

Difficult Parent Conferences – Overview

By Michael Grinder & Mary Yenik

There are many reasons why a parent conference can be difficult. Sometimes the content is difficult to talk about. Sometimes the student is difficult to deal with in class. Sometimes our own lack of comfort causes the *difficulty*. Sometimes the parent is difficult, and it is quite likely there are misunderstandings that make the conference difficult.

Four Stages

The four stages of a Difficult Parent Conference, with a commentary on the non-verbals, are listed below. Our goal is to have the grade book or a paper represent the source of the problem. This preserves the relationship with the parent.

Controlling our eye contact during a difficult parent conference is critical to our success.

Parent Stage Venting

Recommended Teacher Responses

Maintain eye contact with the parent. (We will refer to eye-to-eye conversations as “two-point communication.”)

While the parent vents, maintain eye contact and a soft face.

Surprisingly, an overtly angry parent shifts more easily than a covertly angry one. The parent probably has rehearsed a dozen times what they want to say, yet the parent’s ability to listen is like a full box of voice mail. The parent cannot hear the teacher until they have emptied out their pre-rehearsed recordings by venting and feeling heard.

Shifting

Use your hand and eyes to direct the parent to a grade book or paper (When both parent and teacher look at visual information, we refer to it as “three-point communication.” The grade book, etc., is “the third point.”)

Only after the parent has vented can we use wording like, “Let’s see what the grade book indicates.” Or if more information is needed, shift the parent from talking (oral) to looking (visual). That is, shift attention to a piece of paper where you write down information that needs to be gathered and clarified.

Self-Discovering

Let the parent discover the facts.

Maintain three-point communication. The most important phase of the conference is when the parent discovers the facts. Most likely the parent will be shocked and will look up at the teacher. Don’t look back at the parent yet – continue to look at the grade book. As the parent absorbs the facts, it’s okay to nod and make empathetic sounds while continuing to look at the facts.

Resolving

Flexibly alternate between two and three-point communication.

Return to eye contact when the parent is ready for solutions. But always return to looking at grade book when the “problem” is discussed, even if you are in the middle of a sentence. For example, you might look at the parent and say softly, “What we can do about [switch and look at the grade book and raise your voice] THAT is....”

Note: It often takes more than one meeting to progress through all four stages. The success of the conference depends on more than the teacher. Sometimes the conference gets stuck in one of the *Stages* and never progresses to resolving.