

# HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

BY JANET MALLERY

*“My son, Tom, is not being treated fairly in class! You don’t give him the good grades that he deserves. He says that all of the students dislike him. At home, he causes no problems, but here at school, no one seems to want to help him. I’ve talked with many other parents, and they all have the same kinds of problems with this school!”*



As Ms. Adams listens to Mrs. Shaw, she wonders how to communicate with this irate parent. Even though she has taught successfully for the past eight years, it seems that when one of these “difficult people” enters the classroom, she automatically becomes defensive and ends up with an unpleasant situation. She has read Alper, Tjosvold, and Law’s empirical study, which states that a cooperative approach works best in conflict management.<sup>1</sup> But how can she

work with a parent who seems anything but cooperative?

There are no magic solutions for dealing with difficult parents, colleagues, principals, school staff, students, and others. There are, however, some basic principles that help ease tension and can produce a win-win situation. The examples in this article relate to the classroom teacher, but the suggestions can be used by anyone who has to deal with difficult people.<sup>2</sup>

For the Christian educator, resolving disputes involves an additional dimension. Ellen White puts it well: “Souls who have cost the life of God’s only-begotten Son must be estimated in value by the immense ransom paid for them; and, rich or poor, black or white, must be treated in respect to the value Christ has placed upon the human soul.”<sup>3</sup>

The following suggestions are largely based on experience accompanied by research, which is cited throughout the article. The Bible and Ellen G. White also have some valuable recommendations about dealing with difficult people. So, the next time you find yourself wondering how to handle a certain parent or colleague, try using these principles:

## **Confine the Conflict**

“Don’t tell your secrets to a gossip unless you want them broadcast to the world” (Proverbs 20:19, TLB).<sup>4</sup>

Involve only those people who are actually participants in the situation. In dealing with Tom’s mother, Ms. Adams would do well to keep the discussion between teacher and parent. She should avoid expanding the discussion to others unless there is a good reason to do so.

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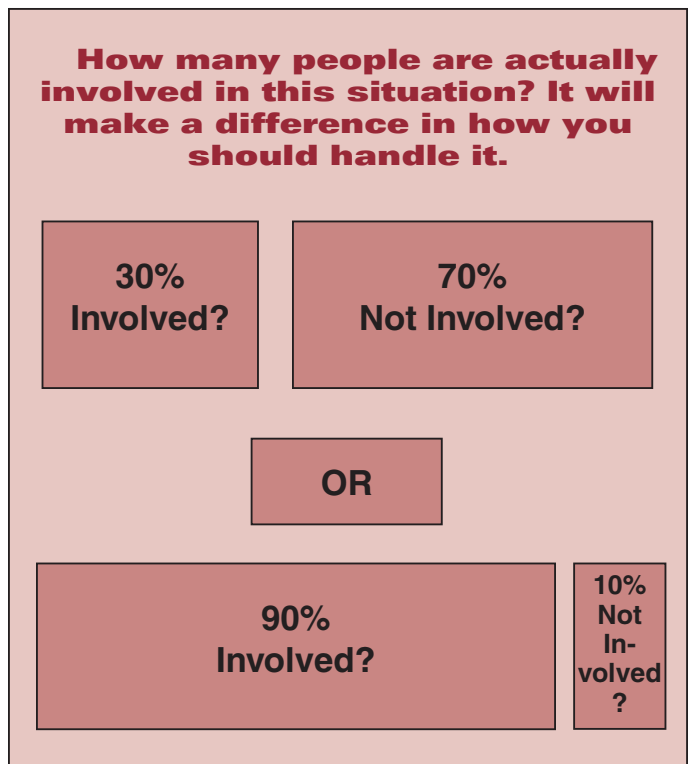
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between her and Mrs. Shaw if possible, involving the principal only if this seems necessary.

### **Know How Many People Are Involved**

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13, NKJV).<sup>5</sup>

Determine how many people are actually involved in the dispute. In Tom’s case, it appears that Mrs. Shaw is the only person who has openly expressed dissatisfaction about Ms. Adams’ or other teachers’ treatment of students at ABC Adventist School. Ms. Adams will certainly want to reflect on her own behavior to determine whether Mrs. Shaw has legitimate concerns. However, it will be helpful for her to realize that since there have been no formal complaints to the principal or school board, probably very few parents feel this way. Hopefully, the problem can be solved before Mrs. Shaw begins to complain to other parents. On the other hand, if Ms. Adams has had previous indications of significant parental dissatisfaction, she will want to address the issue in another way, such as seeking counsel from



Mr. Samuels, the principal of a large Adventist elementary school, received an anonymous letter declaring that the board and the teachers were not doing “what they were supposed to be doing” and listing a number of examples. Feeling confident that the allegations were untrue, he decided to read the letter at the Home and School meeting. Rather than handling the problem with those who were actually involved in the situation, Mr. Samuels opened up the conflict to the community. Most of the teachers and parents had not been aware that anyone had issues with the school, but now they were! Everyone began talking about the allegations. Whether they agreed or disagreed, having rumors flying about only multiplied the administrator’s problems.

Likewise, Ms. Adams would be wise to keep the discussion

the principal or superintendent of education.

### **Be Suspicious of the Words “Everyone” and “No One”**

“Any story sounds true until someone tells the other side and sets the record straight” (Proverbs 18:17, TLB).

This should raise a red flag! Just because someone says that “All the parents are talking about this!” or “Everyone believes that!” does not necessarily mean it is true. It’s important for Ms. Adams to realize this and to put things into perspective so she does not feel under suspicion by “all” of the parents or constituents. Even if some parents are talking about the problem, it’s unlikely that all of them are doing so. This ties in closely with the previous principle, “Know how many people are involved.” Understanding this principle can help you to view the situation more objectively.

### **Feelings Before Facts**

“Gentle words cause life and health; griping brings discouragement” (Proverbs 15:4, TLB).

If you don’t remember anything else from this list, keep this in mind: The feelings of the difficult person must usually be dealt with before any problem can be solved. Educators are great at taking a situation and designing a plan to correct it. But beware! A difficult person who is angry and emotionally distraught is not ready to hear a rational solution based on your “facts.”

When presented with a complaint, an educator’s natural reaction is to dive right in to fix the problem. We ask questions to find the facts, and offer explanations for why certain procedures are being used. We tend to feel somewhat defensive, which heightens the tension.

Ms. Adams may well react by saying something like this: “I try to treat all of my students fairly. You can look at the grade book to see how I grade. My goal is to help all of my students.” While this defensive response might help her feel justified, it will probably not make Tom’s mother feel that her complaint is taken seriously or that her feelings are acknowledged.

Instead, Ms. Adams should handle the situation by first taking the following steps:

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## ***For the Christian educator, resolving disputes involves an additional dimension.***

- Don’t jump right into problem-solving mode. Before meeting with the difficult person, reflect on how best to approach the problem, and pray for wisdom. At the beginning of the meeting, if the person seems amenable, suggest that the two of you pray together for God’s guidance in resolving the issues.

**B**e sure to listen intently, making good eye contact and showing through your body language that you are interested in what the person is saying. Don’t interrupt. Listen respectfully until he or she is finished talking. Stephen Covey, internationally respected leadership author, advises that in order to create a win-win situation, people should first try to understand—then they will be better understood.<sup>6</sup>

- Show clearly that you hear the person’s concern. Respond with statements like, “Thank you for coming to talk with me. I can see that this is a very serious

concern for you. I am sure it hurts you to think that your child is not being treated fairly.”

- Watch for body language that reveals whether you are dealing appropriately with the person’s feelings, or if the confrontation is escalating. Clues to watch for in an upset person are crossed arms, hands on hips, high-pitched voice, and hand motions. Physical reactions to anger include increased heart rate, muscular tension, and faster breathing, according to Dean Ornish, renowned cardiac researcher and author.<sup>7</sup>

When you see the person’s body begin to relax (arms unfolded, slower, lower-pitched speech, and relaxed facial muscles), this suggests that he or she is calming down and the angry feelings are being addressed.

- Observe the person carefully for signs that he or she is ready to talk about the facts. Do not move into a problem-solving mode until it’s clear that the emotional issues have been resolved. Obviously, each person is different and mannerisms will vary from one culture to another. However, observing the person’s hands (tense, tapping, tightly folded, pushing away) and feet (tapping, kicking) throughout the discussion will provide hints about his or her reactions.

Once you are sure that the feelings have been handled, then it is safe to deal

with the facts. At this point, Ms. Adams can talk about Tom's relationships with other students, show how grades are determined, and provide proof of the school's care and concern for students. But if she does not handle the feelings first, these facts will only further irritate the difficult person, making objective problem-solving difficult to achieve.

### You Can Disagree, but Take People Seriously

"It is harder to win back the friendship of an offended brother than to capture a fortified city" (Proverbs 18:19, TLB).

Ms. Adams is probably not going to agree with Tom's mother's opinions; however, by listening carefully and not being dismissive, she can make Mrs. Shaw feel respected. In order to continue to help Tom and develop a working relationship with his mother, Ms. Adams must reassure Mrs. Shaw that her concerns are being heard. By simply listening carefully and taking notes, Ms. Adams can show Mrs. Shaw that her words are important.<sup>8</sup>

When possible, give the difficult person appropriate power. Maybe Mrs. Shaw would be willing to help with bulletin boards or listen to the class read so that Ms. Adams has more time to work with the children. Sometimes, however, it may be necessary to say, "I appreciate what you have told me. You have expressed legitimate concerns. At this point, however, I will not be able to follow your sugges-

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tions." By saying this, Ms. Adams acknowledges that she takes Mrs. Shaw seriously. Usually, people can handle the fact that someone does not agree with them, but they become hostile when they are not taken seriously.

### When Helplessness Increases, Aggression Increases

"The heart of the righteous studies how to answer" (Proverbs 15:28, NKJV).

If Ms. Adams does not find some way to acknowledge the earnestness of Tom's mother's perceptions, the discussion is likely to degenerate into name-calling and threats. As Mrs. Shaw's feelings of helplessness and frustration increase, she may become aggressive and irrational. As early as 1939, Dollard, Doob, and others at Yale established the link between powerlessness and aggressive behavior, contending that "aggression is always a consequence of frustration."<sup>9</sup>

In a recent workshop that featured role playing, I found that the most common mistake was participants' assumption that the aggrieved person's feelings had been handled adequately, when, in reality, they had not. Addressing the underlying emotions requires more than a dismissive "I'm sorry" followed by "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, let's get to work on the problem." Consciously evaluate whether the person is really ready to jump into the problem-solving mode before moving to "let's figure out how to handle this."

### A Gracious Response Has Eternal Implications

The Christian teacher has the opportunity to witness to the love of God and the results of grace in his or her life when dealing with difficult people. Ellen White reminds us that: "We may never know until the judgment the influence of a kind, considerate course of action."<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Research indicates that in general,

teachers are more accommodating and conflict resistant than people in other professions.<sup>11</sup> However, sometimes everything seems to fail. When this happens, always pursue the next step: Call for assistance from your principal or conference superintendent of education.

Do these principles always work? No. But my experience has shown that they do help more times than not. And they offer some tested approaches to help you solve problems with difficult people. ✍



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. For additional ideas, see Kay D. Rizzo, "How to Prevent and Overcome Job Burnout," *Journal of Adventist Education* 65:5 (Summer 2003), p. 14; and Paul Meier, *Don't Let Jerks Get the Best of You: Advice for Dealing With Difficult People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Co., 1993).
3. Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1932), p. 210.
4. Verses marked TLB are taken from *The Living Bible*, copyright ©1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Ill. Used by permission.
5. Texts credited to NKJV are from the New Kings James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers.
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