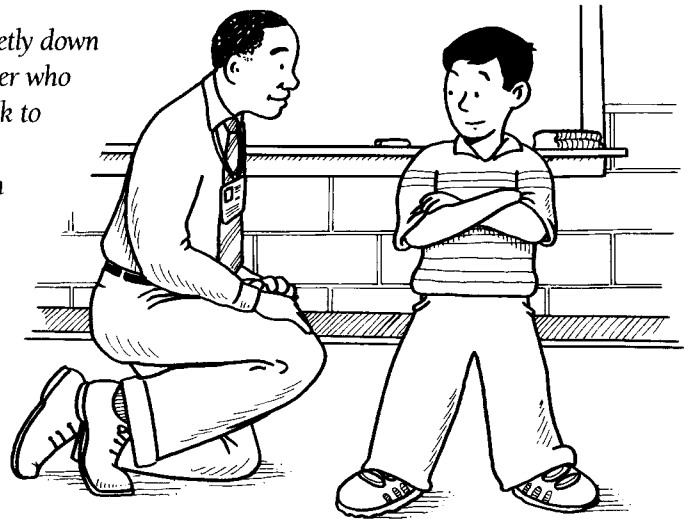


Dealing with **Difficult Situations**

A fourth-grader angrily refuses the art teacher's request to walk quietly down the hall. On the playground, two third-grade girls break into a fight over who said what to whom. As school ends, a parent arrives, demanding to talk to the teacher right now about her child's math grade.

What is the best way to deal with a defiant student, conflict between youngsters, or an angry parent? Here are suggestions to help you and your staff resolve the difficult situations you face daily.



The defiant child

It's unrealistic to expect perfect behavior from all students. Kids will talk out of turn, have outbursts, and fail to follow directions. But the openly defiant child—the one who blatantly disobeys you and won't back down—can really try an educator's patience.

Set the rules

Get off on the right foot at the beginning of the school year by laying out rules and the consequences for breaking them. Put your guidelines in writing, and send them home to parents. Go over them with students on the first day of class and with parents at your open house or back-to-school night. You can consider making the sheet into a "contract" by requiring student and parent signatures.



Encourage good behavior

Try to prevent defiant behavior by getting in the habit of noticing when students behave well. Be specific: "Susan, I like the way you're sharing your markers with Matt." "Ian, you did a great job helping me put the instruments away after music class." Your praise and appreciation are sure to promote better behavior from everyone.

Handle problems effectively

In spite of your efforts, things will sometimes get out of hand. For example, you tell your fourth-grade class that it's time for the daily writing activity. Instead of taking out his pencil and paper, David says loudly and angrily, "I don't want to do it, and you can't make me." What do you do? Try these steps:

1. Speak to the youngster privately. Take him into the hallway where you can still keep an eye on your classroom.
2. Get the student's attention. Make eye contact, and use his name: "David, I need you to listen to me now."
3. Be brief. A youngster who is upset will respond better to short, simple statements.
4. Stay calm. Send the message that people can get their points across by speaking in a nice tone.

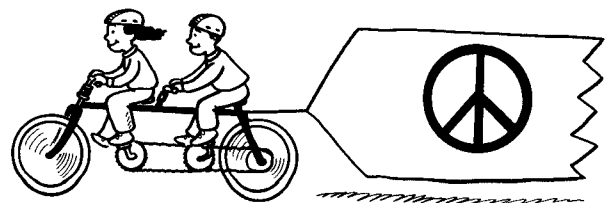
5. Show understanding. Ask the child why he is upset, and let him know you hear him by repeating what he says. Then, reinforce the behavior you're seeking: "You're upset that recess is over, but it's time to start your writing assignment."
6. Explain what will happen. Remind him of the consequences if he speaks disrespectfully to you again (he'll be sent to the principal's office, he'll have to do the assignment after school).
7. Praise good behavior. If the student does what you ask (goes into the classroom and quietly completes his work), tell him you are proud of him.
8. Deliver consequences. If the child continues to be defiant, follow through (send him to the principal's office, have him do the assignment after school).

Conflict among students

Conflict is a part of everyday life—in school and at home. Help your students learn to communicate better and resolve disagreements peacefully, and you'll teach them valuable skills for a lifetime.

Talk it over

Molly wanted Caroline to play ball with her, not jump rope. She called Caroline "stupid." Caroline told Molly she was being "bossy." To help the girls work things out, separate them and explain that they cannot play together until they can be nice. Then, let each student explain her side without interruption.



Express feelings

Teach youngsters appropriate ways to express their feelings. For example, let them know that it's okay to criticize an idea or action—but not the person. Using “I” statements is one tactic. Instead of saying, “You’re stupid,” Molly could say, “I got mad when you said you didn’t want to play ball with me.”

Deal with anger

Help students learn to calm down when they get upset. They might count slowly to 10. They can close their eyes and think about something they like to do (go to the beach, play at the park). Or they could repeat a phrase like, “Everything is all right.”

Find a solution

Try to lead the students to a compromise. You might ask each girl how she would feel if the other one always got to decide what they played. Suggest that they ask each other “What if” questions. “What if we play ball for five minutes and then jump rope for five minutes?” or “What if we jump rope first today and play ball first tomorrow?” Let them decide on the best solution.

Note: Sometimes these steps won’t work, and the fight will escalate. In that case, make sure you apply logical consequences for breaking school rules (a day of indoor recess, calling parents in for a conference). You’ll want to be sure the consequences are reasonable and have been laid out in advance.

The hostile parent

No matter how hard you’ve worked to establish good relationships with parents, some will get upset with you. Whether you’re faced with a complaint about a low grade or a discipline matter, try these strategies.

Listen to concerns

Let the parent vent his concerns before you try to address a solution. Don’t interrupt to defend yourself or correct a

point. Listening to the parent’s frustrations will allow you to understand what he is thinking. If the issue is complicated or you have a class full of students waiting, you may want to make an appointment with the parent for later.



Be calm

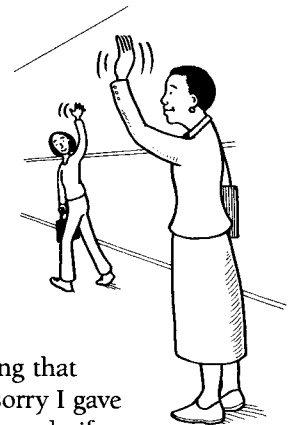
Stay in control by remaining cool and collected. Don’t speak right away. Take a few deep breaths to compose yourself and think about what you want to say. Keep your voice low and even—no matter how angry the parent is.

Note: If a parent screams, gets too close physically, or threatens harm, call

in another adult immediately—even if that means walking away to get someone.

Use neutral body language

Keeping your hands and arms open and visible shows that you care about the parent’s concerns. Sit or stand so you and the parent are on the same level. Maintain eye contact, and keep a neutral expression on your face. You’ll want to stand or sit up straight (slouching shows disinterest or lack of confidence) or perhaps lean slightly forward to show more interest.

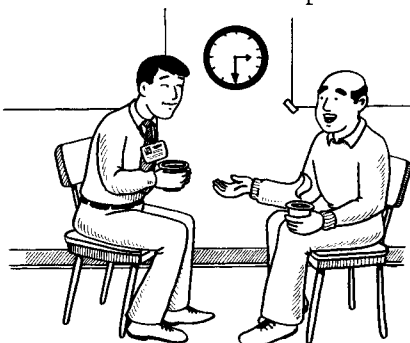


Affirm and clarify

Restate the parent’s concern instead of apologizing. Say, “I know it’s upsetting that Max failed the test,” rather than, “I’m sorry I gave Max an ‘F.’” Then, you can ask questions, clarify your decision, and show that you want to work together to help the child. Be sure to take notes during your discussion. This will create a record and also let the parent know that you take the situation seriously.

Create a plan

If there was a mistake on your part or by your staff, apologize and correct the error. If not, help the parent understand what the student needs to do to and how the parent can help. For instance, if Max failed because he didn’t do his homework, discuss ways to make sure he records assignments and finishes his work. Summarize the solution, bring Max in on the plan, and put it in writing. Then, remember to follow up to see if the ideas are working.



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