

Having Difficult Conversations with Parents, Caregivers and Families

Tips for Educators & School Staff

What do educators and caregivers have in common? We all care deeply about children's health and education and want the best for them.

Because that care runs so deep, it's natural that parents and caregivers get passionate when they have concerns about their child's health and well-being – passion that can lead to challenging, and sometimes difficult, conversations.



When tensions are raised, it's normal to question yourself ("Did I hear correctly?"); feel mad, upset, or confused; and wonder if it's 'worth it' to engage with this person on this topic, yet it is extremely important to maintain a team attitude and find common ground.

In *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, the authors present four core beliefs necessary for strong partnerships:

- *All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.*
- *All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.*
- *Parents and school staff should be equal partners*
- *The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.*



Here are 5 Tips for Having Difficult Conversations with Parents, Caregivers and Families:

1

Pause and give yourself time to process and get in the right mindset for the conversation.

Reflect on past engagements with the person (if any) and be mindful of other stressors they may be facing. Don't take it personal; parents have the best of intentions but may be worried, scared, concerned, or frustrated about the situation. As you respond, use encouraging words and connect to common goals such as the health and education of our kids.

2

Withhold judgment, come from a place of empathy, and seek to understand.

Ask open-ended questions to understand their viewpoint, actively listen and allow them to finish their point. Acknowledge the source of their concerns by re-stating what you heard in your own words. Avoid shaming or telling people what they should do; instead, ask permission to offer solutions or share information.

3

Maintain a solution-focused mindset.

Lack of understanding is often the root of conflict. Parents may be unfamiliar with how the school system works, staff may have past negative experiences with parents, and a lack of trust may be present from both groups. Focus on discussions and sharing ideas instead of debates and power struggles. Work together and leverage strengths, resources, and solutions.

4

Set ground rules and refer back to them.

Establish and communicate expectations around communication to parents and caregivers. Basics like 'Be respectful,' 'Listen when others speak,' and 'Assume good intentions' are great reminders. Involve parents in establishing the ground rules, then post them in prominent locations so you can refer to them if needed.

5

Bridge the conversation to a respectful end.

Shifting the conversation in the heat of the moment can be very difficult – here are a few phrases that can help you take the conversation in a different direction or move on from the conversation while still showing respect.

- Provide information that they can access on their own, even if they may not be ready for it now: "I appreciate and understand your perspective. It sounds like we may need more time to review the information. I will leave this with you and let's schedule another time to discuss more."
- Thank them for their time: "Thank you for taking the time to discuss. I want to be respectful of our time, and we have a lot to cover, so I'd like to ask that we move to the next topic."
- Set time aside to talk with them later in the day or during another session, after you establish some boundaries around that area: "how about we add this to our next agenda so we will have more time to discuss."
- Leave the door open: "I'm available if you have any questions. Please reach out to me by [method of contact]."

