Chapter 7

Supporting Parents of Children with Challenging Behaviours

Communicating with parents who challenge …

Bill Rogers

Many years ago, I was sitting in a principal's office with an angry mother and her seven-year-old child (whose behaviour – at school – had 'created' a very large file). The principal had asked me to sit in on the 'interview', as I had been working in 'Jackson's classroom' as a teacher–mentor. I had worked with Jackson's teacher to enable a behaviour plan to help Jackson with his low frustration tolerance and attentional behaviours. My colleague and I had seen some hopeful, early, changes in his behaviour.

The principal also wanted some moral support at this meeting with Jackson's mother – it can be taxing when a mother storms in with obviously hostile body language. Before we had finished a 'welcome' and a careful focus of, 'We wanted to talk with you about Jackson …' she started a tirade of, 'Ever since he's come to this sh_t school you've had it in for him … He was alright at the last fifteen schools …!' The tirade continued … with f___ing, and sh_tting about the 'bastard teachers in this school …'. We let her run with 'this' for a few minutes.

I directed Jackson to sit outside the office and gave him a box of toys to play with. It took us another five minutes or more to calmly find a 'break into, and through', the 'psychological traffic' of her 'spleen-venting' (as it were!) and reassure her that this meeting had been called so that we could share Jackson's 'success' with his behaviour plan (Chapter 3).

- *We assured her that we knew she cared for Jackson (as did we).*
- *We focused on the link between his behaviour 'plan' and how it would* encourage and support his learning at school.

- *We invited her understanding and support. We asked if she had any questions ...*

It took time and patience (in that meeting) to gain a sense of connectedness with Jackson's mother. I also experienced – yet again – the principal's goodwill, grace and patience with this mother.

In the following essays, my colleagues recount a number of situations where they have sought to defuse tension – with stressed, anxious, demanding, challenging and angry parents – while at the same time seeking to be professional and supportive. No mean feat! Increasingly, it seems, we have to deal with very frustrated, angry and even abusive parents.

An article in the Sunday Express *(14 September 2008) suggested that as verbal abuse and physical intimidation from parents who fail to see that their children had behaved badly increases, teachers are more likely to let bad behaviour pass rather than risk parents' anger. Not only do teachers fear the reactions of such parents but there is widespread concern that these parents are not taking responsibility for their children nor are they playing their part in the bargain in making teachers authority figures. This feeling of being undermined isn't helped by the fact that in the 2007–08 academic year, more than 70,000 pupils who assaulted teachers were let back into school.*

> **Editor's note**
> A provocative headline in an Australian newspaper, 'Workplace is a war zone' (*The Age*), notes that research from the Australian Institute of Criminology, conducted among police, doctors, nurses, taxi drivers and teachers, indicates that these professions face the greatest risk of verbal attacks and, even, assaults, injury through employer negligence, physical and verbal abuse, racial abuse, bullying, sexual harassment and (even) malicious gossip (*The Age* newspaper, Santina Perore, 22 February 2000).
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> In each of these professions – of course – those members of the public are vulnerable, often feeling anxious, confused, in pain (psychological or physical or both); in our case as teachers, this is mostly parents or close relations of the student/s in question.

Wherever a sensitive – and disturbing – issue like this is raised in the press, it can seem as if we are overwhelmed by difficult parents; we are not. Most parents (thankfully) are co-operative and supportive, even when their son or daughter is presenting with behaviour and learning concerns. However, there is a small but significant group of parents who can create significant stress for their own children and teachers. It is for this reason that my colleagues

and I have sought to address this issue severally to enable a practical, yet supportive, response when supporting parents. Although these colleagues work at primary- and secondary-age levels in 'regular' schools, pupil-referral visits and schools for students with emotional and behaviour disorders, there are common shared practices that enable supportive and positive relationships with parents and children.

Dealing with – and supporting – difficult parents

Gail Doney

We know that the greatest influence in any child's life is their parents. Yet as schools and teachers, we often seem to concentrate on trying to provide for the academic, social and emotional needs of our students within the boundaries of the school, believing that we can have little or no influence on the parental influence of a child's life. In this essay Gail seeks to share how she communicates with the more challenging parents to enhance parental support.

Connecting with the parent

As a classroom teacher – some years ago now – I always made the relationships with my students' parents a priority and especially targeted the extremely quiet parent, the over-anxious parent and, most importantly, the parent of students who had obvious behaviour or social problems. I would always welcome the parent warmly, often approaching them in the morning and after school to have a personal chat, sometimes sharing my personal experiences and family with them, and most importantly ringing them now and again to tell them how proud or pleased I was with their child. I would make a point to congratulate them as a parent saying such things as: 'You have done a wonderful job to produce such ... a lovely child; a confident child; or a child with an enormous exuberance for life.'

Taking the time and effort to remember a parent's name *seems basic* but it is imperative. Children tell us one of the most important things a teacher can do is call them by name – it develops and contributes hugely to a sense of connectedness and belonging. It is the same for parents. School can be just as terrifying for some parents – new people, not quite knowing the expectations or how things work and being anxious about fitting in and finding a sense of value and worth. Enabling a positive connectedness with the parents of my students in this area as a classroom teacher was a crucial aspect of my teaching but now, as an Assistant Principal, how was I going to transfer this practice to a whole-school level? That was my challenge!

> Editor's note
> Parents also come to a school with their own memories of schooling (good, bad or in between). Some parents have had a negative, failing, even punitive experience of schooling; this will quite likely colour how they feel as they make any visit to school. Obviously, those first visits are crucial in engaging some sense of connection and acceptance. *Our* perspective-taking is always *helpful*: how do we feel as a new parent in a new school (see also p. 152).

How much of this can we plan for?

Strategic planning to develop parent relationships on a whole-school basis is critical to achieve success when dealing with difficult parents. The more 'deposits' you have in the '*positive* relationship bank', the more easily the more negative situations can be resolved.

Training teachers and even giving them time to role-play, practise and consolidate their skills in developing relationships with parents is the first step. Practise 'making conversation' and discuss behaviours that enhance parent connectedness. Many teachers are nervous enough about their grade, much less in taking the time to worry about how they will connect with and relate to parents. In particular, young teachers are often more 'frightened' of the parents than anyone.

The transition phase from pre-school and kindergarten to 'big school' is probably the only time that schools will get 100 per cent of all parents together at one time – listening attentively and (mostly) with great eagerness and expectation – a bit like classrooms on the first day. How we run that first session and the rest of the programme is crucial to our success. It will be important to have activities that promote positive relationships between parents, educating parents on the rules and programmes at the school and the reasons and purpose for them, giving parenting tips and articulating repeatedly how and why we should always work together. *The children are the first priority for all of us*.

All these factors are important but we do not live in a fairytale world. Since becoming Assistant Principal, there have been a number of occasions on which I have had to deal with angry parents. One important thing I have learnt over my many years in education is to try to understand the values and behaviours of parents sometimes described as 'living in generational poverty'. This attempt at understanding has been fundamental to any success we have had as a community of teachers in gaining parental trust and enlisting their understanding and support.

The immediate emotional moment

When a very angry parent presents at the school, they may well be extremely

agitated, psychologically and physically. They may well have a mindset intent on 'getting their way', insisting the school do … (this or that) 'now!' They may even want revenge for what they perceive as an injustice to their child or to themselves.

At this point, the parent may be verbally hostile, or provocative, using swearing or even threatening language. The swearing may not be directly 'attacking' but rather an expression of their anger (and difficulty in relative self-control). We too may have experienced these feelings *and* behaviour ourselves!

We avoid getting drawn into the secondary stage of an angry or aggressive situation: swearing and rude behaviour to some extent can be tactically ignored, depending on the time and place. Listening to what is being said – giving the parent an opportunity to vent, and to feel that their concerns have been given acknowledgment – is essential to discovering the core reason for the anxiety and coming to a satisfactory solution for all concerned. Never become defensive. We can, of course, be assertive as it is imperative to adhere to our duty of care for students and other community members. Above all, though, stay calm! At times this can be a difficult mental state to control (see p. 163f).

The following two examples illustrate how we might seek to deal with extremely difficult parents in a way that is likely to engage a workable – even a positive – outcome.

Ann

Although skinny, frail and poorly dressed, Ann looked excited with anticipation during her first visit to our school. She wanted the very best school for her child and decided that this was where he had to be. She talked nervously about anything and everything on the school tour. I made particular care to refer to her by name and help her feel at ease; I instinctively felt that our 'journey' with Ann would not be an easy one for all of us. Before her child started school, I had ten requests from parents for their children *not* to be in her child's grade. Ann had been described to me as rude, loud and aggressive. Her son Bobby was boisterous and often antagonistic but it was actually the mother the other parents did not want to be near.

It did not take long for Ann to make her mark. The first incidents included swearing and name-calling at other parents in the schoolyard, abusing and cursing parents in the school car park and even chasing our School Council President through the streets in a road rage incident. On each of these occasions, I would escort her quietly into my office and talk to her about what was acceptable at school and what was not. She would change from an aggressive, out-of-control person to an insecure 'little girl' who cried uncontrollably – the sign of a person under enormous stress! I would always ask her what was going on in her life and she would tell me. We would discuss strategies and then seek

to put them in place; she freely admitted that she had an anger-management problem. It is very important when working with someone like Ann that we always show empathy and understanding, no matter how irrational some of the things they say. Just listen, and always bring the conversation back to *their children*. We would say such things as, 'You have to understand, Ann, that if someone was speaking and acting like that in front of your children, you would not be happy. We teach the children to use their manners and be respectful and I know that's what you want for your children; look at the wonderful job you've done with Bobby.' I also spoke to her about the repercussions of her behaviour on her son. We talked about how she was perceived by other parents when she was behaving in this manner (regardless of how unfairly she felt she had been treated) and that the result of this would be that parents would tell their children not to play with Bobby. Did she want that?

I discussed with her the value of anger-management skills and encouraged Ann to attend an anger-management course. We also organised regular sessions with the school psychologist. I made a point of seeking her out, a few times a week – in the mornings and afternoons – when she was picking Bobby up, to ask how she was and comment positively on Bobby's behaviour and learning. I asked her to help me with the sorting and packing of chocolates for the school chocolate drive – a situation where she would have a chance to meet and talk with the other parents. I worked alongside her all morning, encouraging conversations with the other mothers that would give all of them a chance to get to know Ann. She had a very enjoyable time and for some time after seemed happy, relaxed and feeling better about herself.

Yet, still we had another incident. Her close friend (and she didn't have many) told her she was no longer welcome in her home as she and her husband did not like the way she swore in front of their children. Of course, this made her very angry and increased her feelings of rejection and insecurity. The end result of this was that, a week later, she walked across the school hall, screaming and cursing and hit the friend's husband over the head with a book in front of a school assembly of 600 children and their parents. She was assertively escorted out of the hall, and as the situation was very volatile; she was asked to go home immediately. I spoke to the other family involved and they admitted having made gestures across the hall that were intended to antagonise her. Both families were informed that this behaviour was unacceptable and would not be tolerated at our school. I spoke to Ann at length, but made it very clear that if there was one more incident, she left me no choice but to ban her from the schoolyard. I also requested that she come to the office whenever she came to the school and I would escort her to and from the classroom to protect her and others. She did not like this at all and complained bitterly, even contacting the Department of Education, but not

liking or wanting the alternative, Ann did adhere to our conditions. We stood firm on our decisions despite a number of tantrums.

The school still continued to focus explicitly on maintaining and building a positive relationship with Ann. The office staff, class teacher and teacher aides *were always very friendly and welcoming*. Things went along nicely for quite some time. However, only a month later, as a result of a private family dispute, Ann verbally attacked her Year 4 niece, before school, in the schoolyard. The child was hysterical for an hour afterwards. Mothers came running from everywhere calling for me to do something quickly! The duty of care for my community, students and parents had to be my immediate priority. I walked up to Ann and said, 'Ann, your behaviour is totally unacceptable. Please leave the schoolyard now and when you have settled down, I want to see you in my office before 3.30 p.m. today.' She started to yell about what her brother had done and I put my hand up, repeated my first statement and then said, 'If someone had spoken to Bobby like that, you would have been furious. Please leave. I will talk to you when you are calm.' Much to my relief, she did.

I had my conversation carefully planned for when she came to my office later that day. I would have to ban her from the school. At midday, she rang me to say she would not be coming to my office as she had decided she no longer would come into the school as she didn't need to put herself under the stress of having to deal with *those* people! Such a relief! I thanked her for making a decision that was probably the best option at this time and I promised to keep in touch with her. I made a concerted effort to periodically ring Ann and see how things were going. She has gradually been allowed into the school over the past two years. She had one small incident at the transition meeting for her second child where she had an altercation with another mother and I am pleased to say she very quickly pulled herself together, apologised and the two of them actually sat down and had coffee together. I whispered in her ear how impressed I was with her and since then she has clearly made a positive effort. I am 'keeping my fingers crossed'.

Relationships are important. Yes, she was difficult but there were many things contributing to her anxiety. My core responsibility – however – is the children at our school. The happier the parent, the happier the child and, I am pleased to say, Bobby is thriving academically and socially.

Faye

Addison had attended the local kindergarten. On one of my visits, Helen the teacher and Sue the assistant, informed me of how much trouble and stress his mother, Faye, had caused – she had taken up a petition saying the children where all being abused at the kindergarten which was a total fabrication. Prior to the

new school year, many parents came quietly to me requesting that their children be placed in a different grade to Addison, Faye's son, as they wanted nothing to do with his mother. Warning bells of potential trouble rang in my head!

Faye was a huge attention seeker. She was pleasant enough but very much 'in your face', wanting recognition and acknowledgment. She thoroughly enjoyed the five two-hour weekly transition sessions and laughed and talked with other parents. She was obviously excited about her child beginning the journey into his school life. I made a point of talking to Faye and discovering that she was a single parent; Addison's father was not involved in the children's lives in any way. She had no job, preferring to live on benefits so she could be at home with her two children. We both talked about our families and quickly built quite a positive relationship. The next year, school started well and I frequently stopped to talk to Faye in the playground or corridor. She seemed happy.

One month into the school year, a very distressed graduate teacher came to me saying Faye had come into her room aggressively and in front of the children, called out to her across the room, 'YOU ARE A LIAR! Yesterday, you promised my son a sticker and he didn't get it!' In actual fact, we had sent this young teacher home at lunchtime as she was extremely ill and she did not have the opportunity to fulfil her promises to any of her students that day.

The next day, I quietly walked up to her just as she had delivered her son to the classroom and asked her if I could speak to her. I started the conversation by saying I had heard from the teacher that she had been very upset the day before. I let her unload her grievances about the sticker and listened respectfully. I then explained the situation to her – the teacher having to go home – and empathised that I was sorry Addison was disappointed. However, there was a protocol at the school, and what she had done was not acceptable, *especially in front of the class*. I then stated that she appeared to be very stressed and asked if everything was all right. The tears flowed steadily for the next half hour as she told me all her woes. Faye was a very lonely person with low self-esteem, who was struggling to do her very best for her two children whom she loved very much. We talked about what she should do if she was ever worried about anything and I suggested that she train as a reading tutor as a stepping stone to developing skills and qualifications that may help her gain employment when her youngest started school.

Faye was one of the most committed and enthusiastic workers for our school and we were most thankful for her wonderful contribution. We did not have an entirely seamless transition, as she was innately a gossip and something of a 'busy body' and had to be spoken to a few times about confidentiality and appropriate professional behaviours in our school. We survived these situations due to a long-standing positive relationship. Eventually, she completed an integration aide course and provided casual relief for staff absences. We helped her find employment at another local school as a teacher aide. She is currently a kindergarten

assistant and has one more year before she graduates with a Bachelor of Education. *I am so proud of her.*

Understanding each case on its merits with empathy, encouragement and openness creates far more positive outcomes for the parent, child and the school.

Supporting the parents of children with challenging behaviour

Cathy Whalen

Dealing with parents who are upset, confused even angry, is 'par for the course' in most schools. Cathy is a head teacher in an early years school and shares how she seeks to work with her colleagues to establish supportive communication and practical support for parents with challenging children. It is not only some children who have special needs – some parents, too, have special needs. Balancing dignity, respect and practical support in dealing with parents is addressed in this essay with experience, empathetic skill and a sense of realistic possibility.

A little about our school and nursery

As a head teacher of a nursery and infant school, with children from 3+ and 7+ years old, I am in a very privileged position, as I meet parents and carers when their children are still young and the vast majority feel positive and optimistic about their children, school and the future. Parents want the best for their children and want to know what they can do to work in partnership with the school for the benefit of their child.

Each day, parents and carers are welcomed into the school and nursery to bring and collect their children, and over the course of time, I see bumps become babies, toddlers and finally new admissions to our nursery and school. I try to be around and available at the beginning and end of session times, to meet and talk with parents informally. Some people would not contemplate coming to see me in my office, but will catch me when I am wandering in the classroom or on the playground. This creates opportunities to watch the interaction between parents and their children, to see how they relate to each other and their friends, and to build positive and trusting relationships with them. This can prove invaluable if and when life or behaviour goes a little 'pear-shaped', as it does for so many of us at some time or another.

If and when difficult situations do arise, parents hopefully feel they know me quite well and are able to approach me confidently, knowing I am ready to listen and support if I can, or put them in touch with someone else if they need specialist guidance.

At our school and nursery, the behaviour policy is deeply embedded in daily practice. It applies to everyone involved in the school: children, staff governors, parents,

carers and visitors, and is based on respect, and on those essential rights and responsibilities – the right to feel safe; the right to dignified, fair and respectful treatment and the right to learn without undue or unfair distractions or disruptions. It has created a calm, safe, purposeful ethos in which enjoyable learning and teaching takes place and where people are trusted. Many of our children come from homes where there are a range of difficulties and challenges, and life can be very hard:

- Some of the children and their parents have special needs.
- For some, the environment and behaviour of adults and children at home is challenging, erratic, sometimes frightening and abusive.

By trying to support the needs of the individual children and their parents and carers at our nursery and school, we are creating a safe haven for them, a place where they can talk confidently and hopefully move forwards and face life and events more positively.

So what do we do when a child's challenging behaviour is proving to be beyond the level a class teacher can manage, or beyond what parents can manage at home?

Sometimes, a child's behaviour at school is 'manageable', but at home they are out of control and the parents feel desperate. If you cannot manage your child's behaviour at the age of five, how will you manage when they are 15? Most parents under these circumstances want help and guidance. They want to be in control. Some are frightened of their children and give in easily to their demands for constant attention, refusal to go to bed, eat their food or get up and come to school.

Encounters with parents of children with challenging behaviour can come in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons. It is worth remembering that sometimes they are flooded with a range of strong emotions triggered by nothing to do with school. It is essential not to take their comments personally. They may be angry and demanding of your attention and time now, like their children, or they may be embarrassed by their children's behaviour and defensive. Sometimes they are in denial that the behaviour is unacceptable and feel the school's expectations are unreasonable.

Other parents may be perfectly happy with their child's behaviour at home and surprised and shocked that the child is behaving in unacceptable ways at school. Personal circumstances also impact on people's responses and needs. They may be depressed, sleep-deprived, mentally or physically ill, or even bereaved and grieving. Some single parents are coping alone with a range of challenging circumstances at home with no family or friends to call upon and they arrive weeping, feeling helpless and hopeless about their situation, desperate for guidance and support to know what to do.

Being aware of the above helps me to deal with what it feels like to be faced with an angry or distressed parent, but even after all these years, it can still feel like a personal attack, threatening or frightening, disturbing and distressing – and I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my body, making my heat race and my mouth go dry.

Under these circumstances, as with managing children's challenging behaviour, it is crucial to stay outwardly calm, allow some 'cool-off time' if possible, be a supportive listener and take the time needed to resolve the situation. If a parent is angry and behaving or talking abusively, either on the phone or within the school situation, it is important to remind them calmly but clearly that they are breaching the school's expectations for behaviour, and to arrange a time to meet later in the day. This gives time for emotions to subside and time to think, plan and investigate a situation further.

Amber

Lunchtime play is just over and the children are returning to their classes. A flushed member of the support staff comes to find me. Seven-year-old Amber has scratched another child on the face as she was hanging her coat up, and is now in an extremely disturbed state in the toilets, refusing to come back to her classroom. Would I please come and help. This is a familiar scenario with Amber at the moment – a child who frequently engages in unprovoked attacks on other children from mild pushing, to kicking, biting, punching and scratching others, for no apparent reason. She also defaces their work, calls out during whole-class teaching times, crawls under furniture and invades others' space – anything to get attention. The class teacher is highly skilled in the management of children's challenging behaviour, including Amber's, but there are times when the next step of the whole-school's behaviour policy needs to come into action. Having her in the classroom is like sitting on a time bomb. The children and teacher visibly relax when she is removed. They need recovery time too.

I find Amber lying on the floor, screaming and out of control in the cloakroom area, with a learning support assistant watching her to check she is not going to run off, hurt herself or injure someone else. The sound of her distress can be heard throughout this part of the school as the classroom areas have no doors. Her wailing is distressing for other children and staff. I approach her calmly, talk quietly to her. I tell her she needs to come to my room and that she can either walk there by herself or we will need to help her. She knows what is going to happen, but is so out of control of her emotions that she does not seem to hear me. She is reluctant to come but I insist, and carefully the support assistant and I help her down to my room where she crawls under the furniture, ending up lying under my

desk, still screaming. With the door closed, we can watch and wait until her anger and frustration subside. She knows she is safe here, that we are here to help her. It takes some 20 minutes before she finally falls asleep under the desk. She has totally exhausted herself.

As head teacher, I have a responsibility to contact the parents of the injured child as well as Amber's parent. I need to see the injured child, talk with Amber about what has happened and meet with her parent, and to reassure the class teacher, support staff and her peers that all is okay. This takes the remainder of the afternoon and goes well beyond the end of the school day and takes up time later in the week, as we put into place the following plan of action.

- When Amber has calmed down in my room sufficiently to be left under the watchful eye of her classroom assistant, I return to Amber's class to talk with the injured child, check that she is okay and listen to her account of what happened.
- I reassure the class teacher and Amber's classmates that she is safe and has calmed down.
- I phone the parent of the injured child to explain what has happened, that their child is okay and to explain what we are doing to follow things up. I do not tell this parent the name of the child involved, but invite her to see me at the end of the day with her child.
- I phone Amber's mother and ask her to come to the school as soon as possible, as Amber is still asleep under my desk. She is distressed but not surprised to hear there has been another incident.
- When she arrives, it is close to the end of the school day and Amber is beginning to stir. Mum greets her lovingly; there is no reprimand, she only appears concerned about her own child, not the one who has been injured.
- Amber is calmer now, but still in a dazed and weepy state, just wanting her mother to take her home.
- I talk with Amber about what she has done and how she has behaved. She knows she has broken our safety rule and agrees that her behaviour was unacceptable. I explain that she will be spending her break times tomorrow working with someone on her action plan. When asked what she might do to make amends, she suggests writing a letter of apology to the injured child and one to the teacher and class, as well as behaving appropriately in school the following day and keeping the school rules. (She knows the school rules and behaviour policy well, but has huge difficulty keeping to them when she is flooded with emotion.)
- Mum and I confirm the date of our next meeting with the Educational Psychologist and myself at school. This is one of a series we have arranged to support Mum managing Amber's behaviour at home.

Meetings with parents and carers

When I do meet with a parent or carer, I always thank them for coming and try to put them at ease by offering a drink (usually a hot one) and a quiet, undisturbed place where they can talk in confidence. It must be a bit scary if you have been asked to come and meet with the head teacher, especially if your experience of school as a child was not positive. Confidentiality is essential, as is empathy, understanding and respect.

Working in collaboration with other professionals

Throughout the years, I have learned a great deal from others, particularly professionals such as educational psychologists, speech therapists, bereavement therapists and health visitors. They see children and their parents in different settings – sometimes at home – and can bring insight, expertise and a new dimension to our understanding of how we can best meet individual needs.

Over recent years, I have worked in close partnership with the Educational Psychologist assigned to our school, focusing our time on parents and carers with children showing the most challenging behaviour either at home or at school, children who are at risk of being excluded if their behaviour does not improve. The approach is preventative not reactive, offering help and guidance before things have reached crisis point. She has expertise and training that I lack, but I know the children and parents well, so together we are well placed to work in tandem to support parents and indirectly their children.

Sometimes, a child's behaviour can be challenging because we do not have the full picture of what life is like for them (see Amber's story above.) Our Educational Psychologist has shown me an approach that has worked successfully with many children and their parents. Sometimes, a child's teacher or one-to-one support worker will also be present, or will have written an account to share. With complex needs, we work together, but now I frequently use the approach myself and find it provides a clear and helpful framework to move a situation forward positively.

The basic collaborative framework for the meeting with parents is as follows:

- *Welcome and thank* the parent/s for coming to the meeting.
- *Emphasise confidentiality*. Explain that everything shared is totally confidential, unless there are child protection issues involved.
- *Ask parents if they mind if notes are taken* of the meeting as a report will be written and sent to the parents and school after the meeting.
- *Briefly explain the outline structure of the meeting*:
  - time limit – one hour

- share strengths
- share concerns
- share early background (going back to before the child was born, pregnancy, baby's early months and childhood). *Please note – I do not ever do this if I feel it is beyond my role and expertise as a head teacher*
- agree on an action plan for home and school
- put another date in the diary for everyone – about two to three months in the future.

Jason

Jason is a very able boy of six, physically large for his age. He lives with and is cared for by his father, who is separated from his mother, although she still sees him with his father regularly. Dad works full time and Jason spends his time before and after school with a childminder. Academically, Jason is making good progress, but his behaviour at school has been giving cause for concern since he was in reception, aged four. His face seldom shows emotion and he frequently hurts other children, usually by pushing them over, hitting or kicking them. He can tell you how he should be behaving and knows the school's behaviour policy and procedures extremely well. He can tell you the inevitable consequences of breaking our rules and yet he regularly continues to do so.

In his first year at school, his teacher spent most Fridays after school talking with his father, giving feedback about Jason's week, the positive and the negative, listening to the father's reactions and offering support and guidance. The father is a shy, quiet man who is always defensive of his son's behaviour and quick to blame other children for 'provoking' Jason. He says he never has any problems with Jason's behaviour at home. As head teacher, I have often joined the teacher at these Friday meetings, trying to understand why we seem to move forwards with improved behaviour for a few weeks and then slip back again.

Dad has agreed to meet with me and our Educational Psychologist to see if we can improve things, as he now generally agrees that Jason's behaviour can be dangerous and unacceptable. Recently, Jason was responsible for a nasty injury to another child when he pushed him into a metal fence.

We follow the format described above and then:

- Start by asking the parent to describe the child's strengths. Parents of children with challenging behaviour frequently find this hard, and slip into negative descriptions at such times. It is necessary to immediately redirect them to describing positive traits, interests and abilities. Parents' outward appearance often changes at this point and they start to smile and relax as they share good experiences and memories. In Jason's case, this is different. The father is

pleased with the progress Jason is making with reading and writing and feels there have been fewer incidents of him hurting others. He says he plays independently at home and is very imaginative. He is keen to write and draw. He says he plays well with the younger children at the childminder's.

- Next, the school or teacher shares the child's strengths. These often coincide with those of the parents and give the meeting an upbeat feel. The teacher is similarly pleased with Jason's work progress and says his behaviour in class has improved.
- We share concerns from the father and school. The father is concerned that he does not play with children of his own age out of school. Jason and his dad spend a great deal of one-to-one time playing together, with Jason leading the direction of the play. He feels Jason is not being stretched at school. The teacher feels that he isn't fulfilling his potential, as he is frequently interfering with and distracting others at work times. He makes negative comments about peers' work and will take ages completing a written task. He is regularly involved in incidents at playtimes where his 'friends' get hurt or upset.
- We share Jason's early background (going right back to before the child was born, pregnancy, baby's early months and childhood. I have omitted this for reasons of confidentiality). *Please note again – I don't ever do this if I feel it is beyond my role and expertise as a head teacher.*
- We agree an action plan for home and school. Dad will try to enrol Jason in some clubs outside school where he can mix with children of his own age. Jason will miss a couple of days' outside playtimes, spending time with his class teacher or another skilled adult talking about how he can play well with others. At school, we will assign one of our playtime learning support assistants to engage Jason in productive play with other children. (We have many resources available at playtimes, including bikes and scooters, large climbing equipment, board games, construction toys and small world play resources.)
- We arrange another date to meet in two months' time, with Jason's mother present too.

In the interim period, we monitor Jason's behaviour at school, and continue with our daily/weekly, teacher/father meetings, as and when necessary. We always try to focus on the positive and improvements, whilst never losing sight of the day-to-day expectations of behaviour from across the school, and that what we expect and will accept from Jason is no different from our expectations of anyone else within our school and nursery.

At subsequent meetings, we learn that:

- Jason's mother and father have very different views on what is acceptable behaviour at home.
- Both parents dote on Jason, and he has lots of one-to-one adult attention from both of them.

- Dad seldom makes demands of Jason, tending to follow his lead, allowing him to dictate much of what will happen at home. Dad thinks it is okay for Jason to throw a ball repeatedly at his dad's face.
- At school and home, Jason does not appear to show or feel remorse when he has hurt someone, and will justify his behaviour by saying someone provoked him.
- Jason is very competitive when playing board or computer games with his parents and has to win. If not, he gets very angry and will have a tantrum, although this doesn't last for more than about five minutes. He hates losing under any circumstances. Many of the computer games are violent and involve fighting and killing. Both parents say they are highly competitive too.

Action plans include:

- The parents will encourage Jason to play more independently of them at home, and will ask themselves how much Jason is controlling their lives.
- They will consider inviting Jason's peers from class home to play.
- The class teacher will set up a 'circle of friends' with Jason and children in the class. With the guidance of the teacher, between them, they will set some targets for Jason to improve his behaviour at school, and the circle of friends will help him to achieve these.
- The head teacher/teacher undertakes some observations of Jason at playtimes from within the school, so that Jason is unaware he is being observed. (This reveals fascinating evidence of Jason dominating and controlling play with his peers on the playground. When Jason resorts to violence, it is usually because his friends have changed the rules of a game in some way, so that Jason is no longer dictating the roles and direction of play.)
- The class teacher will establish a chart to record Jason's good playtime behaviour, i.e. when he does not hurt another child. This will be shared daily with the father, and some kind of agreed reward given if Jason achieves six out of ten good play times, initially, building up the frequency of good play times over time. (This proves to be highly motivating for Jason and his behaviour improves.)

As a result of the work with the parents and children in the case studies described above, the behaviour of both children improved considerably. There were still occasions on which their behaviour deteriorated but the frequency decreased. Without this work, there is a strong possibility that they could have been excluded from school. Amber's relationship with her mother improved dramatically, with the mother taking more responsibility and control of the situation at home. All parents worked in partnership with the school and said they found the meetings valuable.

Children are more likely to learn and thrive when they feel secure, safe and cared for and that applies to their parents too. Sometimes we succeed with both parents and children, sometimes we enable the children to find ways of coping,

and occasionally we fail, but whatever the outcome, we know we have tried to make a positive difference, and hopefully the parents and children know that too.

Working with difficult parents

Maureen Smyth

How can we realistically enable and support parents of very challenging children in a way that meets their needs for unconditional positive regard? Maureen raises a fundamental human question that is always held in some tension with our need to protect the safety and welfare of all of our students. As head of a school for emotionally and behaviourally-disordered students Maureen seeks to share how she, with her colleagues, seeks to face this daily reality.

It is difficult to be a parent and to an extent all parents are difficult. When my first baby would not sleep, I (eventually) went along for advice and support to a sleep clinic organised by the local child and family consultation service. How hard was that, to specialise in managing difficult behaviour and find myself less than perfect, with a child who would not play by the rules? What were these 'rules'? How come I did not have a copy? 'Parents like you are the worst' said the community psychiatric nurse reassuringly. My first-born never did sleep much, was strong-willed and challenging. 'Who does he take after?' mused the nurse, thus teaching me a valuable lesson. While I admire my son's spirit and would never squash it, his non-conformist ways down the years have ensured that throughout my professional life I dare not become complacent or judgemental. The challenge is, do not judge, do not patronise and try to walk in the other's shoes.

To work with difficult parents, we first need to check out their value system and our own. Most parents want to do the best by their children, even if their way of doing it is not to our liking. School evokes strong feelings for most adults, especially those who were not successful there; so turning in to the school gates, they can meet with feelings and thoughts long suppressed. Being called to account for the difficult behaviour of their children, some parents feel as if they are back in their own schooldays, summoned before the head teacher to account for some childish misdemeanour. 'Difficult' parents are often those in denial of any problems or those who feel responsible, guilty or humiliated that their child's behaviour has come to this.

The extent to which the parents negotiate the first meeting is largely dependent on the experience they bring with them and the reception they receive. Very

few people want their child to attend a special school for children with behavioural, emotional and/or social difficulties and it can be a tough job to encourage parents to see the value of such a school for their child. Some protest that the problem lies with the school, any school, not their child. This could be true, but is less likely to be so if the child has attended or been excluded from several schools.

Parents are susceptible to strong feelings of guilt, humiliation and shame and these are easily identified with, or projected on to the school. Acknowledging that your child's behaviour is a problem can mean that you may have to acknowledge your part in creating or maintaining the problem. It is much easier to blame the school or *that* teacher than to take on board your part in it. It is important for schools not to be blaming either. Some children are hard to bring up.

One way to obviate the blame and guilt is to look at the challenging behaviour as causing a problem rather than being the problem itself. When I ask parents and children if they have lost friends because of the child's behaviour, the answer is often yes. Eventually, people stop inviting troublesome children to play, and parents are marginalised at the school gates. A new school with new support systems for children and parents is often a new opportunity to get life back on track, to understand behaviour and the feelings behind it, to take responsibility and to change.

It is a hard lesson for parents to learn that children do not arrive exactly the way we expect them. They come as themselves, with their own personality and idiosyncrasies. As one parent said to me recently, 'I am so quiet and reserved. Where did this angry, feisty child come from?'

As I write, the headline reports in the British press are about the tragic and cruel death of baby P, aged 17 months, at the hands of his mother, her partner and/or lodger. While the leading stories vilify the social workers and system which did not protect this child, there is little comment on the parent and adults who tortured and killed their child, or an examination of what their experiences of childhood were.

Parents who hurt their children or do not seem to like them are, in my experience, the most difficult to deal with. They operate on a continuum of abuse from ridicule and put-downs to physical harm and murder. I remember teaching a Spanish lesson many years ago to a class of 13-year-olds who were learning numbers and the names of family members. Suddenly, one boy rose up from his seat and hurled the table across the classroom. It transpired that as a small boy, he had witnessed his father put his baby sister in a cardboard box and kick it around the room. The girl later died. How, then, to answer the seemingly innocent question, 'How many brothers and sisters do you have?' The less innocent speculation is, will he go on to become a parent who abuses his child and about whom we will read in our newspapers in the future? Sadly, this is possible.

Sometimes the best we can do is to support children in spite of their parents. I sometimes wonder if our task with older children is to teach them to 'withstand'

their parents. We have recently readmitted a girl in her last year of schooling who is on the point of permanent exclusion from the mainstream school to which she transferred from us four years ago. Her mother has never forgiven her for being referred to a special school, as if her challenging behaviour was all her doing and nothing to do with her. In the intervening period, she had made her daughter's life so intolerable that she has left home and is living with ageing grandparents some distance away. The mother has since thrown out her daughter's bed, given away her things and given away her room. Mum is vociferous and self-righteous in her anger. The girl just wants her mum to say sorry for the hurtful things she has said to her, for the blame she has heaped on her, for not loving her enough or caring for her at all.

In these circumstances, 'unconditional, positive regard' is the biggest test of all.

Editor's note

Maureen highlights several valuable reminders about working with difficult parents:

- Consider the term *unconditional positive regard* – developed by Carl Rogers in the late 1950s. Rogers believed that human beings have a basic and innate need to be accepted and valued; they have a fundamental need for positive regard from others, most essentially – and obviously – from their parents. One's very life concept is linked to others' regard. *Unconditional positive regard* (in this sense) means our acceptance of the child regardless of their behaviour (but not, of course, merely ignoring or excusing their behaviour). For us – as teachers – this means we address our discipline to the behaviour while accepting the child and not rejecting them. He contrasts this with conditional positive regard where praise, acceptance, love are conditional on the individual's conforming to parental or social standards (Halonen and Santrock, 1996).
- Remember that, as parents ourselves, we, too, have struggled and questioned and doubted: why are our children so different? Am I too hard a parent? Too lax? Could I have done better?
- Ask why does my child/my son/my daughter, behave this way? Is it my fault? *Our own perspective-taking* (as a parent) is helpful when we face a parent who is struggling with doubts, anxieties, fears and anger.
- Avoid the temptation to patronise; yet – notwithstanding – we sometimes need to confront parents whose behaviour is causing disturbing and dysfunctional relationships for their own children or other members of the school community (p. 25).
- Recognise that the behaviour of a child is not only problematic *in itself*; it is part of a wider frame of relationships. This is probably our biggest concern, and challenge. We cannot ignore the challenging behaviour nor can we excuse it, but we can *try to understand and support the child* within the range of his behaviour.

As Maureen notes, this is the 'biggest test of all'.

Working with parents/carers of children with challenging behaviours (primary)

Alyson Dermody Palmer

Building trust and common understandings are crucial to working with parents and children, particularly children with behaviour-disorders. Children in pupil-referral settings often have a jaded and troubled history in mainstream schooling. Alyson shares how she, and her team, seek to re-build trust, and positive – workable – relationships with the educational community for parent(s) and children alike.

'That's the first time anyone has ever said anything nice about my child.'

I was really shocked when a parent from the unit said that to me after I told her what a lovely boy her son was and that he had had a good day at school.

Building relationships and trust, and common understandings

A large proportion of my role is working directly with parents of children in the Pupil Referral Unit. When children with challenging behaviour are in mainstream schools, a lot of the contact between the parents and the school is negative. Parents say that towards the end of their child's time at their previous school they are often receiving daily phone calls to go and pick up their child and take them home early as the child's behaviour is too challenging for them to be at school. When I first meet parents/carers, I make a point of saying, 'Please answer the phone if we ring you because we try hard to phone with good news rather than bad.' When children first start at the unit, both the child and their parent/carer can be disillusioned with the education system and wary and unwilling to engage with staff. They often mistrust school staff and when a child has been excluded from school, relationships between home and school are at the best fragile and at the worst completely broken down.

A lot of parents I work with feel isolated and often have no one to talk to. They feel people do not understand their situation and what it is like having a child with very challenging behaviour. The vast majority of our parents/carers are lone parents and an increasing number are grandparents. I have been told many stories about when their child was in their last mainstream school and other parents in the school would not talk to them in the playground and would tell their children to move away and not play with the child with challenging behaviour. Over two years later this is still a very poignant memory for one grandparent I work with. Another parent told me the day after her son had been permanently excluded from

school, she still had to take his older sister to the same school. As she walked through the school gates, the other parents moved back, whispering and sniggering as she had to make her way across the playground. The mum told me how upsetting this was and how dreadful she felt to be such a public figure of speculation and gossip as she took her daughter to school.

Effective working with parents is extremely time-consuming. Our unit obviously has a lot less children than a mainstream school so it is easier for us to get to know parents well. Regular contact both by phone and in person is essential to sustain a good relationship. I have weekly/bi-weekly meetings with some parents because they need that high level of support. A lot of time is spent listening, sometimes being shouted at, not necessarily because they are cross with me directly but because I happen to be there. We explore problems together and we come up with solutions and ways forward.

In the past year, our Family Support Worker and I have introduced weekly parents' coffee mornings in the unit. We are developing these informal sessions where we chat about whatever parents want to. Other sessions are more focused and we have covered topics such as sleep issues, internet safety, healthy eating and rewards and sanctions. This term, an ex-parent, Pauline, has joined our coffee mornings. Her son has a wide range of special education needs including Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD and he left the unit over two years ago. Whilst Pauline's son attended our unit, we developed an excellent relationship and stayed in regular contact with her and her family after he had moved to his new specialist placement. Pauline spoke to me at the beginning of this term and said she would really like to do some voluntary work with parents who were in a similar situation to her when her son was permanently excluded from his mainstream school. This was too good an opportunity to be missed. Parents respect Pauline's views and listen to her advice because they know that she understands exactly where they are coming from and all the different emotions that go with having a child with challenging behaviours. Hopefully, Pauline's role will continue and develop over time. We try to maintain contact with families of children who have left the unit. We often get ex-pupils and their families coming back to visit which is wonderful.

Home visits

Home visits can sometimes be a vital part of my work with parents. It is not appropriate to make home visits to all parents but for some it is the right thing to do. Last year, one of the parents at the unit had a serious illness which meant that when she was not having treatment, she was often very weak and walking was difficult so I regularly made home visits to help support her. She always thanked me for going and I never felt like I was intruding. We built up a strong relationship and although we often had to discuss very difficult issues, we were able to

maintain this relationship. Thankfully, the parent's health improved and sometimes she was able to meet me at school which her son loved. She even managed to cook lunch with him at school for everyone else!

Inviting parents to 'the visit'

We also encourage parents to spend time in the classroom. We model behaviour strategies and quite often it is good for a parent to have time with their child away from the rest of the family or with some external support. Sometimes, they are reluctant to actually be in a lesson with their child but feel more comfortable cooking a favourite dish with their child in our kitchen. This is really successful – we have had some delicious food and the parents/carers and child are very proud of each other and what they have produced.

We invite parents to our Christmas play which in a Pupil Referral Unit is always an interesting event – you never really know what might happen next! It is often the first time that the children have been allowed in such a play and that alone is an enormous thrill for everyone. After the performance, the parents say how proud they are of the children and how well they have done, which sadly is not something they are used to saying.

All the children in our unit regularly go on school trips, either topic-related trips, e.g. to the Science Museum, or trips they have 'earned' by regularly meeting the targets in their Behaviour Support Plan. Occasionally, we invite parents/carers on these trips, particularly if a child's behaviour is very difficult to manage out of school. These trips are generally very successful and parents always enjoy them. We also have the usual newsletter, reports, parents/carers evenings to communicate with parents and a parents/carers questionnaire about their views on the unit and their child's progress at school.

'Rewards' and behaviour consequences

Supporting parents with rewards and sanctions (behaviour consequences) is also a large part of my work with them. I devise and make sticker charts for parents to use at home with their child. The focus is on one specific behaviour that the parents want to change at a time. We provide stickers and ongoing support to maintain the charts. Children at the unit are used to these types of charts at school. Therefore, they understand how they work and they feel secure with them. It enables a visible and tangible framework for parent and child. I spend a lot of time discussing rewards and sanctions with parents. I try to encourage them to give children rewards which are more to do with special time with each other than material goods (see also p. 130f). Discussing sanctions (behaviour consequences) can be a much trickier thing to do. I always advise parents to make the sanction something that the child will

mind, and not like losing, but also not so difficult for the parent that it makes their life even more difficult than it already is! I also advise them not to make hasty decisions when they are angry but to try and make a calmer more measured decision later on – a strategy I try to use with my own children! For example, do not ban the computer for six months – it is too difficult for everyone involved.

Parents of children with challenging behaviour have lots of different professionals with whom they need to keep in contact. I communicate with outside agencies on parents' behalf including Social Care and Safeguarding, Health Services and Play Services. Often an introduction, a letter or making an appointment, is enough to start the ball rolling. Sometimes, more is needed and I attend appointments with parents at a variety of meetings to support them and sometimes to make sure they attend! I help parents to complete application forms for a variety of things, most commonly the Disability Living Allowance (on which I have become something of an expert!). Receiving extra financial support can often make a huge difference to the lives of the families we work with.

Beyond our support

When we are thinking of a child's next placement after leaving the unit, we have a lot of discussion with parents/carers about possible schools. I accompany them on visits to those schools and talk through any concerns, worries etc. with them. When any child changes school, it is often a difficult and stressful time for families. When children with challenging behaviour are changing schools, the process is even more difficult and stressful. Parents and their children worry about being excluded again and the placement breaking down. Concerns about whether they have made the right decision are even more prevalent for these families.

Parental perspectives

Above all, at our unit, we value the parents' perspective and knowledge of their child. They live with their child and often have to manage their child's very challenging behaviour, alone and in difficult circumstances. At school, we have the luxury of excellent support from our staff team and a 'soft room', which is a safe place for the children to calm and settle, and focus. We also say goodbye to the children at the end of the day and do not have to manage their behaviour 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The better the relationship staff at the unit have with the parents of the children we work with, the more progress the children make with both their learning and managing their behaviour. It is crucial for parents to support and back up the work we are doing at school, and it is just as important that we support and back up what parents are doing at home. We must remember how isolated, desperate

and lonely some parents/carers of children with challenging behaviour can feel, and one of the most important things those of us who work with them can do is listen – this listening enables our understanding and invites their trust.

Working with children with challenging behaviour is a great but demanding job. Living with them, well that is a different matter!

An extended note on anger (primarily from Aristotle)

Bill Rogers

Can you remember the last time you got really angry; what it felt like; what you did when you were angry? Imagine how difficult it can be for children when they get angry.

In reflecting – yet again – our dealing with frustration, and anger, in others (and in ourselves) I have re-visited the writings of Aristotle. There are many understandings, and principles, about managing anger that immediately touch the reality of this most powerful, and often troubling, human emotion. Aristotle enables us to find the difficult 'middle way' between the disturbing extremes of behaviour that anger can generate.

I have also tried to summarise the key ideas, principles and practices from all the essays in Chapter 7 in the light of reflection on the philosophy of Aristotle in the Nichomachean Ethics.

Aristotle (in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1969) notes that, ' …we must not forget that it is human to be painfully affected by anger and to find revenge sweet' (Book Three: p. 100). He is not saying we *should* find revenge sweet – but many will take recourse in forms of revenge and 'justify it' because of their anger. In Book Seven (Chapter 6), he further notes that 'anger and bad temper are common human frailties' – it is hard to bring reason to bear upon those things, circumstances and people that occasion our anger, hard but not impossible.

He says (in Book Four) that our 'anger may be produced by a variety of causes, but, however that may be, it is the person[1] who is angry on the right occasions and with the right people and at the right moment and for the right length of time who wins our commendation' (p. 128). He contrasts those who are overly (and overtly) tame when there is a good (just) reason to express appropriate anger with those who are choleric. In fact, he says – in such cases – that not to speak with 'proper spirit' when one has 'due right' to be angry 'looks like insensibility' (ibid.: 128).

Then there are those who 'lose their tempers easily, quickly and completely' (the

1. I have taken the liberty of substituting *person* for *man*. When Aristotle uses *man* in the generic sense, he does so as standing for humanity in general.

choleric) and 'who refuse to make a quarrel up unless they are allowed to inflict some vengeance or some punishment …' (op. cit. 128). I have worked with some teachers (and parents) who believe that it is not enough to exact an appropriate behaviour consequence for a child who has been overly disruptive or who has cheated, lied, stolen or bullied, but that we must also vilify them and make them feel really bad *as well*. This – of course – is the constant tension between justice and punishment, and between guilt, revenge, reconciliation and restitution.

For Aristotle, the general principles of 'anger management' (he does not use that term) can be drawn from the *Nichomachean Ethics* as 'those we are to lay hold upon (in) the middle state …' (Book Four: 129). Finding a 'middle way' between losing our temper easily, quickly and intemperately, and conversely 'holding our anger in' for fear we might ill-manage our emotions is no mean feat. Such skills can be learned.

Because the emotive states of high frustration and anger are impulsive and sometimes even irrational, it is difficult for reason to be exercised *at the point of high emotion*. As noted later, when we are dealing with others who are impulsive or angry, it is *our own calmness* that can enable the *degree* of impulsivity in the other start to defuse (p. 163). So too when we – ourselves – are angry (hopefully on issues that matter), when we communicate *our anger*, then *our calmness* enables some clarity in that immediate emotional moment.

Of course, a *sustained* expression of anger to another is normally self-defeating. A clear, assertive expression of what we are angry about can be effective if we allow some cool-off time at the point of significant frustration; reason can *then* 'play' a restorative role. At its most expressive, this is sometimes called (as it is by Aristotle) 'righteous anger' (Book Seven, Chapter 6: 208). And in Book Three, Chapter 1, he notes, 'There are some things at which we *ought* to feel anger …' (Aristotle's emphasis). 'Righteous' anger was expressed by Jesus on several occasions and directed against pompous, lying, cheating, hypocritical leaders (certain priests, politicians) in high places.

Aristotle says (what psychologists would later say) we should never deny our anger simply because 'feeling angry (or frightened) is something we can't help' (Book Two, Chapter 5: 63). It is the *feeling* we cannot help when it arises in us; what we do *when* that feeling arises is something we can learn to do something about. In this sense, general 'anger management' is possible. As Aristotle goes on to note:

> We are not spoken of as 'good' or 'bad' in respect of our feelings but of our virtues and vices. Neither are we praised or blamed for the way we feel. A person is not praised for being frightened or angry, nor is he blamed for just being angry; it is being angry in a particular way. (ibid.: 63).

This is a crucial principle and a very helpful teaching point: while we cannot immediately control our feelings (our feelings – *as such* – cannot tell us what to do), we can learn to control what we do when we have those feelings. There is,

says Aristotle, the 'element of the will' in what we do *when* we feel angry. This, though, is affected by our 'general disposition' and is also open to learning. We can learn to express and communicate those issues and concerns about which we are frustrated or angry, in a better way. This is what Aristotle meant by 'getting angry in the right way'; there are better, more effective ways to communicate our anger. Aristotle dares to say what the post-modernist often would not say – there are 'right ways' (just ways) to express and communicate our anger. (p. 160f)

To summarise some understandings about anger and how we address it, and express it (from the *Ethics*):

- Feelings – mostly – just *come* … What we do *when* they come is a different matter.
- We cannot directly, and immediately, control how we feel (in the immediacy of the moment).
- We should not blame ourselves (or others) *because* they are angry. After all, it is our emotions that make us uniquely human.
- There are many issues that contribute to our anger.
- We do not always have control over the issues that contribute to, or affect, our anger.
- There are issues, concerns, that we *should* get angry about. Some issues clearly merit *just* anger.
- It is pointless trying to 'reason' with someone who is irrationally angry: 'The person who is passion's slave will not listen to or understand the logic of anyone who tries to dissuade [them] from going on as [they] are doing. When a [person] is in that state, what chance have you of changing [their] mind by argumentation?' (Book Ten, Chapter 9: 311). In a sense, it is very difficult to even *think* when we are angry. We need cooling-off time!
- There is a significant difference between the emotion of anger (that which we cannot immediately control) and what we can do *when* we recognise, and feel, angry. That is, we can learn to *manage* our feelings of anger *when* we feel them *and acknowledge them*. We also cannot directly control another's anger; we can contribute to *their calming* and, then, occasion the possibility of working on the issues that sparked their anger. That management (even when we need to be assertive) can be more effective for the expression of anger in the emotional moment, when we consciously legitimise our need to express (not sublimate) our anger. Whether we do it immediately or after cool-off time and reflection may depend on the context, situation and people involved.
- When we communicate our anger, we do so on issues that matter. In this sense, we would not say to a student, 'I am angry that you haven't done your homework.' 'I'm angry that you call out a lot in class.' These behaviours/issues, while contributing to our frustration, do not merit *anger*. More appropriately, our emotional language (in degree) would see us saying, 'I'm *concerned* you haven't done your homework – how can I help?' 'I'm *annoyed* when you call out a lot in

class because the other students – your classmates – don't get a fair go. Let's work on a plan …' (this conversation would obviously occur one-to-one).

As a parent, we would not *reasonably* say, 'I'm angry because you haven't put the lid back on the peanut butter and the kitchen bench is *still* messy!! What's wrong with you; you're just like your bloody father!!!' We are annoyed by the mess – yes – and our children need to hear that (plus the reminder to clear up *their* mess). Annoyance, and 'cheesed-offness', though, are different in *degree* from anger.

The issues, circumstances and behaviours that *merit* anger need some moral weight, some effect of injustice, rather than equating *anger* (a 'big league' emotion) with being annoyed, fed-up, irritated or frustrated. In this sense, as teachers, we are careful not to easily debase the word anger, so that it can carry moral/justice weighting. Getting angry on issues that matter is part of our learning and part of our moral perspective on life. How we *communicate* the *degrees* of frustration through to significant anger is something that can be learned. This conception about 'moral weight' regarding anger is important to our professionalism as teachers.

- This gives us hope that the *habits of anger* (in ourselves as well as those we teach) can be modified. Behaviour is not universally, immutably fixed. If that were true, we could help no one. Developing more positive 'habits' of anger management is possible – thankfully. Aristotle quotes Evenus: 'Habit, my friend, is practice long pursued that at last becomes the [person] themselves' (Book Seven, Chapter 10).

The articles in the newspapers I noted earlier sound dramatic (p. 137) – and they are. It is important to note, however, that it is mostly only a small percentage of parents who get so angry they become temporarily irrational and hostile. Many of us have had an angry parent storm into our office (or even a classroom) demanding – with a raised voice – why we have been *so* unfair to their child. Sometimes, the parent is so angry they will be swearing and even threatening. 'What kind of f___ing school is this!? What'd you suspend my Craig for!!? What did he do?! What about the other little sh_ts …?!!' Upset? Yes, sometimes a parent will present with irrational anger. Yet even that anger is motivated (one hopes) by care for their child and not merely a poor sense of justice. As Aristotle notes, it takes some *conscious will* to address another's anger (as well as our own).

Habits of anger

In each of these essays, my colleagues note key understandings that enable more positive 'habits of anger':

- The first person to calm in such a situation is ourselves. We cannot actually 'calm' someone else (adult or child); it is hard enough to consciously cue ourselves to be calmer when we are really frustrated or angry!
  As the adult self, we cue our calmness to enable theirs.
- It can help – initially – to let the other person 'run out of psychological steam' (as it were). It will be important, though, not to look at your watch – frowning – as the angry parent remonstrates(!).
- We take a deep, cognitive breath as it were, and communicate (non-verbally) that we are not a threat to them, that we are ready to listen. It is important not to *immediately* react to the other's hostility.
- When we cue our calmness, the parent will – often – regain some self-control, enough for us to ask them to take a seat … Having run somewhat 'out of immediate steam' – and seated – it is less likely they will feel *so* psychologically angry.
- If you sense any significant threat, or *any* danger, immediately call for a colleague. It is crucial that class teachers call for senior teacher support *immediately* if a parent storms into a classroom and demands an *immediate* audience, or verbally abuses or threatens a class teacher.
- Once the parent is 'calm enough', it will be important to *tune in to how they are probably feeling at that point*. We avoid saying, 'I know how you feel.' (We do not know how they feel.) We can say something like: 'I can see you're really upset about Craig being temporarily suspended from school, Mrs Whinger …' If the parent butts in ('… too f___ing right!!') and wants to begin another tirade, it will help to wait for the next 'break in the psychological traffic'. We can then repeat, 'Mrs Whinger … I can see you're upset and angry … please take a seat.'
- Reassure the parent that we know they care. This is important; we know (ourselves) that this is what would drive us as a parent in any similar situation. 'Mrs Whinger, I know you care about Craig. So do we … You wouldn't be here if you didn't care …' This may well be the 'door' that opens to a more positive communication.
- If the parent has directly sworn at us, or used threatening swearing about us, or other staff, it will be important to *briefly* make the point: 'Mrs Whinger, I'm not swearing at you, I don't expect (or 'want' or 'like it when …') you swear at me. As I said, I know you care about … We're here to try to help and support … We can do this without swearing and accusing.' If we say nothing about their swearing (or hostile language), it in effect excuses, or discounts, their behaviour. We acknowledge their anger, we do not – however – have to accept, or merely 'tolerate' their swearing. On these occasions, I believe we need to be quietly, *briefly* and calmly assertive and move on.
- Focus – then – on the issue of concern. Keep the focus on the issue; avoid getting overly involved in 'what happened at the other 15 schools(!)', or 'what happened with the other teacher last year(!)', or ….

- Yes, we have to listen to a parent's concern (however skewed, confused, misinformed, or – even – frivolous) yet it is important to address the issue within the school's policy (relative to the issue). While it is always important that a parent knows that they will be heard and that they will always have an appropriate right-of-reply, we do not need to *defend* the school's behaviour policy, or defend what we believe about aggression, bullying, or racism or … We keep the focus on the central, core rights and responsibilities relative to the issue at hand.
- Get the facts about the issue or concern (or have them ready at hand wherever possible). It can help to have it in writing from (we hope) reliable records. This will aid clarity and focus.
- We should seek to be honest as well as caring; not hiding the unpleasant details but not attacking the character of their child (or the parent!) tempting as that might be on occasion!). We work towards a solution that will address the issue *in light of the student and the parents, and the school's rights and responsibilities.*
- It may sound obvious, but it is important to avoid taking a querulous or argumentative *stance* (even if we think we are right on 'all this …'). It is still tempting though!
- When we invite early support to parents, it can often minimise (or eliminate) messy and often inaccurate disclosures in the public domain (local gossip, the press, the media).
- There are (again rare) occasions when a parent will *continue* to vent, vilify, accuse or threaten despite our calmness and our cueing of care and concern. On these occasions, it is wise to direct the parent to leave, calmly, clearly, firmly, assertively. Some parents, when they arrive on school property, may be affected by alcohol or drugs and unable to effectively control thought or speech. Some are so driven by an insistent passion for misguided justice that they will refuse to see anything beyond their emotive state. Some parents are simply bullies. Either way, it is pointless trying to reason with them – at least for now.

  It is pointless trying to engage a parent when they continue to stand and threaten. Hold up a 'blocking hand': '… Mrs Whinger, I want you to leave now. NOW. I'm not prepared to continue with this while you're swearing at me and threatening me.' If you can also get in the words, '… When you've calmed down ring and make a time to talk …' – do so. If not, show them the door.

  If they refuse to leave (it sometimes happens!), walk out yourself; they will most likely follow (by now a colleague will have appeared to give support). As they leave, they may well still be chanting their mantra, 'You bunch of gutless bastards; I'm taking Justin out of this shit, f___ing school!! I'm going to tell the Department about you, you f___ing a___hole …!!'
- If any teacher has been on the receiving end of a disturbing – or dysfunctional – parent tirade, it will always help to debrief with colleagues before leaving school

that day. Many schools (these days) have internal policy guidelines on managing parental concerns, complaints and crises. Such policies will normally reflect the sorts of approaches my colleagues and I have raised here in this chapter.

Caveat

There are occasions when a parent's behaviour is so bizarre, so threatening or potentially dangerous that we will need to contact the police. Schools – normally – have good relationships with their local community policing team. No teacher should have to be the victim of continual threats, haranguing or harassment. Even on these (thankfully rare) occasions, we would normally contact the parents – later – and invite them to another meeting. The messy business of restraining orders on some parents (regarding visiting a school) are also (thankfully) rare. Our overriding concern on these occasions is the safety and welfare of our students and our colleagues.

Editor's note

None of this is easy to describe – in print. When we talk about the natural tension between *our* calmness and our assertion when addressing angry parents, it is not easy to describe it without sounding tendentious, patronising or pompous. Yet it is this – precisely – we do not want to communicate. It is one thing to say 'we need to be calm in such situations …' – we do; it is communicating our calmness in such a way that is likely to *enable the other* (child or adult) to cue potential calmness in themselves. Perspective-taking (how would we want to be 'treated'?) is at the heart of how we behave towards others.