

On Parenting • Perspective

Parents berate their kids in school conferences, and a teacher cringes

By **Meghan Leahy** March 28

Q: *I am a high school teacher without kids of my own. I have parent-teacher conferences with my ninth-graders and their parents. Frequently, these meetings turn into the parent berating the child in front of me, with me wincing and not knowing how/whether to interject. I don't know how to politely correct the parent on how that's possibly the worst strategy. Without kids of my own (I have one on the way), I don't know whether I'm out of bounds. Normally, I wait until the parent finishes and then give as many suggestions as I can for improvement. But I have never told a parent to stop. What do you suggest is appropriate?*

A: Upon graduating from college, I landed a position as an English teacher at a great school. I taught sixth and eighth grades as well as high school English in an all-boys school with intense academic standards.

Although I loved the students and my days were happy, my first set of parent-teacher conferences is something I will never forget. There I was, 21 years old, grade book out, greeting parents who were old enough to be my parents, and I was completely unprepared. I sat frozen as parents challenged my ability to teach, accused me of not understanding what their child needed for college and borderline threatened me.

If these parents were with their children, they would upbraid them for low grades and accuse them of laziness, ingratitude and stupidity. Threats would often follow: “Do you want to go to the horrible school near us?” “You better change this now, or we will toss your butt out of this school.” “I am not paying for you to get C’s.”

I would die inside as I watched students grow red in the cheeks and cast their eyes down. The shame was so palpable that I would begin to sweat right there with the child.

Panicked, I went to my mentor in the school. She gave me advice that I built upon and made into my own: Don't let the parents talk the entire time, and give them a concrete plan.

Unless it's mandatory, don't have the student present for the entire meeting. You need to speak to these parents alone before bringing in the student. Every parent getting tough news about their child needs a couple of moments to breathe and find equilibrium. In a perfect world, the parents would keep their patience and instantly find a way to connect with and support their child, but the first reaction is usually shock and anger.

Unless the parents verbally abuse their child regularly, the explosions you see are fear. What are they afraid of? That their children are failing and putting their future in jeopardy. I understand this fear.

Because we know that fear and anger will be the first emotions, you want to do your best to keep the student away from those primal reactions.

But you may not have the luxury of having the student outside. In that case, here are ideas on how to proceed.

1. Begin with the good news. There is always something good to say about a student, and you need to lead with it. This shows parents that you know their child has redeeming qualities and is more than just a grade. Show strong appreciation for these good qualities, and keep a smile on your face. You would be surprised how smiling can bring about smiles in others. It doesn't work perfectly every time, but it is worth a try.

2. Discuss the grade and promptly demonstrate how this grade came to exist. Quickly zero in on what needs attention (homework, test grades, quizzes, behavior) and then — this is important — share your plan.

3. The biggest frustration I hear from parents is that a teacher will go on and on about what is not working, and then the meeting is over. The parents feel panicked and hopeless. A concise plan is needed to ease the parents' fears and initiate hopeful action. You don't have to be extraordinarily specific, and this is a good time to elicit help from the parents and student. For instance, if a student's grade is poor because homework did not get turned in, you can create a quick incentive plan for organizing and prioritizing homework. If studying for tests is problematic, you can suggest services in the school that the student can use and show the parents how to sign up for them. I like a plan that is no more than three actionable steps.

4. By this point, if you are running the meeting well, the parents have not been allowed to speak very much. This is by design. You are the teacher, this is your meeting, and it is your role to set the tone and the goals. You're also in charge of how much time is spent on questions and concerns. When I taught, I would take notes as the parents spoke, and if I could not answer their concern in the given time, I would ask them to write an email to me repeating the question. I did this for two reasons: 1) That way, I was not the one responsible for writing to every parent after the conferences, and 2) it was important for me to read the parents' concerns in their language. It was almost always something that we could address quickly, and, if not, I asked other professionals in the school for assistance.

5. End the meeting with a reminder of the plan, a hopeful feeling and an exact date that a check-in will occur. Again, I preferred that the parents check in with me, but you should do what works best for you and the families.

My hope is that this advice will help sidestep the shaming. But if parents are determined to embarrass their child, there are ways to slow it down. If a parent begins berating a student, don't shame the parent. To defuse the anger, agree with the parent's feelings and keep the conversation going. "Yes, I know it feels bad to see this D. I think you feel pretty disappointed, and I understand. Let's refocus on how we are going to improve this. Again, we will . . ." That way, you can move the conversation along so that the conference is not spent in anger.

If you sense that you're losing control of the meeting, you have the right to stand up, smile and say: "Well, it seems that we have reviewed everything we need to today. Let's speak again soon when we are all a little more calm." Does it take courage to do this? Absolutely. It will take practice to run a meeting with this kind of leadership, but you can do it. Rehearse with another teacher or mentor before the conferences. Have a friend pretend to be a difficult parent and get your phrases ready. Have your plans prepared.

The conferences won't go perfectly, but at the end of day, you and the parents are just human, trying to do the best you can.

Stay strong, stay organized, stay compassionate, and good luck.


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Meghan is the mother of three daughters. She holds a bachelor's degree in English and secondary education, a master's degree in school counseling and is a certified parent coach.  Follow @mlparentcoach

