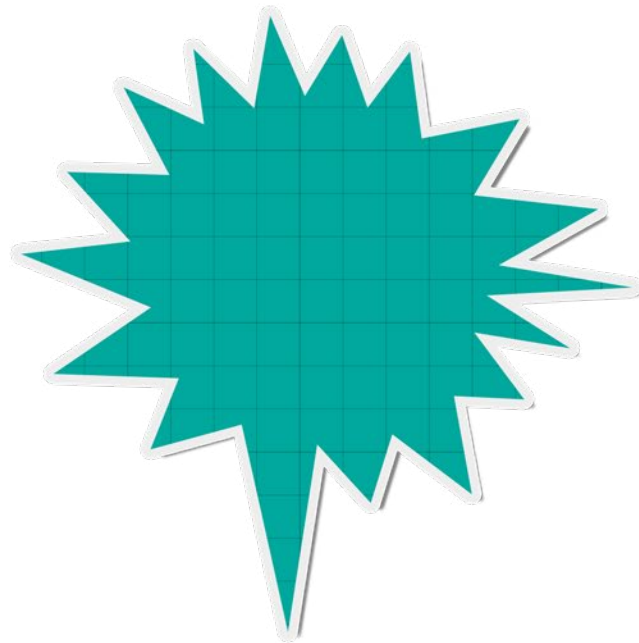


**WHEN LEARNING GETS ITCHY:
EMBRACING THE LESSONS
OF OUTDOOR TEACHING**

**EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES
FOR NAVIGATING TOUGH
PARENT CONVERSATIONS**

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR NAVIGATING TOUGH PARENT CONVERSATIONS

BY FIONA TAPP



A teacher's job is made easier through collaboration. This can be with school administration, other educators, and professionals like speech pathologists and psychologists. One of the most vital partnerships, however, is with parents. By fostering a strong home-school connection, parents can support homework and provide insights about their child, while teachers can share classroom strategies for success.

From time to time, teachers might meet a difficult parent who doesn't want to work with them or who may be combative or even violent. A recent survey of Alberta teachers found that [50% of teachers](#) (and 75% of school leaders) had experienced aggression in their work environment within the first three months of the school year.

This is a growing problem across the country: another study by the Canadian Teachers' Federation found between [41-90% of surveyed teachers](#), across different provinces, had experienced or witnessed violence against teachers from students or parents. The situation isn't much better in the States. A [report](#) from the American Psychological Association found that nearly 30% of teachers and over 40% of administrators experienced violence or aggressive behaviour from parents during the 2020/2021 school year.

In the face of these statistics, it's normal to feel a little apprehensive about meeting with parents, especially if you have to deliver disappointing news about a student's behaviour, schoolwork, or grades.



TIPS FOR MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS

Thankfully, there are many proven strategies for diffusing tense situations. Read on for expert-backed advice and tips on how to have difficult conversations with parents and resolve conflict in your classroom peacefully.

ESTABLISH AN OPEN LINE OF COMMUNICATION EARLY ON

The best way to manage tricky conversations with parents is to start from a strong foundation. “Planting seeds right from the start and throughout the year is helpful,” says [Dr. Caroline Buzanko](#), a Calgary-based psychologist and assistant professor at Athabasca University who specializes in helping children and teens with anxiety and ADHD. “The stronger the working alliance, the easier it is to have these tough conversations.”

Keep the lines of communication open and regularly share news from the classroom, including rules and expectations, projects the students are working on, and small wins along the way.

PREPARE FOR THE MEETING

Come ready to the meeting with all your notes, test results, examples of work, and any incident reports, but be sure to also prepare yourself by taking some deep breaths or expending some pent-up energy by running on the spot or doing a few jumping jacks.

Buzanko says that it’s normal for educators to feel apprehensive about a potentially difficult meeting and that preparation can make all the difference. “If we think of the upcoming conversation as a challenge [instead of a threat],” she explains, “our brain will release more energizing hormones (e.g. adrenaline) to help us prepare, versus stress hormones (e.g. cortisol). Just acknowledging this shift can help.”

FOCUS ON FACTS AND SOLUTIONS

Parents are bound to feel defensive about receiving any criticism of their child—even if that criticism is fair—so Buzanko highlights the importance of stating objective facts rather than opinions. “Take note of specific examples of the concern you would like to raise,” she advises. “Write them down so you can make sure you anchor the conversation and address the key points (and not get caught up in emotion).”

Clearly describe the issues you are seeing in school without emotion or judgment, for example:

“I’ve realized that your child has missed several assignments over the past month, which has impacted their overall grade.”

“I’ve noticed that your child struggles to stay focused during group activities.”

“I’ve seen that your child tends to interrupt during class discussions.”

Using “I” language is important in expressing your thoughts and feelings without sounding accusatory or confrontational. Instead of placing blame, it encourages open and constructive dialogue. For example, instead of saying: “Your child is always disruptive in class,” try: “I’ve noticed that your child sometimes has trouble staying focused during lessons, and I’m concerned about how it affects their learning. I’d love to work together to find strategies that help.”

STAY CALM AND PROFESSIONAL

[Shelly Qualtieri](#) is a Canadian registered social worker with expertise in providing therapy for issues like conflict

resolution, anxiety, depression, trauma, and more. She explains that what may seem like difficult behaviour from parents is often rooted in anxiety, frustration, or a strong commitment to advocate for their child. “Recognizing this can help teachers approach conversations with empathy rather than being defensive,” she says.

Keep the conversation brief, Buzanko advises: “The killer to effective communication is talking, so we want to minimize how much we talk. It’s easy to get stuck on the challenges but we want the meeting to be productive, so always keep the conversation going towards where you’d like to go.”

If things do become heated, be careful not to match the energy you receive or to mirror back parents’ emotions. “Stress is contagious!” Buzanko notes. “If you need to step out for a quick break to help create some time or space, do so. No matter what, stay calm and maintain professionalism.”

Involve a senior teacher or administrator if needed and keep detailed written documentation of interactions for accountability.

LISTEN ACTIVELY AND VALIDATE CONCERNS

Qualtieri says it’s important to make sure you are actively listening during meetings. “Acknowledging concerns without immediately countering them can de-escalate situations,” she explains. “Simple phrases like ‘I hear your concerns,’ and ‘I want to work together to find a solution’ can shift the conversation from confrontation to collaboration.”

Ask the parents if they have experienced these same behaviours/attitudes/issues at home. For example:

“Have you noticed similar behaviours or attitudes at home?”

“How does your family handle situations like this outside of school?”

While children may behave differently at school and at home, parents often have valuable strategies that work in their environment, and their insights can offer helpful solutions that might not be immediately apparent in the classroom.

Parents may also share information that you didn’t know about, such as incidents of bullying or health issues, so be prepared to pivot and focus on solutions. Remember that parents are experts on their children.

KEEP THE FOCUS ON THE STUDENT

“There is a good chance everyone is bracing themselves for a battle. So, we want to always come to the conversation from a strengths-based perspective,” Buzanok says. “Identify where the student does well ... and add what you appreciate most about them—that little note can really help set a nice tone.”

This preamble helps bring parents onside and shows that you haven’t just turned up with a list of complaints. It is also important for educators to remind themselves consciously of the student’s positive traits. Don’t focus so much on “solving the problem” that you lose sight of the student as a whole—someone with strengths and challenges who is deeply valued by their family.

FOLLOW UP WITH AN ACTION PLAN

End the meeting with a clear plan of action, outlining what the student will work on, what you as the teacher will do to support them, and what the parents can do at home to reinforce progress. Set a specific timeline for follow-up so parents aren’t left hanging. This collaborative approach ensures everyone is aligned and committed to helping the student succeed.

Here’s an example of what this kind of action plan could look like:

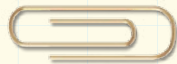
Student’s Responsibility: The student will complete their late assignment by the end of the week.

Teacher’s Responsibility: The teacher will provide additional support during class.

Parent’s Responsibility: Parents will help create a quiet, focused space at home for study time.

Follow-up: A follow-up meeting will be scheduled in two weeks to assess progress and adjust strategies as needed.

Afterward, especially if the meeting was tense or difficult, allow parents time to digest the information and then follow up with your agreed-upon action plan. Remind them that you are all on the same side—you all want to best support the student's learning.



As part of caring for your own emotional well-being, Qualtieri encourages teachers to remember that “Dealing with difficult interactions can be emotionally draining. Seeking peer support, setting firm boundaries, and focusing on positive relationships with other parents can help maintain balance.”

Handling difficult conversations with parents can be an opportunity to strengthen relationships and support student success. Remaining calm and listening actively can help keep conversations productive, allowing both sides to focus on solutions rather than conflict. Set clear expectations, follow up as needed, and document key points to ensure everyone—including parents, students, fellow educators, and school administration—is all on the same page. By setting a positive tone and working collaboratively, you can turn tough conversations into productive partnerships.



FIONA TAPP is a former teacher and school administrator of 13 years. She writes about education, parenting, and travel for a variety of publications including *National Geographic*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Sunday Times*, and many more.

