

Dealing with difficult or demanding parents can certainly add to the stress of working in schools. Whilst staff in schools have the needs of multiple students to consider, most parents are only advocating for a small number of students, their own children. That's understandable!

Keeping the scale of the problem in perspective is important. What is known as the 80 / 20 rule generally applies. 80% of problems will come from 20% of parents. In most cases an even larger percentage of issues will come from an even smaller percentage of parents. This is not intended in any way to trivialise the issues. However keeping it in perspective is important. Whilst dealing with difficult parents may take a lot of time and energy, helping to resolve issues and keep the parents on side (where possible) is beneficial.

A further complexity is that most parents are responding to information that is second hand. They are generally responding to what they are 'told' happened. Seeking clarity about the facts therefore needs to be a priority before concerns can be truly resolved.

## Men build too many walls and not enough bridges

Sir Isaac Newton

A relationship of trust between the school and the home is important and benefits the student. I have found the advice in Covey's great book *'The Speed of Trust'* (2006) to be particularly useful and relevant. Covey advocates behaviours that build trust. Whilst the behaviours aren't 'rocket science', using the relevant behaviours in dealing with 'difficult' parents can not only resolve issues but also build the trust that can lead to issues being less likely to occur again.

**LISTENING FIRST** is always a good idea! - At times when we are faced with a confrontational parent we immediately get defensive and start to counter attack. This is particularly the case when the parent raising the issue clearly hasn't got all of the relevant information. Before correcting or jumping to a defensive mode it is usually best to really listen to ALL that they have to say.

**CREATE TRANSPARENCY** by correcting misinformation or providing further information that the parent wasn't aware of. This should be done in a calm manner. Be aware of your own tone and body language.

Covey highlights the importance of the 'sweet spot' with each of the behaviours. The fine balance between too little and too much of each behaviour is clearly evident in the next behaviour, **TALKING STRAIGHT**. It is important that we are honest and upfront with the parent. We need to get the balance right by being equally aware of being too soft - eg sugar coating or political spinning, as well as being too blunt eg harsh, abrupt or aggressive. The key is conveying our message calmly and clearly so they have accurate first hand information.

If we are at fault, the best thing that we can do is **CONFRONT REALITY** and **RIGHT WRONGS**. Blaming others and making excuses are unlikely to build trust. Confronting the situation, admitting where we have made a mistake and endeavouring to genuinely address it are far more likely to be helpful.

**CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS** is the next step. Both parties need to be clear on what happens next. Keeping these commitments is vital to building trust.

Ultimately we can **only** control our own behaviour. We can't control the behaviour of others. Whilst it is impossible to resolve ALL difficulties, applying Covey's behaviours that build trust is usually helpful.

## Key points

**Listen First** – try to understand exactly what their concern is without becoming defensive

**Create Transparency** – by calmly providing further information to the parent

**Talk Straight** – convey the message clearly without being too blunt or sugar coating

**Confront Reality and Right Wrongs** – if the parent's concern is justified, acknowledge it and work on a solution

**Clarify Expectations** – agree on what will happen next and the timeline

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