

# Working with Difficult Parents

**P**rincipals are talking about the increasing number of what they consider “difficult” parents today. They are asking for help finding good ways to work with them.

Has parent involvement changed? Yes, it has changed! But our entire country has changed, too. As a nation, we seem to have less trust and respect for authority than we had just a few years ago.

The No Child Left Behind Act and school security concerns have changed school and classroom routines to the point that many schools barely resemble those that today’s parents attended. Countless parents have received official notices that their child’s school is “failing,” accompanied by information about the option of moving their child to a school with better test scores.

More parents than ever are working today. Their schedules are more hectic. They have less time for themselves and for their children. They are overworked and overstressed. At the same time, many schools, forced to employ heroic efforts to achieve adequate yearly progress, are devoting less time to working with parents.

Certainly some parents have become more difficult. But educators have changed too, and truth be told, some of us have become more difficult as well.

## Effective Ways to Work with Difficult Parents

Here are the top ideas compiled from Parent Institute resources and a national survey we conducted of 3,000 current school leaders:

**Listen to parents calmly, respectfully, and without interruption** in a nonthreatening environment, such as a conference room or parent center—not in the principal’s office. Allow parents to get what they need to say off their chest, expressing their frustrations, fears, and concerns. Calmly and politely, give them your full attention as they speak. Avoid thinking about what you plan to say when they finish. Use body gestures and facial expressions to show your interest and silently draw out the speaker. Take notes. Be patient and allow long pauses, letting parents break the silence. Often the most important information is revealed after an awkward silence. Let them speak until they are finished.

**Make sure parents know that you have heard and understood their concerns.** Review what parents have said and ask them to confirm your summary of their concerns. Correct misunderstandings immediately. Acknowledge the problems



and be sympathetic to the frustrations they are facing. As one principal pointed out, “Parenting is an extremely difficult job, and some parents come to complain—not to be difficult, but because they are at their wits’ end and don’t know what else to do.”

And keep in mind this surprising and often overlooked research finding: Simply listening carefully, and making sure parents know they have been heard,

satisfies most angry parents—even when there is nothing you can do to solve their problems.


**Identify common ground.** “We both want your child to be successful.” One principal reassures angry parents that she knows they are trying to be good parents who are concerned about their child. She does not think that they are bad parents, or that their child is bad. Mention positive things about their child. Assure parents that you are willing to work with them in partnership to help their child succeed—but that you cannot do this without their help.

**Treat parents as professional colleagues.** Work with parents

to develop an action plan during the conference and follow it. Make it clear that you are interested in working with them to solve whatever school problems may arise. Don’t agree to do things you cannot do, but promise to keep parents’ concerns in mind. Make copies of your conference notes and make sure your staff and the parents have copies when they leave the meeting.

**Involve the student in conferences when appropriate.** One principal responding to our survey suggests:

“When parents are angry based on what their child has told them about a school problem, include the student in the conference with you, the parents, and the child’s teachers—and begin by asking the child to repeat what he told his parents. Nine times out of 10, the child will change the story to the truth and the parents calm down and apologize.”

Parents, teachers, and principals today are all likely to be difficult at one time or another. But we can find ways to work together to help students learn. 

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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