



# THE 10 MOST CHALLENGING TYPES OF PARENTS

and How to Work with Them

BY BRETT J. NOVICK


As a principal, you know them all too well—parents with issues. Sure, they’re fewer than 5 percent of all the parents you deal with, but they take up 95 percent of your time. Who are these difficult parents, and what are the most effective ways to work with them?

**1. The “Angel Child” Parent: These parents sincerely believe that their child is never, ever, at fault.**

**Effective Strategies: Stick to the facts.** Avoid getting swept up in their emotional turbulence, and remember that mirroring anger, frustration, or emotion will only serve to pour kerosene on the fire.

**Document your conversations.** When parents feel “victimized,” they can become litigious. Documentation can help clarify facts, reduce emotional exaggeration, and avoid legal disputes.

**Avoid triangulation.** Children of these parents often will “triangulate” parents against teachers, administrators, or other adults in authority, so be sure to include the student in the conversation with these parents.



“Encourage rules and consequences that are consistent across classrooms.”

**2. The “He’s Your Problem Now” Parent: These parents will either tell you “it’s your job to handle the student” or not call back at all.**

**Effective Strategies: Don’t become defensive.** Some of these parents are drowning in a world of financial despair and/or emotional, physical, or family issues. First, see if these survival concerns are being met.

**Don’t expect the parent to be a motivating factor for compliance.** Seek internal rewards, motivations, and consequences that can be used within the school.

**Involve the school counselor.** Have the school counselor or teacher create an inventory of rewards that can be used within the school setting.

**3: The Questioning “Know it All” Parent: These parents question why teachers do something a certain way, and why you as an administrator run your school in a particular way.**

**Effective Strategies: Show these parents the information they’re seeking (within reason).** Often these parents use questions to understand and feel like they are a part of their child’s education; do not, however, confuse questions with passive-aggressive criticism.

**Be proactive in advising parents.** The more information that these parents have on the front-end, the less apt they are to question how things were handled on the back-end.

**Encourage teachers to notify parents in writing if they deviate from curriculum.**

This is especially true with items that could be deemed as the least bit controversial.

**4: The “Bullying” Parent: These parents emulate or demonstrate harassing, intimidating, or bullying behaviors for their children.**

**Effective Strategies: Be proactive.** Do not wait for this child to go home and convey what he feels happened in a particular situation, as this gives ample time for a parent’s anger to grow. Call the parent and allow your side of the story to sink in before the student gets home.

**Don’t call these parents when you’re angry.** These parents often mirror anger when they are confronted, which almost inevitably leads to an explosive argument.

**DO NOT email these parents.** Emailing these parents can appear confrontational, even if unintended. Calling and documenting the conversation provides a one-way form of record keeping that works to your advantage.

**5: The “My Child Will Attend School When They Want To” Parent: These parents think that school attendance is not necessarily compulsory.**

**Effective Strategies: Look for patterns of absences.** Patterns can tell you a lot about what could be going on at home.



“Do not allow these parents to take the conversation to blaming or victimization.”

**Encourage teachers to provide work for chronically absent students.** Not providing work is counterproductive; it does not allow a student who may want to keep up with work the ability to do so.

**Keep an eye out for patterns of abuse or neglect.** Sometimes, unfortunately, students are kept home to allow bruises to heal or because parents are not present physically or emotionally to put a student on the bus. Watch for red flags.

**6: The “Not My Child” Parent: These parents believe that their child would never do what you say they did and are not responsible for any of the issues their child is involved in.**

**Effective Strategies: Educate the parent on board policies and procedures.** Focusing on the black-and-white policies takes the conversation away from blame and toward rules and regulations.

**Allow the parents to address their concerns first.** Encouraging parents to share their worries first enables you to remind them in a firm-yet-understanding tone that the rules of the school apply even if they don’t necessarily agree with all of them.

**Have another faculty member present at parent meetings.** This step helps to further document these sessions, which is especially important if the parent brings the confrontation to another level.

**7. The “Passive-Aggressive” Parent: These parents can be heavily involved in school organizations and social media. They may establish dual relationships with teachers as an educator and friend.**

**Effective Strategies: Be aware of gifts—even small ones.** If a teacher or administrator accepts gifts, such as the daily coffee or bagel, there may be a price to pay.

**Be careful of backhanded compliments.** A passive-aggressive parent will state a compliment by using a comparison to another faculty member or administrator. By not defending the other person or accepting this compliment, you may be inherently indicating that you agree with their views.

**Maintain boundaries at all costs—even when it comes to social media or the soccer field—and advise faculty to do the same.**

**8. The “Why Is the Teacher Always Picking on My Child?” Parent: These parents question why their child is always victimized by either the students, the faculty, or both.**

**Effective Strategies: Do not allow these parents to take the conversation to blaming or victimization.** Remind them that it is the behavior that you are addressing. You are not condemning their child’s character or, consequently, their parenting skills.

“Don’t focus on being right or wrong; focus on what is right for the student.”

**Avoid using too much emotion or overstating the issue.** Too much talking or being reactive muddies the water with these families and only makes them feel more victimized and attacked.

**Encourage rules and consequences that are consistent across classrooms.** It is difficult to enforce rules and consequences when each teacher has vastly different standards. It’s also tough to mediate when there are contrasting rules, expectations, and consequences.

**9. The “Helicopter Parent”:** These parents are named for their tendency to “hover” around their children and are generally considered to be over-involved or overindulgent.

**Effective Strategies: Contact the parents on a regular basis initially.** Some staff members may say there’s no time to do this. If you do not call at your convenience, you will get calls from the parent of an “urgent” nature frequently at their convenience.

**Compliment the parents for their earnest concern for their child.** Remember, parents are hovering over their children with worry but also out of a deep and passionate concern for their child’s well-being.

**Note successes and report these to the parent.** These parents are concerned that their child will not be able to handle the proverbial “real world” without their intervention. When you report successes to the parents, it helps them to realize that they do not have to do everything for their child.

**10. The “Distrustful of Public Education Parent”:** Some parents are inherently distrustful of public schools, administrators, or teachers.

**Effective Strategies: Avoid having meetings with negative or critical feedback.** Five faculty members do not need to say the same thing about how a student is performing poorly in school; one person can say this. Therefore, prepare ahead as to who will say what.

**Don’t focus on being right or wrong; focus on what is right for the student.** Oftentimes, the parents or faculty get trapped in “being right.” We must ask ourselves if we engage in that power struggle what we are doing productively that is “right” for the student.

**Look for opportunities of mutual gain.** If we can give the parent an opportunity to “save face” and find a chance for us to meet halfway, that is the optimal resolution—a win-win solution.

### The Bottom Line

Keep in mind that these parental types only represent a handful of the parents you may interact with, and remember that many of these parents may be drowning in a sea of frustration or emotional, physical, and/or financial issues. Therefore, they may try to pull down anyone that is around them (including you) in an attempt to keep their heads above water. 🚫

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