

Parentkind

Bringing together home & school

in partnership with



UK MEDIATION



Managing difficult conversations
and moving towards partnership

Ten top tips

for managing difficult conversations and moving towards partnership

“We know it’s always easier getting the results we want if everyone works together – it’s also a lot less stressful.”

Conflicts between parents and schools have hardly been out of the press over the last few years, be it school uniform changes, off-rolling of pupils, new curriculum initiatives (such as the recent Relationships Education changes), behaviour management techniques and sanctions, and children being ready to start at primary school to name a few.

We know it’s always easier getting the results we want if everyone works together – it’s also a lot less stressful. So how can parents and teachers navigate some of the more challenging yet necessary conversations?

A long-term solution would be to build parental engagement into the school or academy improvement plan. Parent voice groups can support this and provide both formal and informal structures for sharing plans and listening to parent views before changes are implemented. Parentkind’s Blueprint for parent-friendly schools is a helpful starting point for this. You can find out more about the blueprint at www.parentkind.org.uk/blueprint.



Parents and teachers can bring their own barriers and perspectives to a situation. It is therefore important for teachers and parents to understand these challenges in their school and explore how best to address them. Engaging both parents and teachers in this process is crucial to get an accurate and real perspective.

Below is a summary of the top potential barriers shared by parents and teachers in Parentkind surveys:

What Parents Say

Lack of time (work, childcare)

Haven't been asked

Low self-esteem, find the idea of getting involved intimidating

Negative experience of school

Low aspirations

Health issues

Lack of guidance on how to support their child

Not sure what skills and knowledge they can contribute

What Teachers Say

Lack of time for both teachers and parents

Difficult getting parents interested/involved

Belief among parents that educating their children is the school's job

Parents unable to support their child's learning because of limited education

Families disengaged with education

Reluctance of parents to come into school

Lack of training in parent engagement

Challenging parent behaviour

You can see more in our joint guidance with NAHT and ASCL: [Parentkind.org.uk/home-school-partnerships](https://parentkind.org.uk/home-school-partnerships)



But what if the conflict is now?

The ten top tips below focus on bringing about a one-to-one conversation to help resolve an immediate conflict or disagreement and help both parents and teachers move from conflict to partnership.

When conflicts come up over a point of principle, where personal issues are not a concern, you won't need to follow all of these steps, just choose those that suit the situation.

1 Decompress & get some perspective

Conflict can play havoc with our emotions and fight or flight mode can quickly take hold. Take a moment to step away, take a deep breath and clear your mind. Ask yourself some questions to get some perspective. What are the facts of the situation? Did the other person really do something wrong? Did they knowingly intend to upset you? And don't shy away from the hard question either- did I contribute to this conflict in some way?

2 Schedule a meeting

Both parents and teachers can be busy people. Parents may be working or have caring responsibilities, so find a time that works for both. If the parent is able to come in during the day, is there a colleague who can cover for you? A working parent may find an evening appointment preferable. Is it possible to hold the meeting somewhere that makes it easier for the parent, teacher or both to access? Be mindful of other barriers that might make parents or teachers nervous of engaging and try to address them at this stage.

3 Choose a comfortable and private environment

Conflict can be daunting. Both teachers and parents may be nervous about confrontation, or worried about what others might think. Take steps to make the environment as comfortable, safe, and secure as possible. Ideally, the meeting will be held in a private room with comfortable surroundings, away from any hustle and bustle, leaving both parent and teacher able to have a collaborative and productive conversation.

4 Address any power imbalance

Holding a meeting on school grounds can bring its own issues. Being on 'the teacher's territory', so to speak, may suggest an imbalance in power between parent and teacher. The parent may also feel that it's them against the school, and this will need to be addressed with as much impartiality and fairness as possible. Are there community venues you can use? If this becomes too much of an issue to overcome, however, you may wish to consider bringing in an independent third party that both parents and teachers are comfortable with, like a family liaison officer, a teacher from another year group or even a mediator.

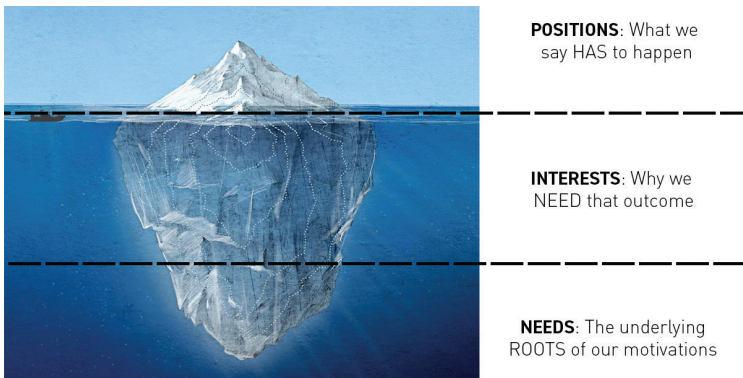
5 Start the meeting with a warm welcome

No matter how busy you are, take a minute to relax so you start the meeting in a positive and friendly way, because a genuinely warm welcome can go a long way to breaking down barriers. It may sound obvious, but you'd be surprised how often we forget to smile when we know a difficult conversation is coming. By making it clear at the beginning of the meeting that you're there to work together to support the child, you'll be on the path to a positive outcome from the start.

6 Listen Actively

Whether you are a parent or a teacher, you will be keen to put your point across at the start. Try to resist the urge to interrupt – actively listening to the other person’s perspective can be really helpful. Try to find out what the other person has experienced/observed and what they would like to happen next. This will help you to understand why they are looking for a particular outcome and what their underlying needs are (i.e. to be heard? To be treated fairly? To feel less stressed?) It is ok to ask questions as long as they are focused on gathering a better understanding of the whole situation. Gathering a clear view on both sides will help you to come up with a solution or compromise that you can both agree on. Empathise with how the other person is feeling (and express it). It doesn’t mean you are agreeing with them, but it shows you are hearing their perspective. Be genuine and sincere about it though and resist the temptation to make your point – your turn to speak and to be listened to will come!

The Interest Iceberg demonstrates this well.



e.g. A position or statement of “I want this teacher fired!” could translate to an interest of “I want my child to have the best possible education and I don’t feel that they’re getting it from this teacher”, which gives both parents and teachers some common ground to work from.

7 Don’t shy away from difficult questions

If there is an issue to solve, don’t shy away from the elephant in the room. It might be uncomfortable to address it, but if you have followed all the other steps, you can focus on finding solutions, next steps and looking forward to the future that can give you a real opportunity for success.

8 Ask for a break if you need it

Sometimes difficult conversations can bring up negative memories, and with them we can experience negative emotions like fear or anger. It is absolutely fine to ask for a break to help calm and ready yourself to pick up the conversation again. We are all human and capable of feeling - so be kind to each other.

9 Shift the focus from past to present

When we get stuck in conflict, we tend to find ourselves completely focused on the past and what's already happened. We may try to prove we were right all along or attribute blame or fault to others. When this happens, we must try to change how our thoughts are presented, shifting the focus from what's already happened to what is going to happen next. Use open questions such as "How" and "What" (e.g. "How can we take this forward?" and "What do you want to see happen?") This is a technique often used in mediation called 'reframing'. By bringing everyone into the present moment, we can leave the entrenched positions behind, move towards responsibility, and start looking at what can happen in the future.

10 Find your common ground

Both teachers and parents want what's best for the child. As a parent it can be hard to hear things about your child that are negative or sound like criticism, be it behaviour, attendance or ability to manage the level of school work. We need to remind ourselves that both parents and teachers want the same things: we want to see children succeed in their education so they are able to pursue work and hobbies that make them happy. Don't be afraid to say this out loud whether you are the parent or the teacher. Focus on how you can help the child go forward in their education. Openly sharing your hopes and aspirations as a parent or as a teacher for that child can be a great way to find a common starting point, and focus the meeting on how you can achieve this together.

Final thoughts

We know, and evidence tells us that when parents and schools work together, the outcomes for children improve on many levels. By communicating effectively, listening actively and focusing on solutions, especially when we're faced with difficult conversations, we can achieve some great outcomes for the children we all care for.

About Parentkind

Parentkind is a charity that champions all the ways that parents can participate in their child's education and is the leading Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Parent Council (PC) membership organisation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The charity provides training and resources to teachers, governors and parents to build successful home-school relationships while promoting greater parental engagement and involvement, and opportunities for parent voice to be heard.

About UK Mediation

Founded in 1999, UK Mediation has come to be recognised as the leading provider of mediation services and training. Based in the United Kingdom and operating all over the world, UK Mediation uses only the most experienced mediators and adult educators, either resolving disputes between individuals or training them how to do it for themselves. Thousands of people have trained with them to become professional mediators and they've worked with hundreds of businesses across a wide variety of sectors, all to help them resolve conflict more positively.



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