The Best Tips for Teachers Dealing With Frustrating Parents!

SECOND EDITION

HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT PARENTS

Proven Solutions for Teachers

A **Prufrock Press** Book

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Chapter 1
Dealing With Parents 101

Despite what some people may think, not everyone can be a teacher. Teaching is a challenging but rewarding career, one that actually makes a difference in people's lives. But it takes skill, commitment, and courage.

People become teachers because they love working with kids. They have spent 4 or more years becoming experts in one or more content areas: reading, math, physical education, music, English, science, special education, foreign language, or social studies. They have learned how to plan a lesson, create valid tests, diversify instruction, and run inclusive classrooms. They have practiced effective teaching strategies and classroom management techniques during their student teaching or internship experiences. In short, they arrive at their first teaching jobs eager to embrace the challenges of the profession.

If they are lucky, they will be among the 200,000 new teachers hired each fall across the nation. They will enter the field with high expectations and a willingness to work hard to improve their skills.

In 2 years, 10% of them will quit.

In 3 years, about 40% will quit.

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By the end of 5 years, about 50%—fully half of those new, optimistic teachers who have spent so much time, money, and effort to prepare themselves for their careers—will have left the profession, according to studies conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics and the National Education Association in 2006 (see National Education Association, 2010).

Some new teachers who leave find student discipline overwhelming. Others point to a lack of administrative support. But one of the main reasons for leaving the profession, according to the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (Plecki, Elfers, Loeb, Zahir, & Knapp, 2005), is this: Teachers are unprepared to work with difficult parents.

TEACHERS ARE UNPREPARED TO WORK WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

Despite all of their training, new teachers often lack the skills needed to handle the demands of some of today's parents.

There's Justin's mother, for example, who thinks that it's okay for her son to stick mozzarella sticks up his nose during lunch ("He's such a character!").

There's Samantha's stepdad, who says it's the teacher's fault that Samantha cheated on her social studies test ("Why weren't you watching her more closely?").

Keisha's mother did her daughter's science project for her and then complained that the work only got a B ("Do you have any idea how much time this took?").

Bradley's father threatened to have the teacher fired if she didn't change his son's math grade ("It will be your fault if he doesn't get into his first-choice college!").

And Lee's mother's boyfriend says Lee doesn't deserve detention because fighting is what boys do ("I'm the one who taught him to fight!").

Dealing with difficult parents isn't the only reason that teachers abandon the profession, but the stress of doing so remains one of the top reasons teachers cite for leaving the ranks.

TEACHERS NEED TO LEARN PARENT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Teachers who remain in the classroom discover that, in addition to classroom management skills, they must develop parent management skills if they want to be successful. Without such skills, an adversarial relationship between a teacher and a parent can take its toll.

For example, when teachers know that a child's parent stands ready to challenge them at every turn, they can become reluctant to confront inappropriate student behavior or lack of effort. When they know that a dreaded "helicopter mom" is always hovering nearby, ready to swoop in at a moment's notice to protect her child, teachers may feel that it's not worth the personal stress to stand up for what they know is in the child's best interest. When they know that a student's father will go directly to the principal if he's unhappy with his child's grade, they begin to feel perpetually defensive. In short, dealing with difficult parents can have a demoralizing effect on the individual teacher and even on the school as a whole, particularly if teachers feel that they have to fend for themselves without administrative support or a comprehensive school policy for working with parents.

Let me hasten to point out that I am not talking about all parents. Most parents are supportive, helpful, and realistic. They volunteer as band

Any teacher can develop an array of strategies that will prove successful a great deal of the time.

boosters and help with bake sales. They attend their kid's performances and vote for the school budget. They take an interest in their child's progress, work with teachers as partners, and communicate with them respectfully and civilly. Although they sometimes disagree with the school's position, it is their right to do so. (It's fine for parents to disagree. It's not fine for them to be disagreeable.)

Let me also agree that, yes, difficult teachers exist in every school system, creating their own set of problems. However, even the best and most reasonable teachers around the country report that a growing number of parents make excuses for their children, refuse to allow them to take any responsibility, and believe that every wish their child makes should be granted. Teachers who refuse to accept excuses, insist on student responsibility, and aren't afraid of saying no are bound to find themselves in eventual conflict with parents who make unreasonable demands and criticize or even threaten their children's teachers when those demands aren't met.

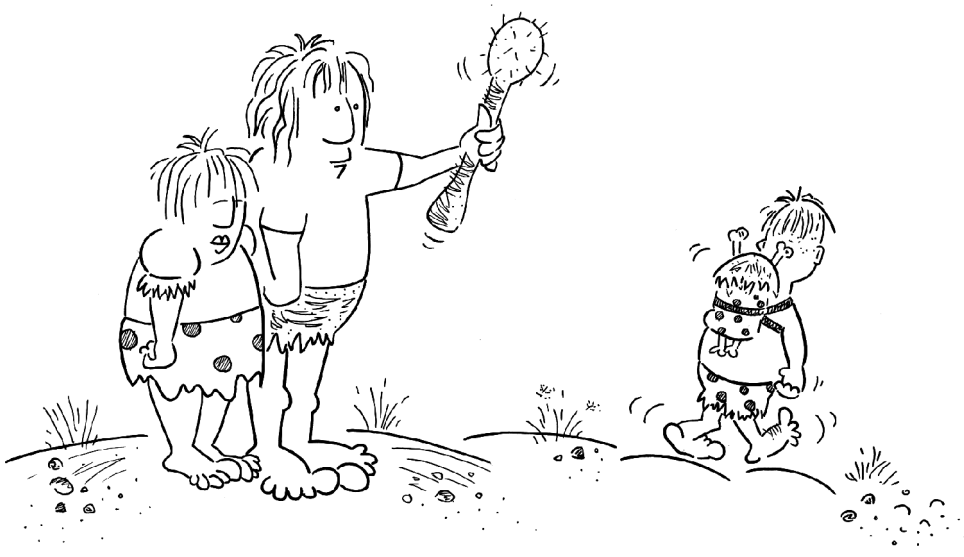
ALL TEACHERS CAN LEARN TO HANDLE PARENTS MORE EFFECTIVELY

What can a teacher do when faced with a problem parent? No single strategy will work for all situations. However, any teacher can develop an array of strategies that will prove successful a great deal of the time.

In the following chapters, you'll find plenty of effective techniques, including what to say and what not to say, and how they can be used in specific situations. You will find them helpful whether you're a new teacher or a veteran.

Chapter 2

A Short and Subjective History of Parents



THE ANCIENTS

In 1900, Mark Twain, in an address to the Public Education Association, observed that, "Out of the public school grows the greatness of a nation." The waves of immigrants to the United States in the first quarter of the 20th century resulted in legislation making public school attendance compulsory for children for the first time. Compulsory education not only "Americanized" the younger generation, but it also kept them out of the factories where children had previously competed with adults for jobs.

During those years and for many years that followed, parents went to work and their children went to school, the children often moving well beyond their parents in terms of formal education. Few parents questioned how the school was run or whether their children were being taught well or treated fairly. They believed school was their children's responsibility, just as work was theirs.

When my brother, sister, and I were children in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, our parents did not contact our teachers if we didn't like an assignment. They did not call the principal to complain if we got detention.

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They did not believe that we never lied. They did not care if we were bored in school, and they did not accept being bored as an excuse for poor grades. They did not believe that children had "personality conflicts" with teachers because children's personalities had little standing in their book. They did not tell us that we should respect teachers only if they respected us. They were wise enough to know that our version of what happened at school that day was just that—our version. They did not know what our math homework was, and they didn't care. Whatever it was, they expected us to do it. In some ways, we had a freedom that today's children can't even imagine.

Our parents' disinterest in the details of school did not mean they were bad parents. In fact, they were great parents. They were very clear, however, about their expectations for us in terms of school. Like the parents in every other family we knew, their expectation was this: "If you get in trouble at school, that's nothing compared to what will happen when you get home."

I don't want to give the impression that my parents didn't care about us or about our education. They did. They made sure we reported to school every single day unless we were running a fever, had spots, or were throwing up. They knew when report cards were issued, they reviewed them, and then they signed them. They went to all of our concerts, plays, and awards programs. (The only things they didn't attend were our summer baseball or softball league games. Watching us do the same thing we did in the middle of our street, except on a field where first base was a sack instead of the sewer cover, was not a reason to take off work. In truth, the only parents who ever watched us play ball in the summer were dads who were out of work for one reason or another.)

They were just busy—busy attending to their responsibilities of working hard, raising a family, and paying the bills. We were expected to attend to our responsibilities—going to school every day, staying out of trouble, and paying attention. In a sense, they had their jobs and we had ours.

We did not feel deprived.

Kids who had formerly been described as "lazy" (a word we teachers were now forbidden to use) were now "bored."

THINGS START TO CHANGE

I became a teacher myself in the late 1970s, and it seemed to me that parents of that era were, for the most part, similar to my parents. They still expected their kids to do their job while they did theirs. They were still suspicious of their children's renditions of what happened in school that day, and they still expected their children to behave. Here's a typical conversation from that era:

Teacher: Tommy swore in class today.
Mr. Smith: I'm sorry. We'll take care of it at home.
Teacher: He's going to need to serve a detention.
Mr. Smith: That's fine with us.

Here's another example:

Teacher: If Madeline can stay after school on Thursdays, I can help her with spelling.
Mrs. Torres: She'll be there. You hear that, Madeline? Every Thursday.

However, by the early 1980s, I began to see a slight abdication of parental authority. Typical conversations of that era tended to sound more like this:

Teacher: Mrs. Jones, I'm having a little trouble getting Jack to do his homework.
Mrs. Jones: If you can't make him do it, what do you expect me to do?

Or:

Teacher: Mr. Fazio, Jennifer really needs to stay after school for extra help.
Mr. Fazio: Well, she's a lot like me—doesn't like to be told what to do.

Around this time we began to hear about "bored" children. Kids who had formerly been described as "lazy" (a word we teachers were now forbidden to use) were now "bored." Reading bored them. Math bored them. Writing bored them. Homework especially bored them. The reason for all this boredom? These kids were *way* smarter than the other kids, according to their parents.

Of course, these students typically didn't demonstrate their boredom by staring out the window, doodling, or coming up with creative solutions for problems. Instead, they did no work at all or disrupted the class. This, according to their parents, was because they weren't being sufficiently challenged.

No one I knew when I was a kid ever admitted to being bored. I learned early in life never to say to my mother, "There's nothing to do around here," because she would quickly find something for me to do: vacuum, pick beans, take out the garbage, clean the garage. It never would have occurred to her (or to me) that it was her job to entertain me if I was bored.

However, as a teacher, I began to feel that was exactly what some parents expected me to do with their kids—entertain them. If their children weren't doing anything in class, it wasn't because they were lazy or because they had legitimate issues like learning disabilities. It was because they were so smart that the work in class was beneath them. The "challenge" they needed was really mine: to motivate them or perhaps . . . to entertain them.

By this point, I had kids of my own. Watching *Sesame Street* with them, I began to see how they could grow up believing that all learning could be fun. Number facts should be set to music, and letters could sing and dance!

Well, I wanted learning to be fun, too, but I knew that was not always possible. Although my 1980s hairstyle made me look like one, I was not a Muppet.

THE DECADE ENDS

At the beginning of the 1990s, I began to see a big difference in the attitude of some parents