

Difficult Parent Conference

As teachers we view parent conferences with great ambivalence. On the one hand we have the opportunity to cooperate with our students' parents – that could turn the pupil's school year around. And, at the same time we are much more used to communicating with students than adults and may find ourselves in a defensive posture.

Four Stages

The four stages of a Difficult Parent Conference, with a commentary on the non-verbals, follows. It is essential to make the grade book or a paper the source of the problem. This preserves the relationship with the parent.

Parent Stage	Recommended Teacher Responses
1. Venting*	While the parent vents, maintain eye contact. Surprisingly, an overtly angry parent shifts easier than a covertly angry one. The parent probably has rehearsed a dozen times what they want to say**. The parent's ability to listen is like a full message machine. The parent cannot hear until they clear the previous rehearsed recordings by venting.
2. Shifting	Use your hand and eyes and direct the parent to a grade book or paper. Suggested wording, "Let's see what the grade book indicates."
3. Self Discovering	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 – continue to look at the grade book. As the teacher listens to the parent's discovery, the teacher makes empathetic sounds and nods their head.
4. Resolving	The teacher returns to eye contact when the parent is ready for solutions. Sometimes the teacher looks at the parent and softly says, "What we can do about (switch and look at the grade book and raise your voice) THAT is..."

Sometimes it takes more than one conference to process through the stages. The parent may not have fond memories of their own school experiences. Consequently,

inadequate feelings are stimulated. When the parent leaves the classroom they often relax. While walking the parent to the parking lot, a more neutral environment, the parent may shift - then a more meaningful conference occurs.

*The success of the conference depends on more than the teacher. Sometimes parents don't come with a win-win attitude. We can be successful with a parent who communicates with a win-lose attitude. There will be occasions where the parent hurts so much that the parent operates with a lose-lose (e.g., "I am hurting so much I want others to suffer also!"). As professionals we have every right to leave a conference when treated less than humanely. We have every right to not let people express unwarranted anger at us. A simple, "It sounds like it would be appropriate to have (mention position of the person you plan to ask to attend; e.g., principal, another teacher, union representative) present." At the same time, we have the option of allowing someone to vent.

A scene from the book *Silence of the Lambs* (sorry, it didn't appear in the movie) offers such an example. The patient, hard working FBI Director waits at the curbside to be picked up by his driver. That morning the driver learned the Director's chronically ill wife passed away during the night. As a way of giving the Director love, the driver intentionally waits around the block so that when the driver picks him up late, the Director can explode at the driver – thus *venting* his long held frustrations.

** "they" "their" "them" have both singular and plural connotations.