

Parents *and* Schools



Is It to Be War or Peace?

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BACK IN THE DAY I was a founding professional advisor for one of the Chicago CHADD chapters. In that capacity I would attend all the professional presentations. It was striking how often parents' questions were themed by how to deal with PITA (pain-in-the...) teachers and school administrators. This led me to wonder if there were serious problems with how the Chicago public schools were responding to youth diagnosed with ADHD.

Flash forward a few years and I started doing in-service training for teachers. It was striking how often teachers' questions were themed by how to deal with PITA parents. I noticed that all of these clenched fists—which were exacerbated by not sufficiently understanding each other's intentions—served no one. As this tension interferes with the actualization of youth diagnosed with ADHD at school, I thought I'd share my top seven tips for both groups to collaborate effectively.

Tips for parents

- Always attend conferences and meetings regarding your child; strive to avoid single parenting in two-parent households. Attending conferences, even when everything is going swimmingly, says to both the teacher and your child that your child's education is very important to you. (For school meetings I'd also strive to bring a skillful child mental health professional with you whenever possible.)
- Be a few minutes early to meetings, stick to the allotted time, and take notes. This says to the teacher that you value their time and input. Also, if written documents are to be shared, ask to see them in advance of the meeting.
- If the teacher has not mentioned any of your child's strengths,

ask for such a list before discussing problems. This is only fair, as your child has *at least* as many strengths as vulnerabilities (and usually many, many more); moreover, strengths can be used as fulcrums for change.

- Listen with an open mind to what the teacher has to offer. The more skillful teachers will make it easy for you to avoid getting defensive. However, even if you are dealing with a less tactful person, try to find the value in what is being said. Remaining open, no matter what emotional reactions you are having, is a gift to your child. Moreover, agree whenever possible.
- Affirm any aspects of the teacher's approach or behavior that are worthy of it. Moreover, use empathy and gratitude when possible and avoid going over to the dark side (through anger

and blaming, that is). So many questions seem to be effectively answered with two words: loving kindness.

- If the teacher has not volunteered such information, inquire about grades, homework compliance and quality, effort in the classroom and relationships with both the teacher and with peers. Sometimes teachers don't share important content that doesn't interfere with their teaching (such as when a kid is excessively withdrawn, for example), so it's important to ask. I find too many parents rely on the faulty principle of "things must be fine if I haven't heard anything." Also, share your child's homework experience, especially if it is taking longer than ten minutes times their grade in school (for example, if a sixth grader is working earnestly for more than an hour each night).
- Follow up with a thank-you note that expresses gratitude, reviews any action steps you've agreed to, and reviews when you will next communicate. (Of course, you're avoiding sounding like an attorney who is laying the groundwork for a future cause of action.)

Tips for teachers and school administrators

- Aspire to have difficult conversations face-to-face. Calling up a parent to discuss a problem on the phone, or emailing about the problem (worse), is like planting a field of corn by tossing the seeds out the side of a biplane as you fly over. Maybe that's all that resources can allow for, but then one should not blame the seeds or the field when the outcome is compromised.
- Start with the child's strengths, not as an Oreo cookie (starting and ending with undeveloped or inauthentic positive remarks only to set the stage for what is really the focus), but because you authentically enjoy a bunch of stuff about the kid. Hearing stories about a kid's strengths is to a parent what scratching under the chin is to a cat.
- Before sharing your concerns ask the parent(s) something like: "Every one of us have opportunities to grow. I know I do! What would you say are Aiden's top opportunities for growth?" If a problem is first noted by a parent, and they experience you as a helpful ally, tensions fall and collaborations rise.
- Offer to put the kid on display for a unique and positive contribution to the school (this idea comes from psychologist Robert Brooks). The kid can be the one to open the school door as people arrive in the morning, read announcements, help janitors at lunch, help monitor younger kids, take care of a school hamster, and so forth. This can counteract the kid's history of being on display for a unique and negative contribution.
- Choose in-service topics that can enhance your team's understanding of ADHD and its associated challenges, especially from experts who focus on how to deploy cost-effective, science-based, and practical interventions.

- Get training in how to understand, reduce, and respond to burnout and compassion fatigue. Just about everyone working in a service industry is vulnerable (myself included). Moreover, I find most teachers significantly underestimate their power to make transformative contributions across little moments in time (search for "Be a Mr. Jensen" on YouTube). Solutions for burnout and compassion fatigue can be transformative, practical, effective, and difficult to come up with on your own.
- Aspire to not make disparaging remarks about kids and parents, even when they are not around. Harsh judgements, whether directed at oneself or others, reflect a lack of information or a distortion of the truth a hundred percent of the time. Pros look past the surface-level agitation to the human condition that drives the uncomplimentary behavior, responding with empathy and lovingkindness whenever possible. (This is not the same thing as justifying or tolerating negative behavior or refraining from giving consequences.)

Discuss your goals

Engaged parents love their child more than their own lives. Moreover, most teachers are in the biz to make a positive difference in kids' lives (those who are in it for the money got some bad career counseling along the way).

These good intentions leave just about all teachers and parents with fantastic goals for kids; indeed, suggesting that you discuss your goals for the child is my bonus tip for each group. Where we get into conflict is with regards to the methods for reaching those goals. Using the tips above can increase the likelihood of getting on the same page and reduce the chances that the conversation will devolve into people quoting laws and policies at each other (*yuck*; sometimes necessary of course, but *yuck*). 🗣️



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