Dealing With Parents Who Lack Respect and Responsibility

Taken From The New 3R’s Respect, Responsibility And Relationships

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Whether it’s between the teacher and the student or between the teacher and the parent, the struggle creates a very uncomfortable situation for all parties involved. Power struggles with students are something that is going to happen, and as teachers, we know this and seek out ways to try and prevent them or manage them in the most effective way possible when they occur in our classroom. Power struggles with parents are much more uncomfortable for the teacher and can create fear, anxiety, tension, and pressure. If teachers engage in one or two of them and manage them incorrectly, they will lose their confidence in managing future struggles. They may also lose the respect of the parent, and will have further difficulty with the parent’s child who is in their classroom.

Here are some tips for managing parents who lack the respect and responsibility

If parents have poor communication skills themselves and are used to getting what they want by raising their voice and using intimidation, that is exactly what they will do during a parent teacher meeting. So, the first challenge that a teacher has is to overcome the fear of being yelled at. If teachers are fearful of parents raising their voice at them, and it is a fear that has come from their childhood, they will begin to feel like a five-year-old at the meeting. No one should ever be verbally abused during a parent teacher conference. If the parent is on the attack and is becoming abusive, insulting, and downright rude, use this statement, and don’t be afraid to use it: “I’m sorry, I am not used to being spoken to this way. Please calm down or we will have to have this meeting at another time.” Usually that will calm down a parent. If it doesn’t work and the parent continues to disrespectful to you, politely end the meeting and dismiss yourself.

Get all the facts prior to the meeting and stick to them There is no question that there are kids that we just don’t like. During the first few weeks of the school year, a teacher can usually determine what students are going to give them the most trouble. Keep a record of their behavior. The records should consist of behaviors that are observable and countable. An example in your records would be, I asked Tim for his homework on 1/17/08 and he responded, "I could care less about any of your stupid work." You record each unacceptable behavior. During the conference, refer to the records and read it to the parent. People can’t argue with recorded facts. Besides, you can be sure that if this student has said these things to you, then he or she has probably said similar things to his or her parent.

During the conference listen well and don’t try to interrupt when the parent is in the middle of any tirade. You will only be accused of being argumentative. Try to understand the parent’s position, as wrong as it might be, and remain calm. Try to find out exactly what the parent wants. Rephrase it and then say, "So if I do __________ and __________ that will solve the problem?" Usually the parent will say yes, that’s what I want. Then say, "Let me see what I can do. Can I get back to you in a day or two?" At this point, you are buying time to talk to your supervisor. By the way, if the struggle is something that you anticipate is going to happen during a parent meeting or conference, see if your supervisor can be present at the meeting.
It is important during conferences with antagonistic parents that you develop physical rapport with them. Basically, look carefully at how the parent is sitting, and then try to match it yourself. Follow the parent’s body movements, then adopt that movement yourself. It is a proven fact that physical rapport is developed before verbal rapport. Matching the body posture of the parent will relax the parent and diffuse any initial tension that may exist between you and the parent.

Lastly, be proactive and don’t wait for a struggle to occur. Work on these techniques when you are calm. If you know your personality and know that confrontations make you uncomfortable, rehearse your lines and practice getting into physical rapport with someone who will work with you. If you try some of these techniques, you will find that conferences with difficult parents will go more smoothly.

**Parents Can Be Bullies Too**

Teachers who lose control of their classrooms usually do so because of the behavior of one or two students. Many times, the parents of these students have the ability to instill fear and intimidation into the teacher and in their own way bully the teacher. This scenario is all too familiar. A student who is a bully gets reported by the victim to the teacher. The teacher doesn’t see the bullying, but is concerned about the report and believes it warrants a phone call home. The teacher calls home and is immediately put on the defensive by the parent. The parent begins to react to the teacher’s phone call and asks the following questions: Did you actually see my child bully someone else? Are you calling my son/daughter a liar? How do you know it was my child? Or, what did the other kid do to my son or daughter? After the teacher catches his/her breath and tries to respond, the parent then starts with comments such as these: I heard your entire class is out of control. My son/daughter has told me that you don’t like him/her. My child told me that he was bullied last week, and you did nothing about it. The parent then ends the conversation by saying the following: Unless you have some proof that my child bullied another student, don’t call me again, and then the parent hangs up. The next day the child comes to school and has more clout than before and continues the bullying behavior. The level of intimidation and fear starts to well up in the teacher, who now wonders what to do if there is another report from a victim that bullying is occurring again (by the same bully as before). This is a serious problem.

What usually does happen is the teacher does everything to avoid making that next phone call to the parent of the bully and begins to ignore the bully, including any bullying behaviors, and starts to surrender the authority in the classroom to the bully. Victims who are in this classroom have to sink or swim on their own and go to school everyday filled with fear.

Amazingly, the teacher starts to see the victim as the problem. If the victim says that he or she is being bullied, the teacher says, “Stop being such a tattletale, go back to your seat.” What’s even worse is that the teacher disciplines everyone else in the classroom, but not the bully. The rest of the class begins to see the teacher as siding with the bully, and the teacher appears to be agreeing with the bullying behavior.
Teachers, administrators, and school districts need to stand up to bullying parents. Victims will be left standing alone with no protection if teachers buckle under the pressure of bullying parents.

**Successful Parent Teacher Conferences**

There are two types of parent teacher conferences—**Planned and Unplanned**. Here is a checklist for both:

**Planned**

1. Do I know what I am going to talk about, and can I express my concerns objectively?
2. Do I have documentation to support my concerns about the student’s academic or behavioral difficulty?
3. Am I ready to listen and understand as much as I want to be understood?
4. Do I understand the principles and benefits of being in physical rapport with the parent?
5. Do I have work samples available for review to support my concerns?
6. Have I kept a behavioral log that documents the child’s episodes of disrespect, irresponsibility, non-compliance and any other type of behavior that is disruptive to the classroom? (For example bullying)
7. Do I know how to overcome objections without becoming defensive?
8. Is my classroom neat and organized?
9. Am I ready to make suggestions to the parent that will help the child improve academically and behaviorally?
10. Do I know how to end the conference on a positive note?

**Tip:** If the conference becomes confrontational with the teacher and the parent disagreeing, find a way to get to yes. Once the teacher and the parent even remotely agree end the conference as quickly as possible.

**Unplanned**

1. Don’t act surprised.
2. Parents that greet you early in the morning or well after school are not there because they are happy about something. Be ready
3. Be prepared for the parent to begin by raising his voice
4. Ask them to come into your room and excuse yourself for a minute. This allows the teacher to let someone else know what is going on.
5. Sit in clear view of the parent, not behind a desk.
6. Be ready to let the parent speak; don’t interrupt.
7. Get to the root of the problem as fast as possible and ask the parent, “What do you want to have happen or what would you like me to do?”
8. Agree in principle only not in content. A comment like: “I see your concern works well.”
9. Don’t argue
10. Plan to meet again. This gives you a chance to be more prepared and be able to overcome objections.

Tip: When conferencing with parents, do not fall for flattery or begin to engage in any type of personal conversation. Maintain a professional relationship.
Who Will Parent the Parents?

I frequently think back to my childhood. I remember how my grandmother (Mom’s side) spent time at my house. To this day, she is still the sweetest old lady that I ever met. I was in an afternoon kindergarten program, and my grandmother took care of me during the mornings. Every morning when I woke up, she was sitting in a big chair right next to my bed. As soon as I opened my eyes she would wave and smile at me. I felt so secure seeing her in that chair. I really loved her a lot. My dad’s mom lived right up the street. When I became old enough, I used to walk over to her house, have lunch with her, do her grocery shopping for her, then just hang around with her. She would give me a dollar for helping her. I saved those dollars to buy Christmas presents for my sisters, my mom, and my dad. Unfortunately, my dad's mom passed away when I was thirteen, and I still miss her today. My mom’s mom passed away when I was nineteen, and that was another big loss that I still feel.

It really doesn't matter how old you are. You still need parenting. Just because someone is grown and married doesn’t mean that they still don’t need guidance and direction. I watched my maternal grandmother help my mom deal with things all the time. Whether it was raising her kids or dealing with my dad, my mom always spoke to her and sought her advice. When she died, it was almost as if my mother’s wheels fell off, and she started to stumble through life and always seemed to be looking for answers to some of life’s most basic questions. She seemed to have greater difficulty being married to my dad and seemed angry at times until the day she died. When my dad’s mom died, I noticed that he would drink more, and go off on benders for a few days. It was almost as if he lost his check valve and didn’t feel accountable to anyone.

I am fifty-three years old now and have been a teacher and administrator for thirty years. After working with and talking to countless parents, I have drawn the following conclusion: Parents need parenting!. I have spoken to many adults my own age and have found that their relationship with their parents is strained or they're not talking to their parents at all. I would ask them, “How long has it been since you spoke to your mom or dad,” expecting to hear that they just had a little spat and it was for a few days. A few days, try twenty years. During that twenty year period, I wonder how much wisdom they lost that they could have gotten from their parents. How much help with their children did they lose, or worse yet, what did the grandchildren lose because these parents despised their own mother or father?

No matter what the age, people need to be parented. Some individuals who have a poor relationship with their parents lose their grip on right and wrong and have a tremendous problem figuring out some of life’s most basic problems. These adult children often have a general sense of bitterness because of their poor relationship with their parents. They may feel resentful when they have problems raising their own children, because they become aware that they are receiving no direction or guidance from their own parents and that they have to figure everything out on their own. They might wonder what they're going to do with their child or what’s wrong with their child. They should be asking what’s wrong with them. Their children enter school and become problems for the teacher. They don’t do what they’re told to do and are disrespectful and non-compliant. The teacher calls home only to find a disrespectful and non-compliant parent on the other end who is defensive and who believes that the school isn’t being fair
to their child. They berate the teacher and blame the school for all of the problems that their son or daughter is experiencing.

This was an all too frequent scenario for me. I dealt with many parents with this type of attitude as a teacher and as an administrator. In one district, I chose to run a parent support group. When I started the group I had seventy-five parents. They all did nothing but complain about the behavior of their kids and blamed the school for the problems their kids were experiencing. Once they discovered that I wasn’t going to play the blame game, my group dwindled down to a precious few and ultimately had to be discontinued.

Parents want help, but they want the wrong kind of help. They want someone to fix their kids, but they need to find someone to fix them. They don’t realize that the people who can offer them the most help were put naturally at their disposal for free, and that’s their parents. The question still remains, Who will parent the parents? Schools have tried parenting programs. These programs don’t work. They offer advice, but ultimately it’s up to the parents to follow through. The minute their kids gives them a hard time they revert right back to blaming everyone else, then start looking for more advice.

Who will parent the parents? Maybe society has to parent the parents. Hopefully, someone will realize that all the wisdom, guidance, direction, support, love, and affection were theirs for the taking, but they chose to turn their backs on their God given gift, their parents.