Communicating our way through conflict

Best practices

1. Assume good will. Remember that educators are in this profession to help children. You might not agree with how they are doing it, but assume and recognize their good intentions.

2. You can be an advocate for your child while still being respectful. Being rude, disrespectful or overly demanding doesn’t do anyone any good.

3. Recognize when you are too emotional to have a constructive and/or productive conversation. Emotions can make a conversation too personal or too charged for anything to get done.

4. Use “I” statements instead of “you” statements. “You” statements can be accusatory and off-putting to a teacher or administrator, making it more likely they will respond by being defensive.

5. Address problems early, before they – and your emotions – spin out of control. An educator can’t fix a problem they don’t know about. And the more an issue escalates, the more difficult it is to resolve.

6. Come up with a positive plan for action. Before your conversation, think about what might be an acceptable solution to you. During the conversation, work together with the teacher and/or administrator to come up with a resolution you can all agree on. Venting is OK, but problems can only be solved through action.

7. Don’t resort to social media to air grievances. This is a quick way to destroy trust between you and your child’s teacher or administrator, and foster an unhealthy climate within your school community.

8. Set a good example for your child. Our children frequently face conflicts or experience tension as they learn to navigate the world around them. We must show them how to resolve their issues maturely, appropriately and effectively.

9. Remember body language. We communicate with our bodies, too. Rolling eyes, crossing arms, pointing fingers can do just as much damage as poor word choice.

Who to talk to, and when

1. You should talk first with your child’s teacher in most cases, such as when:
   a. You have a concern about your child’s academic success
   b. You have a concern about your child’s physical, mental or emotional safety at school
   c. You have a concern about that teacher’s method of teaching
   d. You have a concern about homework
   e. You have a concern about something happening in your child’s classroom
2. You should talk first with your school’s administration (principal or vice principal) when:
   a. You’ve spoken with your child’s teacher and you are not satisfied with the result. However, be open to having the teacher be a part of that conversation. The goal should always be to preserve the relationship between the parent, student and teacher.
   b. You have a concern that is not specific to your child, but instead involves all students and/or the whole school (such as traffic concerns, concerns about the school facility, ideas for campus improvement, etc.)
   c. You have a concern about the leadership of that administrator

3. You should ask our Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team for help when:
   a. You have spoken to your child’s teacher and administrator and you are still not satisfied with the result. Again, be open to renewing the conversation with the teacher and administrator with help from a FACE representative.

How to reach them

1. Teachers: Ask your child’s teacher the best way to reach him or her. Some teachers love to interact with their parents and guardians through text message or phone calls. Others prefer email. Find out what works best for the teacher. However, whenever possible, ask for a telephone or in-person conversation at a time that is convenient for the teacher and doesn’t interrupt instruction time. Do not ask teachers to interrupt their teaching to talk to you, and do not ask them to talk to you in front of other parents.

2. Principals: Call or stop by the front office and ask to schedule a meeting. If you feel the matter is urgent, convey that information to a secretary – but do not expect a principal to be available immediately. Avoid email – principals get a lot of email and yours could get buried. Also, personal conversations are always better!

3. We’ll say it again: Personal conversations are always better! Some of us prefer email because we feel it is a way to avoid conflict. Others like it because it is a way to vent our frustrations without having to say it to someone’s face. Either way, the conversation is likely to be much less productive, and much less personal, than if you have it on the phone or in person.

4. When asking for an appointment, whether it be with a teacher or an administrator, give some information about the nature of your concern and what you’d like to discuss. It gives teachers or administrators a chance to research anything they might need to before your conversation, and it lessens the chance of anyone feeling surprised or, worse, confronted.
The power of language

“Words can inspire. And words can destroy. Choose yours well.” – Robin Sharma

Helpful language

“I” statements (Instead of “you” statements)

“I have some concerns I’d like to discuss with you.”

“I am worried about my child because…”

“I met with my child’s teacher but I still have concerns about…”

“I don’t understand xxx and I’d like to better understand xxx” or “Can you please help me to understand xxx?”

“I am very happy with how my child is doing academically in your class. But I’m concerned he is being bullied.” Or “I like the way you have helped my child with his/her grades. However, I would like to see more communication with parents.” Or “Overall I am happy with this school. However, I do have some concerns about the amount of traffic in front of the school.” (Start with a compliment or positive language before raising your concern)

Hurtful language

“You” statements (Try to use “I” statements)

“You don’t care” (Remember, assume good will. Most educators will immediately get defensive if you say they don’t care; they are in this profession because they care deeply about children)

“You are a racist” or “You are racist”

“You are picking on my child” or “He or she is picking on my child”

“You don’t like my child” or “You hate my child”

“You’re a bad teacher” or “He/she is a bad teacher” (Again, try to be specific. What is it that makes you feel this way? Are they really a bad teacher, or is there simply an issue or concern that needs to be addressed?)

“That teacher” or “that class” or “that student” (Using “that” is dehumanizing and puts down others)

“Other parents are saying” or “Everybody is talking about…” (Focus on your concerns, your child and his or her teacher. Don’t relay gossip, overgeneralize or try to talk on behalf of others unless you can be specific.)

Profanity or vulgarity (This is a non-starter)