

Contents

List of Figures	v
Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
About the Author	xi
Introduction	1
1. How to Reach Parents and Prevent Problems Before They Happen	3
The Changing Face of Families	3
What Parents Want From Teachers	5
Reasons Parents Do Not Come to School	7
Prevent Problems Before They Happen	9
Making Diverse Groups Feel Welcome	16
Opening the Doors to the School for All Families	18
2. About Hard-to-Handle People	25
What Is a Difficult Person?	25
Characteristics of Difficult People	25
The Six “Nevers” With Hard-to-Handle Parents	27
Five Ways Parents Can Make You Lose Your Cool and How to Choose Healthier Responses	30
3. How to Handle the Hard-to-Handle Parent: Strategies for Success	35
The Right Way to Say “No”	35
The Opposite Response for Parents Who Are Negative and Argumentative	36
Repetition Response	37
Don’t Get Sidetracked	38
Agree With the Person	38
Apologize	39
Use the Mirror Response	39

Stand	40
How to Handle Angry Parents	40
The Nine-Step Intervention	41
4. How to Handle Parents With Bad Attitudes	47
How to Handle the “Know-It-All”	47
The “Blamer”	50
The Defensive Parent	50
The “Helicopter” Parent	51
The “Negative Cynical” Parent	52
The “Backstabber”	53
The Parent Whose Child “Does No Wrong”	55
The Parent Who Thinks You Are Not Fair	58
The Parent Who Is Extremely Angry	59
5. Listening Skills for Hard-to-Handle Parents	63
The Communication Process	64
Power Listening	64
Once the Door Has Been Opened	68
The Greatest Gift	72
6. How to Talk so Parents Listen	73
Five Styles to Manage Frustration and Anger	73
Keys to Being Assertive	77
Power Request	77
Power Persuasion	80
Practice Makes Perfect	83
7. Parent Conferences: An Ounce of Prevention That Prevents a Pound of Problems	85
Set the Scene: The Focus Factor	86
The Conference	89
Key Points to Enhance Conferences	93
The Five-Step Approach to Telling Parents Negative News	94
Checklist	98
8. Parents as Partners: Enhancing Collaboration and Teamwork	99
Forming the Partnership: A Collaborative Relationship	99
How to Get Parents to Follow Through at Home	111
Conclusion	114
A Parent’s Plea to Teachers	114
References	115
Index	118

Introduction

I started teaching in the seventies and later became a principal. My background was not only in education but also in psychology. I like to think of myself as a “reasonable” person, and I assumed that the parents of my students would also be reasonable people. While I had many parents who were wonderful, those first years were made doubly tough by having to learn how to handle parents who were often unreasonable. I can still remember the first hard-to-handle parent, Mrs. Walter.* She had five children in the school. All of the children came in each day looking like they needed a bath. Their clothing was often tattered and filthy, and they had body odors that made the other students not want to sit next to them. Mrs. Walter would bring them to school sometimes early and sometimes late, but rarely on time. There was no school bus in those days to come and pick the children up after school, and many times, Mrs. Walter showed up late to pick up her children. When she wanted something, she would just barge in demanding whatever it was that was her latest request. I tried speaking to her over and over again, resolving each time that I would find a way to get through to her. Each time I failed! Eventually, she moved, but other parents came with other problems that took her place. I thought my background in psychology working in a mental hospital had prepared me for handling any kind of situation with difficult people, but it had not! I soon found out that parents were totally different. They had a major investment—their children’s futures—and while some parents acted like they didn’t care, others wanted to protect that investment and “stay on top of things.”

I had no idea how to build a parent team so that they would want to cooperate. I had no clue on how to talk so they would listen. I didn’t know how to assert myself and stand up for what was important. It took years and years of both practice and extensive education to acquire the skills to talk to parents so they listen, to build powerful partnerships with parents, and to create an atmosphere that was parent friendly. That is what this book is about. The skills you will learn in this book will help you handle not only difficult parents but all difficult people. You will learn how to prevent hard-to-handle situations before they even develop, how to handle

2 • How to Handle Hard-to-Handle Parents

difficult parents and situations with ease, how to listen so parents tell you what is really going on, how to talk to parents so they listen to you, how to hold effective conferences that will help prevent problems before they happen, how to build cooperative partnerships with parents, and how to reach difficult parents and turn them from hard-to-handle to easy-to-handle.

*Name changed.

3. Set a Mutually Agreed-Upon Goal

Begin the meeting by setting a positive goal for the meeting. This is very important because it ensures that both of you want the same outcome for the child. It identifies something that both you and the parent have in common (Wherry, 2008).

Mrs. Peterson: I would like to set a goal for this meeting today, and that by time you leave, we have a plan for Cody, and we are both happy with the plan. Is that okay with you?

Mrs. Hodges: Yes, that sounds fine.

When you set a goal, it shows that you and the parent agree on an outcome you both want. It automatically sets you both up as teammates working toward a common goal. Best of all, it helps to diffuse angry feelings because parents can see that you want the same outcome for their children.

4. Set a Time Boundary

Some parents will talk and talk and talk. It is important to set a boundary at the beginning of the meeting so that the parent knows how long you are available to talk. I like to have a small clock on the table as a reminder of the passing time.

Mrs. Peterson: My tutoring class begins in forty minutes, so I can devote the next thirty minutes to you. I hope that is all right. I will keep track and tell you when we have ten minutes left.

Mrs. Hodges: (Nods head that it is OK.)

5. Listen

Listening is a critical component. Many people know how to talk, but few know how to really listen. I have developed a process for listening that I call power listening. It is so important that I am devoting an entire chapter to it later in this book. For now, it is important to know four key components you need to use.

1. Take notes
2. Listen without interrupting
3. Nod your head
4. Summarize what you have heard