

# Effective Communication in Challenging Circumstances

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*When addressing families about a student's tardiness, delivering unpleasant information or conversing with families who may be angry could be awkward without proper preparation. This document suggests some strategies teachers can use to effectively communicate in challenging circumstances.*

## Suggestions for delivering unpleasant information

**Be empathetic.** Allow your tone to help convey your empathy. Using a low-key, it's not-the-end-of-the world presentation may generate more appreciation.

**Begin communication on a positive note.** Best practice is to positively communicate with families early in the school year when people are congenial and optimistic. This helps build trust. But if you have not done so, then start the encounter on a positive note.

Example: "I'm so glad you could speak with me about this problem on such short notice. I really appreciate your support."

**Present negative information.** Be considerate. Deliver the information as politely and carefully as possible rather than being reckless with words.

## Address questions and concerns

### Suggest ways to resolve serious differences of opinion

- Offer to meet with a third party
- Offer to do additional fact-finding or problem solving
- Offer to present the problem to someone higher in the chain of command for an authoritative decision

*Successful teachers are effective communicators. They tailor their communication to fit the situation and use different styles and methods to fit their goals – Yvonne Bender in "The Tactful Teacher: Effective Communication with Parents, Colleagues and Administrators"*

## Suggestions for communicating with people who are angry

*The trick to dealing with angry people is to refuse to become angry yourself. Managing the situation carefully may result in positive outcomes such as clearer communication, more realistic expectations in the future and some semblance of agreement.*

**Remain calm and stay as objective as possible.** Whether you agree or not, a person has the right to his or her own perspective, feelings and point-of-view. Rather than expending energy defending yourself against their claim, focus instead on facilitating the conversation toward resolution.

**Move to a more private venue.** Eliminating opportunities for an audience to gather may settle an argumentative person who is seeking attention as well as curb gossip that could generate from such an encounter.

Example: "I can see you are very upset. Could we go to the conference room where we can talk without being interrupted?"

**Allow the person to vent within reason.** Yelling and swearing are not appropriate ways for anyone to constructively communicate.

Example: “I realize you are very upset. I want us to come up with a solution together. But I’m not yelling or swearing at you. Please don’t yell or swear at me.”

If the yelling and swearing continues, politely end the meeting.

“I’m sorry, but it seems like you’re too upset to continue discussing this now. I’ll be more than happy to meet with you at a later time when we’re both calm. Please excuse me.” Then leave the area and alert your building administrator.

**Acknowledge the person’s concern by restating it in your own words.** Listen to how the person describes the complaint and repeat back to them what you heard whether you agree or not. Simply restating the concern illustrates that you were listening and helps you better grasp the concern. One way to restate is: “So, what I heard you say was...”

**Offer a sincere apology when it is called for.** If you are at fault or could have handled the situation better, sincerely apologize. If you can’t agree that you made a mistake then saying, “I’m sorry we can’t agree on this issue, but thank you for sharing your concern with me. How do we move forward from here?” may help transition the conversation to solutions.

**Ask for help finding a resolution.** If a viable solution is suggested, accept it graciously. If not, explain why the suggestion might not work and encourage the person to continue suggesting possible resolutions.

**Find a point of common agreement.** During the discussion, look for common points of agreement to help base a mutually-acceptable solution.

Example: “It seems we both agree on.... Let’s start there to help fix this situation or to keep this from happening again.”

**Work towards a solution that benefits both parties, if possible.**

**End the discussion cordially.** “I appreciate you talking with me about this” or in cases where a solution wasn’t identified: “I’m sorry that we couldn’t agree at this time. Let’s plan to meet with our principal and social worker to come up with a solution that’s acceptable for you and for me.”

*Teachers with effective communication skills have more positive working relationships not only with their students, but also with parents, administrators, supervisors, resource personnel, and the community at large. More importantly, their highly effective communication skills help them resolve complex problems and avoid long-term difficulties that teachers with weaker communication skills often struggle to overcome – Yvonne Bender, “The Tactful Teacher”*

