

Family

PARENTING

Tips for talking with teacher

When you visit the school, here's what you should do

Braden Bell *Washington Post*

Over the course of a child's school years, parents will almost certainly disagree with, or have concerns about, something a teacher does. It's inevitable, given a parent's natural concern for their child, the subjective nature of human interactions and the number of decisions teachers make each day.

Because teachers are busy and constantly dealing with many people at once, they don't always have time to think before responding to any number of things, including discipline issues, classroom management and personal interactions. Even seasoned professionals will make errors of omission, tactical missteps and bad judgment calls. (Note: I'm not talking about abusive or illegal behaviors, which must be reported promptly to appropriate authorities.)

That's not to absolve teachers of accountability or responsibility; teachers have great power and that must include accountability. But taking time to understand a teacher's perspective might help parents approach a concern. It also helps if you have built a good relationship before a problem comes up. At a minimum, parents should make sure their first contact with a teacher is not related to a complaint.

As a parent and a teacher, I've seen concerns addressed in a productive, successful way, and I've seen them handled in a way that made everything worse. In fact, without some caution, a parent's response can eclipse the initial incident. While specific situations and personalities vary, there are basic suggestions that can help parents maximize the chances of a successful, positive resolution.



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Be careful with style or preference: A teacher's personality or approach may not align with parental preferences; that doesn't mean the teacher is wrong. Avoid quibbling over things that are simply a matter of style. Children can benefit from learning how to manage situations that aren't ideal.

Was it a tactical error?: Assuming something goes beyond preferences, consider whether you and the teacher basically agree on the big picture stuff. Have things generally gone well? If so, it might be worth overlooking errors in execution or approach, especially if these seem to be exceptions or deviations from what a teacher normally does.

Don't make assumptions: Parents frequently ascribe motives to a teacher's choice, then criticize the teacher's intentions. I've seen parents take issue with a disciplinary policy by saying the teacher clearly hates boys. Or argue over a grade by asserting a teacher wants to keep girls from being successful. This will almost always be counterproductive. It diverts attention from something that can be rationally discussed and addressed. It risks making the teacher feel defensive, and may make the complaint seem unreasonable or implausible. And when a parent asserts something that doesn't fit what an administrator knows about the teacher, it can backfire.

Make notes: If you do feel you must keep pushing or escalate, make sure to document your attempts at a good-faith solution. Keep email's and a log of phone calls. The higher you go up the chain of command, the more important this will be.

Stick to facts and observable phenomenon: Don't weaken a legitimate complaint or concern with something that may be completely wrong, or, at least, unknowable.

Start with the teacher: Going straight to the administrators can seem a bit imperious and risks alienating both the administration and the teacher. Administrators will likely refer you back to the teacher, and knowing you went over their head can create an awkward situation. You can always go up the chain of command, but once you escalate, you can't bring it back down. Your child will likely have this teacher for the rest of the year, and you won't be able to go to the principal with each dispute. It's in your child's interest for you to at least try to preserve a working relationship with the teacher.

Ask questions: Don't jump to conclusions. Has your child ever described an interaction with you that you felt was inaccurate? That's not uncommon, even with wonderful kids. Even if your child is reporting everything 100 percent accurately, you've only heard part of the story. Reserve judgment until you have heard the teacher's side of the story. Sometimes a small fact or nuance makes a big difference.

Be reasonable and positive: Teachers take what they do personally. They are not highly paid, nor do they have much status. They tend to do what they do for emotional dividends and will likely respond well to gestures of respect or appreciation, if there's any good you can see, try to focus on that. And if the teacher apologizes, have the grace to move on, even if you continue to monitor the situation carefully.

Be sparing: Teachers and administrators field many complaints, including plenty about minor things. People who complain frequently quickly reduce their credibility and risk being tuned out. If something is really wrong, you need to be heard. But make sure it's worth acting upon and don't risk diluting important things with minutia.

Be specific: Be clear and limited with your requests. You are more likely to get what you want if it's actionable and easily identifiable than if you are asking for wholesale changes. Most teachers are conscientious, dedicated professionals. But there are difficult situations sometimes, problems that continue and cannot be addressed, even when parents act with goodwill. In these cases, I don't have easy answers. You have to weigh carefully the costs and benefits of getting involved. There's time and energy. There's also the potential impact on your child. One thing I'd suggest is finding a trusted confidant, perhaps a past teacher you connected with, or an older, more experienced parent. Make sure they can and will be honest with you. Articulate your concern and your proposed response. Invite them to challenge you if they think it's warranted.

Questions are a good way to start: "Sally came home upset about losing time at recess. I'm not sure what happened, so I don't know how to help her process this. Can you please help me understand?" Resist making demands, such as "Call me NOW," unless it's an emergency. Teachers' time is not their own; they can't always return emails or calls immediately. And take a minute to think about it before you send an angry email. It's so easy to fire off something that we later regret.

Empower your child to address problems: A lot of issues can and ought to be handled by a child. I've accompanied my children before to talk to a teacher when they said they'd been treated unfairly. I coached them beforehand and provided moral support, but required the child do the talking. In one case, the teacher heard the full story, apologized and changed the outcome. She then taught my child how to address the specific situation in a more productive way in the future. On another occasion, with a different child and teacher, the teacher provided a much different perspective, and my child realized how his actions came across. Sometimes my children complain but don't want to go talk with the teacher. In those cases, I tell them that if something is not important enough for them to take action, it's clearly not a big deal. Most teachers genuinely care about students. They will respond to a sincere, respectful student. Timing is important, though. Going privately before school or after class is probably going to be best.

Don't rally the troops: Resist the temptation to enlist other parents, at least initially. This can quickly get out of control, making the teacher feel attacked. And other parents may let intemperate or unreasonable, and linking your situation to theirs can be worse than having no allies. Be careful with what you say on social media or email.

Braden Bell is a teacher, writer and director from Nashville, Tennessee. The author of seven novels, he blogs and writes a newsletter with reflections about parenting adolescent