



# PET PEEVES ABOUT PARENTS: TURNING PROBLEMS INTO PARTNERSHIP

**W**hen asked to remember problems with parents, a teacher in Tennessee related this experience:

One mother stands out. She complained to the principal that I was not being attentive enough to her son. Somewhat of a baby, the boy still threw temper tantrums in second grade. His mother expected me to give him individual help with everything: make sure he had his homework written down and turned in, and so on. She was a very

large woman, intimidating, and one day she came to my class and said she needed to talk to me.

I thought *uh oh*, but I put on a smile and asked what I could do for her. She had quit her job and wanted to volunteer in my classroom. I was dumbstruck but said OK.

After a few weeks we had become chatty. She told me she so admired what I do and had no idea that teaching was so hard! What a blessing came out of that initially bad situation!

Most teachers can recall similar stories, with or without the happy ending.

A cover story in *Time* magazine in February 2005 docu-

BY PATRICIA A. DUNCAN

mented increased pressure on educators in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Students challenge authority, and parents trust teachers less, validating their child's view of the classroom over the adult's. School staff members end up dealing with students and parents more delicately, and with less candor than a few decades ago.

Problems take many shapes: disorganized parents who lose papers, hovering moms and angry dads, and of course absentee parents who never show up for anything. Private schools take even more heat, with high academic goals and expectations that misbehavior "shouldn't happen in a Christian school."

Richard Arends, in *Learning to Teach*, cites two studies indicating that teachers want relationships with parents that "include both concern for the child and support for their instructional program. At the same time, many teachers do not want parents to interfere with their classrooms."<sup>2</sup> Let's look at ways we can foster parent-teacher partnership by setting a positive tone and structure to prevent misunderstandings, being prepared to respond to potential confrontations, and showing empathy and patience while processing conflict.

### **Prevent Problems: Proactively Establish Relationships and Structure**

As the professional in charge of your classroom, you need to set the tone early in the year for positive interactions with parents. If possible, get a list of students entering your classroom before school ends in June and photocopy the previous teacher's class pictures to take home. Use these tools for prayer reminders throughout the summer.

Contact families before school begins. Harry and Rosemary Wong, in *The First Days of School*,<sup>3</sup> encourage preschool and kindergarten teachers to schedule home visits, if appropriate, bringing letters inviting parents to a back-to-school open house and including a list of materials to have ready. Easing the transition means a lot to families.

**I** send my 5th graders a handwritten postcard inviting them to orientation on the day before classes begin. During the two-hour block, parents bring their children to arrange supplies in desks and cubbies. I use the time to get acquainted with parents and begin to forge connections.

After school begins, our Back-to-School Open House offers another opportunity for a good start with parents. Students do not attend this evening meeting. In a short speech, I introduce myself, mentioning my educational background and teaching experience. After outlining my policies on grading, homework, and discipline, I hand out the class

schedule and talk about the curriculum. I point out ways they can support and help their students, and urge them to contact me if they see a problem developing.

**W**hen you hold this kind of meeting, let parents know how you'll keep them informed about what's happening in your classroom. Perhaps you'll send a weekly newsletter home with graded papers. If possible, post your newsletter to the school's Website for easy download, and leave current assignments on a Homework Hotline on the school's voicemail system. If neither is feasible, print extra copies to send home by "kid mail." Tell parents how and when to contact you. Will you take calls at home, or do you prefer they leave a message during school hours, letting you know when to call them back?

Also, invite moms and dads to get involved in the classroom in specific ways. Decide how much parent help you want, being aware of your own comfort level with the presence of other adults in the classroom while you're teaching. In some schools, it's difficult to recruit helpers, while in others, parents eagerly volunteer. The school where I teach has a mandatory family participation program, so parents often choose to work in classrooms to fill their volunteer hours while support-

ing their children.

ing their children.

Positive, clear communication with parents will set the tone for positive interactions all year and prevent many problems.

### **Prepare for Problems: Research, Document, and Plan**

In an ideal world, teachers would not have problems with parents, but realistically, in a fallen world, the question is more *when* than *if*. Prayer and a personal relationship with the Lord underpin the teacher's preparation. Take Paul's advice and "Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:11, 12, NASB).<sup>4</sup>

Next, devise a plan to use when needed. Bill Gallagher, a California teacher and administrator for 40 years, gives these tips:

1. Avoid discussing pressing problems when approached in an informal setting such as bus duty after school or a chance meeting in the grocery store. Set up a formal meeting at these initial contacts.
2. Be prepared with documented information about behavioral problems or answers to questions on why a grade was given.
3. Be positive, and choose your words carefully. If the

## POSITIVE, CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS WILL SET THE TONE FOR POSITIVE INTERACTIONS ALL YEAR AND PREVENT MANY PROBLEMS.



parent gets even a hint that you don't like the child, all is lost.

4. Assure parents you want the best for their child and would love to set up a system between home and school that can lead to solving the problem.

5. When a parent has a history of difficult behavior, hold the conference in the principal's or vice principal's office. Make sure the administrator is versed on the problem as expressed by the parent. If possible, the teacher should direct the meeting. Stick to the point of working out a simple and manageable solution to which all parties can commit. Keep the meeting as short as possible without giving the impression that no one cares. If the child is reasonably mature, have him or her present because sometimes parents don't get the whole picture from their child.

6. Explore the possibility of special testing when appropriate. If indicated, the administrator can encourage parents to authorize it.

7. If parents don't approach you, use your intuition and careful observation to detect dissatisfaction. Take the initiative and innocently suggest meeting with the parents after school. This opens the door to finding out what's on the mom's or dad's mind and shows a caring attitude.

**I**f you're a new teacher, learn your school culture. Familiarize yourself with school policies about potentially touchy issues like discipline, grades, and the dress code. If your school publishes a parent handbook, study it carefully. Over the 50-year history of our school, the board has clarified policies on many details of school life. It's invaluable to be able to direct parents to the handbook if they aren't managing concerns according to policy.

Our parent manual also spells out detailed steps for Conflict Resolution based on Matthew 18:15-17, which states: "Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and



## AS THE PROFESSIONAL IN CHARGE OF YOUR CLASSROOM, YOU NEED TO **SET THE TONE** EARLY IN THE YEAR FOR POSITIVE INTERACTIONS WITH PARENTS.



church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (NKJV).<sup>5</sup>

Also, if you're new to a school, ask if there are hot topics parents don't want discussed with students at all or only in prescribed ways, such as puberty, sexuality, abortion, or drug and alcohol prevention. If these are topics that appear in the recommended curriculum, you may need to discuss with parents the importance of their children being given the facts about sensitive subjects in a Christian context.

### **Process Problems: Pray for Empathy, Show Patience**

My grown children attended the school where I now teach, and I recall unwittingly giving teachers difficulties.

One morning, my son's kindergarten teacher called and said, "I have Brian here with me." I didn't understand why she called until she sweetly informed me that it was not a school day! The typical disorganized mom, I had either lost her newsletter, neglected to read it, or simply forgotten about the teacher in-service that day. There were good reasons for my overload, since I was helping manage a busi-

tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that *by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established*. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the

ness and raise three children. Today's families have even more frenetic lives and need our patience.

In addition, I was sometimes over-protective. When I was offended at ways my children were disciplined, I often talked to other parents instead of going direct to the teacher.

If you're a parent, think back over times you've disagreed with your children's teachers, incidents when you felt frustrated, events that pushed you to anger. Let's face it: Parents aren't objective. They're understandably like mother tigers, preserving their young.

Daniel Goleman, in *Emotional Intelligence*, says empathy is the root of compassion, and those with a talent for empathizing and connecting with people "can be excellent teachers."<sup>6</sup> They have good skills for reading the non-verbal signals of facial expression, body language, and tone of voice to infer what another person is feeling. Mirroring those emotions goes a long way toward defusing a tense situation.

"I'm sure if she were my daughter, I'd feel the same way," you might say to a frustrated father. Expressing understanding lays a foundation for communication. When emotions have subsided, you can present your point of view. You'll have a better chance of being heard. Usually both of you can gain insights you hadn't had before and improve your partnership in helping the student.

Working through disagreements requires patience. The process can continue over days or weeks. Nurture yourself. Vent emotions in prayer to the Lord and find a confidante

### Advice for Administrators

Structure prevention of parent problems with two key elements:

1. A back-to-school night for parents early in the school year.
2. Sit-down parent-teacher conferences after the first grading period.

"Our district has done this for 40 years now and it pays off richly. As a principal I saw a dramatic drop in unhappy parents after we began these two programs," says Bill Gallagher, California educator for 40 years.

#### Tips for Success:

Back to School Night

- Schedule during first few weeks of school.
- No students attend.
- Teachers introduce themselves and curriculum.
- Encourage parents to stay in touch, and to raise concerns soon rather than later.

#### Parent-Teacher Conferences

- Requires commitment from entire staff.
- Accommodate scheduling for multi-student families.
- Show positive student progress. Samples of student work help.
- Gives chance for parent-teacher team to shore up weak areas.
- Suggest having students from 4th grade and up to attend, then accent the positive.

who will listen. Seek advice from your principal or a veteran teacher who can supply wisdom from experience. Humble yourself before the Lord, asking Him to show you if you've been wrong. Apologize to the parties involved, if appropriate. Follow the steps of conflict resolution based on Scripture that are outlined above.

When it's over, move forward, forgiving yourself and others, and using the lessons learned to improve your teaching

Whether you're dealing with minor irritations or a major emotional blow-up, problems with parents are part of the workplace environment. Prevent as many as you can by establishing positive relationships and structure. Prepare for potential issues by researching your school culture and documenting touchy areas. Process conflicts with empathy, prayer, and patience. Remember, God is at work in our schools.

A few years ago, one of my students deliberately hurt another child at recess. When I didn't contact the parents of the injured child promptly, they felt betrayed. Although not a medical emergency, the situation would have triggered strong feelings if it had been my daughter, I realized later, and I apologized. I learned a valuable lesson as a new teacher, but the parents had lost trust in me.

Over the following few weeks, the two girls continued to have conflicts. I tried to keep the parents informed, but it didn't mend our relationship. On the phone, the dad vented his frustration. I dreaded the parent-teacher conference. My principal had been involved throughout the situation and felt I had made amends for my mistake. She pledged to pray.

When the father sat down at the conference table, to my amazement, he apologized. I was so relieved and thankful to the Lord for intervening. With God's help, we worked together the rest of the year, partnering as parents and teachers should for the sake of the child. ✍



**Patricia A. Duncan** teaches 5th grade at Eugene Christian School in Eugene, Oregon.

#### REFERENCES

1. Nancy Gibbs, "Parents Behaving Badly," *Time* 165:8, pp. 40, 42.
2. Richard I. Arends, *Learning to Teach* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), p. 460.
3. Harry K. and Rosemary T. Wong, *How to Be an Effective Teacher: The First Days of School* (Mountain View, Calif.: Harry K. Wong Publications, Inc., 1998), p. 103.
4. Scripture texts credited to NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright The Lockman Foundation, 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.
5. Quoted from the New King James Version, copyright 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers. All rights reserved.
6. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), pp. 118, 119.