

SOLUTION-FOCUSED CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS: COVID-19 EDITION

Teachers will have many challenges before this COVID-19 shutdown is over. Like many of us, you are probably spending your days rationing and policing screen time, planning your grocery shopping as if it were a military campaign, washing your hands every 3 minutes, and listening to news updates with varying degrees of alarm. Some of you are trying to redesign your lesson plans for online delivery to students who will spend most of their time making faces at the other kids on the Zoom call and fighting off siblings who are trying to access the screen. You are probably also preparing to make phone calls home to parents, and I hope this document will help.

Let's start by acknowledging that conversations with some parents are more difficult than others. While teachers have the responsibility to rise above their frustrations and find a way to get through to these parents, we are not (necessarily) saints. If the conversation is not carefully planned, it can easily devolve into a litany of complaints or criticism from the parent, a lot of excellent but unwelcome advice from the teacher, and a rising sense of anger or discouragement for both. Like with teaching, if we want to these conversations to work, we need to think about what we want to accomplish before we begin, and we need to guide the process as we go along. So where do we begin?

THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A therapist friend once told me a story about a man who wanted to borrow his neighbours' snowblower. There had been a massive storm and there was no way he would get his car out of the driveway without it. As he walked through the waist-high snow drifts, he began to ruminate. *"I know he's not the most neighbourly guy, but I'm just going to go ahead and ask him. I mean, it's not like he needs it tonight. His driveway is already done. He's always the first to be done. Probably stands in the window laughing at us suckers with our shovels."* He finally reached the door, and rang the bell. As he was waiting for an answer, he said to himself, *"His house is worth twice mine. You'd think someone with that kind of money wouldn't be so cheap. But no. He never has a word to say to any of us."* The door opened. He looked at his neighbour and yelled, *"Oh yeah? Well you can keep your damn snowblower!"* and he stormed off.

You can see where this is going. What you tell yourself about the parent before and during the call is going to have a big impact on how the call goes. As teachers, we



know this from decades of research on the impact of self-fulfilling prophecies and from our own classroom experience. So we know that we need to prepare difficult calls in advance, but not like our friend with the snowblower.

Imagine yourself making a call to your most challenging parent. As you steel yourself for the difficult conversation, you tell yourself, *"Oh Gawd. Not her. This is going to be a nightmare. I just know it."* You think back to every unpleasant exchange you've had with her. You can expect her to be combative and negative, so you register everything she says in attack mode and you prepare a respectful defence. You try to make your voice sound chipper on the phone, but it's hard not to grit your teeth when your internal monologue is, *"Oh, yeah. There she goes blaming the school again. It's everyone's fault but hers"*. This makes you extra attentive to anything that could be interpreted as putting the blame on you, so even statements that might have been neutral now sound like attacks.

It's only normal- you've been down this road before. But is it helpful? It isn't for her and, just as importantly, it isn't for you. When we gird ourselves for battle, we have a defence for all attacks, but we also end up fighting a lot of battles that we wouldn't even have had if we were not always suited up. So how do we turn this around? We prepare ourselves for peace. It sounds cheesy, but it really does work. **Before we even make the call, we prepare our expectations- we think of the parent in the best possible light.** We don't have to sit on the floor and sing *Kumbaya* before the call, but we can **spend some time identifying common ground and assuming positive intentions**, so it's less likely that we have to go into battle in the first place.

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ALL PARENTS WANT WHAT'S BEST FOR THEIR KIDS

I have worked in residential drug treatment with teenagers, some of whom came from families where there was unbelievable abuse and neglect. It taught me a powerful and surprising lesson. I met some of the most dysfunctional parents you can imagine, but I did not meet a single one who did not, on some level, want the best for their child. This is a helpful starting point for even the most challenging parent: **unless you have proof to the contrary, assume that behind all their behaviour, they want what is best for their child.**

Tell yourself this directly before you pick up the phone. *"This parent wants the best for their child. So much so, that they are willing to ___ (blame me, yell, threaten to sue the school, etc.) because they think it might work. As difficult as it is, I know they do this because they are trying to do what is best for their child."* Try to replace *"Oh, yeah- there she goes blaming the school again"* with *"She really needs us to find an answer to this problem."*

Which interpretation is right? We'll never know. That's the thing about interpreting other people's intentions- we will never know if we are right. So we can just look for an interpretation that makes it easier to help. It needs to be plausible and to put the other person in their best light, but it doesn't always have to be right.

PLANNING YOUR DIFFICULT CALLS

You won't need to do this for most of your calls, but when you know the discussion might be difficult, think of parent calls like a lesson and plan for a neutral or a positive call instead of a battle:

1. Write down one positive thing about this parent

- What is important to them? What are their values?
- What do they seem to want for their child?
- How can you tell they are trying their best?

This is for you, mostly. But if you get a chance to bring it up during the call, it will really have an impact: *"I know how important it is for you that your son do well in school."*

If parents feel you understand what they want, they are more likely to feel you are on the same side.

2. Write down a few things you like or admire about the student

- What are their interests?
- What are 2 or 3 things they are good at?
- Think of a time they made you laugh or did something good that surprised you (even if it's a small example)

Again, this is mostly for you. It will change how you approach the call. But you can also try to bring these things into the conversation with the parent. If you can, do this early and often. After all, it's harder to be frustrated and combative with a teacher who is saying nice things about your kid.

3. Establish one goal for the call

- If you can only accomplish one positive thing during this call, what will it be?
- What would be most helpful for the parent?
- What would be most helpful for you?

Use these questions to establish one goal or one talking point, and try to let everything else go. Talk to yourself throughout the call: *"This is frustrating. They must be doing the best they can. What is really important here is ___."*

I hope these tips are helpful for your calls over the next few weeks, and maybe for parent conversations once school is back as well.

And while you are working on your patience and compassion for parents, remember to save some for yourself as well. Even if your calls don't go as well as you would have liked, **you too have good intentions, and you are doing the best that you can.** As a parent and teacher, I would like to point out that with everything going on around you right now, if you are not spending the whole day hiding in your car in your bathrobe, you're doing all right!

- Sharon Casey