



# Dealing with difficult parents

Parents – we can't exist without them! Most encounters with parents are a delight; both pleasant and profitable. In this article, I shall be looking at a small, vociferous, sometimes influential minority that can wreak havoc if left unchecked, although let us not forget the vast majority of our loyal parents who are, after all, our bread and butter and by and large a joy to work with.



**By Thomas Packer,  
former Headmaster**

Having said this, many difficult encounters can be avoided if a school takes the approach that managing difficult parents is not a series of isolated one off events but a process which if managed

properly on a whole school basis can reduce significantly the number of complaints and problems. Many of those who work in schools will have encountered a difficult situation with a parent at least once.

Whilst senior leaders might be able to calm parents down, they nevertheless find the experience wearing and time consuming. Less experienced teachers and secretarial staff – often on the front line – find it more difficult to deal with some parents who can be very intimidating or even aggressive. Such encounters can escalate to a situation where awkward

conversations are avoided, or there is a complete breakdown in communication. This has never been more prevalent than in Independent Schools, where parents are driven partly by the current concept of 'consumer care' embedded in educational culture together with the quite natural desire to see their children thrive, repaying the enormous financial sacrifice that they are making. Concerns range from serious issues such as academic results or accusations of bullying to seemingly more trivial such as their child's participation in the school play or in a sports team.

## Why independent education?

It is important to understand what parents, in general, expect from their child's school. Some will have a genuine desire to give their child the best start in life, often at huge personal sacrifice to themselves.

They can be fiercely ambitious for their child, expecting him or her to be better than the other children. Others hope that their child will succeed at areas that they themselves did not excel; almost leading their own lives through their children. Sadly, there's a minority who can be vocal, who see independent (or 'private') education as a means of enhancing their social standing. They choose a school on the basis of its perceived status. They are choosing their child's peer group, or even hoping to widen their own circle through their child's friends.

Another difficulty we face in independent education is that we must provide value over and above the state funded alternatives. These are free. In a parent's mind, if they pay £10,000 per year on fees they expect to see something that is £10,000 better than the local state school. In reality of course, the 'extra' funding is minimal unless fees reach twice that figure.

## Why parents become difficult

The reasons why parent become difficult range around these factors:

- They have a genuine concern
- They want their child to be better than others'
- They have ambitions for themselves
- Other problems (eg mental health, influence of alcohol or drugs)

From this list it is evident that some are perceptions that the School can help dispel and some are genuine concerns. Some are simply unreasonable. Of course the child brings about a number of issues at home (or even by text message).

However only some are genuine and the rest manipulation. Today's parents are too willing to take everything their children say at face value without asking relevant questions and pausing for thought. Then we have issues raised which are about the parent's own ambition / status.

## What often happens?

Only too often, when confronted with a potential parental confrontation this is what usually happens:

- Avoid the problem
- Deny the problem; hope it goes away
- Change the subject
- React emotionally: Become aggressive, abusive, hysterical, or frightening
- Find someone to blame
- Make excuses
- Let someone else deal with it

None of these is good enough! Whether it be a genuine concern or a simply outrageous demand, parents deserve to be treated with respect and the issues rarely disappear on their own. In fact, sidestepping the problem simply fuels any dispute.

## How to deal with difficult situations

The importance of the dialogue between school and home cannot be underestimated, and those schools which have taken steps to ensure that their relationship with their parents is a good one, based on mutual respect and concern for the young people whose care they share for at least five days each week will have fewer flash-points on the level of personal interaction between parent and teacher.

Everyone has an experience of school life, so, in that respect, all our parents feel that they are experts! For many, their own experiences of school and of teachers are not particularly good ones: some find entering school premises a daunting prospect, and this unease can quickly escalate into difficult or aggressive behaviour.

Most difficulties can be avoided if the school has in place clear policies and procedures that have been communicated to parents in advance and in a manner that is easily understood. Knowing the school's position, and everyone in the organisation applying procedures consistently not only reduce the number of difficult encounters but also make them easier to resolve, because there is no doubt in anybody's mind.

Therefore consistency and communication are vital, as are clear role definitions.

How many staff are familiar with the school's stance on some of the common 'flashpoint' issues? For example:

- setting and streaming
- behaviour
- appearance
- reporting and matters related to attainment
- support, mentoring and monitoring
- the school's powers outside the school gates

And how clearly, how often and by what means are these communicated to parents?

## Practical tips

A useful overarching tool when dealing with parents is the 'LEAP' method.

Listen - make it clear that you are listening.

Empathise - show understanding (but don't agree).

Ask - ask relevant, open questions to help the discussion.

Problem solve - reach a solution that's workable.

Taking each stage in turn, it's vital that whatever your private thoughts you must not just listen carefully but show that you are listening.

This is particularly crucial when a parent is visibly angry or upset.

This is followed by demonstrating that you understand their point of view. On no account must you actually agree.

## School - Parent Partnerships

What you are aiming to do is to show empathy, with statements such as “I see why you are upset...” “I understand why you are concerned...” These first two steps do much to defuse an ugly situation and also enable rapport and trust to develop.

Then it’s time to get to the bottom of things. Ask relevant questions to clarify exactly what the complaint is about and what evidence there is and what evidence you might need to gather. Questions such as “when”, “where”, “who else was present”, “what” and “how” are useful in this respect. On no account accept hearsay or innuendo. In all cases clarify how substantial the evidence really is. The final stage is the conclusion. It might be that an agreeable solution is readily forthcoming, in which case go for it! However, often you need to gather further evidence, which can be time consuming: bullying for instance. So the ‘problem solving’ stage in this case would be an agreement as to how

matters are going to develop, including agreed intervals at which you’ll update the parent on progress to date. There is nothing more infuriating than agreeing a way forward for the problem to apparently disappear simply because it is taking longer than expected. The parent will interpret this as you not taking the matter seriously or not bothering to take any action.

### Conclusions

There’s a lot more to dealing with potential conflict and difficult situations than we’ve covered here. A whole or half day staff training programme is an excellent way forward. It will reduce the number of stressful encounters and bolster parental/school relationships leading to greater parental satisfaction, retention and recruitment. It also offers a unique opportunity for different staff to work together – support, admin and teaching. Such opportunities are rare in schools; here’s your

chance to build a stronger, more cohesive school community. Last but by no means least it will help a school focus on exactly what it expects from parents, what parents expect from the school and vitally how this is communicated. The author, Thomas Packer, has a wealth of experience in resolving conflict and awkward situations and he can offer tailor made training days or consultancy services to individual schools or clusters. The emphasis throughout is on practical, useful strategies illustrated with real life situations. Difficult parents will always exist in independent schools. But with careful communication and delicate handling in stances of awkward conversations can be minimised. Remember the LEAP principle and never agree to something you cannot or will not do, no matter how strong the pressure. Equally never “agree” to something on behalf of a third party and always make timescales realistic.

## ARE YOU COMPLIANT FOR AN UPCOMING INSPECTION?



ARE YOU HAVING SLEEPLESS NIGHTS, WORRYING ABOUT THE RISK OF YOUR SCHOOL'S REPUTATION IF YOU DON'T HAVE A GOOD INSPECTION – ALONG WITH THE RISK OF LOSING PUPILS ON YOUR ROLL AS A CONSEQUENCE?

**Rest easy; we can help you.**

The Governors' Toolkit has been compiled by a team of experts in governance and inspections from ISI. Subscribers are regularly updated by email with ongoing changes to ensure that they are kept up-to-date with new developments and regulations.

It will help you identify areas of non-compliance and improvement, but also provides the key inputs to develop an action plan to remedy any oversights.

TO START YOUR FREE 14-DAY TRIAL,  
VISIT: [HTTPS://GOVERNORSTOOLKIT.COM](https://governorstoolkit.com)

**Governors'**  
**Toolkit**