

# **FROM ADVERSARIES TO ALLIES:**

## **Working with “Challenging” Parents**

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# CARING PARENTS

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- ✘ Most parents care for and want the best for their children.
- ✘ Those same parents are often not sure how to make that happen.
- ✘ In trying to secure the best education and services for their child(ren), parents can fall into patterns that may not serve the best interests of the child or the school community.
- ✘ As counselors, we can help parents to avoid such a situation.

## **“QUEEN BEE” MOMS / “KING PIN” DADS\***

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These two parent types have led to many other categories. Moms may be socially intelligent, charismatic, certain they are right and will not tolerate disagreement. They will justify a child’s behavior and spin stories that give it a “higher purpose.”

\*based on the work of Rosalind Wisman (*NJEA Review* 12/06)

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- ✘ They almost never apologize for their child's behavior because it is the *other* child who is either too sensitive or just "took it the wrong way."
  - ✘ They apologize only to show that they are so good: "I'm sorry you took it that way."

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- ✘ Dads rarely attend school or parent meetings, unless they are (1) angry – and want to vent that anger, or (2) are forced to go – and resent being there.
  - ✘ They can be condescending to counselors – “It’s not your fault. You just do not know my child.”

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- ✘ They often **start at the top** before speaking with you about a problem.
  - ✘ They often speak with administrators as though they are their allies.
  - ✘ They can see counselors as overemotional, over-reacting and/or incompetent. (Beware of visible tissue boxes or pillows.)

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- ✘ Counselors may feel “unsafe” in dealing with some of these parents.
- ✘ This can be especially true if a counselor does not believe he/she has administrative backing.

[Note: Never underestimate the value of administrative support.]

## **POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

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**Compartmentalize** - It can be important to keep experiences with these parent types separate from your other parent-counselor interactions so they do not influence the way you treat other parents.

# WHAT CAN YOU DO?

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- ✘ Reach out and share information about all of your counseling activities.
  - + Parents (and colleagues) may not understand how the position of counselor has changed, or what it is we do.
  - + Create a handout explaining your job, the role of counseling and showing why you are qualified to help your students.

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✘ **Choose words carefully – Avoid saying “I”**

- + Speak of rules or phrase things as requirements of a given situation, or of the institution.
- + Parents may try to make the issue personal and attribute this to you (when you are enforcing a district, or state regulation).

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- ✘ **Take one item at a time – redirecting the conversation as needed.**
    - + Parents may move from one topic to others, especially if they feel they are not getting what they need on their first point.
    - + Ask the parent to tell you specifically what they believe can make the situation better.

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✘ **Create “walls of support.”**

- + What do the walls in your office say about you? Have certificates or awards. It may even be a good idea to have a short pamphlet listing the services you (and your department) provide.
- + Try include a short bio in that pamphlet, listing your academic background and professional experience.

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- ✘ Always remember you deserve to be treated with dignity.
  - ✘ No parent has the right to curse at you, patronize you or threaten you...ever.
  - ✘ Stop the meeting. Explain that you can schedule another meeting when they may be able to speak calmly. Say “Call me when it is a better time for you.”

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# **SPECIAL PARENT ISSUES**

## **WORKING WITH HISPANIC/LATINO FAMILIES:**

**Familismo** - In Latino culture, family is considered to be more important than the individual members who make up the family. There is both interdependence and a feeling of “oneness” (Falicov, 1998)

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**Personalismo** - According to the Chadwick Center, personalismo encourages *warm and friendly relationships* as opposed to impersonal or formal interactions in everyday life; it is an expectation among Hispanics that they will be treated in a caring and respectful manner. Because of this Hispanic cultural value, it is critical for counselors to find a way to reach Hispanic clients on this personal level, regardless of language or other barriers.

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## **Respeto and Simpatia**

Addressing an older person by their last name is often a sign of respect to older persons (Senor or Senora). The importance of simpatia (sympathy) in Latino culture has been corroborated by empirical findings. Both personalismo and simpatia are characteristic of a collective worldview.



# COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

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- ✘ Parental roles in the College Application Process may include parents who:
  - ✘ 1. Guide their children through the process.
  - ✘ 2. Stand by and hope for the best.
  - ✘ 3. Charge ahead...as if they, themselves, are applying.

# (OVER)INVOLVED PARENTS:

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- ✘ There are other parent types:
- ✘ 1. Helicopter Parents –
- ✘ 2. Rolls-Royce Parents –
- ✘ 3. Subway Parents –
- ✘ 4. Junker Parents –

From: Presentation by Karen Felton, Admissions @ U. of Maryland and Tevera Stith, Director of College Counseling, St. Paul's School, Baltimore, Maryland at NACAC, 2010

# ADVICE TO PARENTS SELECTING COLLEGES:

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## 1. Avoid the following:

- +a. Becoming obsessed with the brand name college.
- +b. “Friending” your child’s counselor on Facebook...don’t do it.
- +c. Saying “we” are applying to...
- +d. Offering to “volunteer“ to help in the Guidance Office
- +e. Requesting special treatment.

# ADVICE TO PARENTS (CONT'D):

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## 2. Do the following:

- ✘ a. Learn the common jargon to help in communication with School Counselors.
- ✘ b. Adjust your role to what your child needs or wants.
- ✘ c. Rather than smothering your child, find other healthy outlets for that energy.
  
- ✘ **Note to School Counselors:** Difficult parents make up a small minority of those with whom we work and they DO care about their children.

# AVOIDING THE PARENT TRAP

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Highlight's of *How to Listen so Parents will Talk , and Talk so Parents Will Listen* by John Sommers-Flanagan and Rita Sommers Flanagan

- ✘ Parenting is a **challenging endeavor** for which we receive no training or manual.
- ✘ **Expectation** that we should be able to figure it out ourselves and a **stigma** associated with seeking help.
- ✘ Those parents seeking our help have often **exhausted other resources** (e.g. family, friends, coworkers). We are their “last hope”
- ✘ Common Feeling of Parents (as they enter our offices) – **Vulnerability.**
- ✘ Common Counselor Feelings – **Fear and even Anger.**

# AVOIDING THE PARENT TRAP

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- ✘ Parents often put up walls as DEFENSE if they feel overwhelmed or vulnerable.
- ✘ Counselor needs to respond by providing a safe accepting space free of judgment and criticism. We need to listen and develop trust first before offering advice.
- ✘ Premature advice can raise parent defenses.

# KEYS WHEN APPROACHING PARENTS:

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- ✘ **1. Empathic Understanding** – See beyond negativity to concern for child
- ✘ **2. Radical Acceptance** – put aside any negative response we may have.
- ✘ **3. Collaboration** - View parent as an “expert” on his/her child

# KEY ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS:

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- ✦ 4. **Let the Parent Lead** – Whenever possible, allow the parent to share his/her concerns which often include one or more of the following: strong willed children, angry or distressed children, impulsive children, teenagers displaying potentially destructive behaviors or concerns about the parent's own behavior toward his/her child.

# KEY ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS:

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- ✘ 4a. Using a combination of **person centered principles and solution focused approaches**, alert parents to your methods of listening first and exploring possible solutions later, empower them to ask for more or less of either based on their needs.

# KEY ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS

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- ✘ 4b. Always ask permission from parents before moving into problem solving strategies.
- ✘ 4c. Help parents extricate themselves from the pattern of “**backward behavior modification.**” Teach them how to switch use boring punishment/consequences and exciting rewards.

# KEY ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS:

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- ✘ **4d. Use the same language** as parents use when talking about their child, check regularly for parental understanding, and **treat parents as experts on their child.**
- ✘ Ask them if they think a possible solution will work.

# **KET ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS**

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- ✘ **4e. If questioned about whether you have children and don't – possible options:**
  - + Reflect concern back to parent. Ask for open communication and trust in your relationship with them.
  - + Observe more experienced colleagues conduct parent sessions.
  - + Become familiar with parenting literature.
  - + Spend time outside office with parents and children to observe their interactions.

# CAUTION:

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- ✘ **Caution to beginning (and to experienced) School Counselors:** Avoid the temptation to let parents know how “expert” we are at providing them with helpful strategies. Resist the temptation to rush in with solutions. Instead respect the process and the value of **parents developing solutions** with your assistance.
- ✘ At first the process of working with parents can be daunting. It helps to focus on ways in which you have been helpful.

## **FINAL DO'S AND DON'TS:**

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1. Do **trust** the process of collaboration, empathy and radical acceptance.
2. Do **notice** and appreciate the parent's strengths.
3. Do be **respectful** of parents.
4. Do comment on their child's strengths.
5. Don't offer information or advice before listening to what they need to tell you.
6. Don't give too much advice.

# **DEALING WITH ANGRY PARENTS:**

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- ✘ 1. Talk in Person (avoid phones + texts).
- ✘ 2. Listen First.
- ✘ 3. Validate their Concerns.
- ✘ 4. Try to ignore **your** Feelings.
- ✘ 5. Don't Take it Personally.

# DEALING WITH ANGRY PARENTS

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- ✘ 6. Respond to What They Say and Don't Say:
  - + A. "My kid never had problems last year."
  - + B. "My Child does NOT have a learning/behavior/social problem."
  - + C. "You keep \_\_\_\_\_ and I think it's stupid/ridiculous/wrong."
  - + D. "I have better things to do than come in and talk to you."
  - + E. "You don't respect my child because we are \_\_\_\_\_ (insert group)."

# DEALING WITH ANGRY PARENTS

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- ✘ 7. Focus on the Student.
- ✘ 8. Find a Solution.
- ✘ 9. Phrases to Avoid.
- ✘ 10. A Last Resort.

From: Tips & Tricks :: Dealing with Angry Parents

Posted on [March 21, 2013](#) by [One-Stop Counseling Shop](#)

# USING A SUPERVISOR:

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A few words of advice from a Supervisor of Counseling Departments for over 30 years at both the secondary and higher ed. levels:

- ✘ 1. When you anticipate a challenging parent conference **consult with your supervisor.** You're not alone! Usually the advantages (giving her/him a "heads up", benefit from experience, display a sincere desire to resolve a thorny problem, possibility of "double teaming," display humility) outweigh the possible disadvantages.

# USING A SUPERVISOR:

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- ✘ 2. Keep in mind that if the conference were to backfire, it's likely that your immediate supervisor would hear about it anyway, if not the principal or superintendent as well, in some districts.
- ✘ 3. If you are absolutely convinced that this would not be helpful, for whatever reason, then at least **consult a trusted colleague**. If a particularly challenging parent tends to push your buttons, someone not involved may be able to see things more clearly and give you an insight or a tip you didn't think of yourself.

# CONCERNS OF PARENTS OF SPECIAL ED. STUDENTS

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- ✘ 1. Grief, Loss and the “Dream Child”
- ✘ 2. Safety Concerns and “Over-protectiveness”
- ✘ 3. Attitudes of Other Parents and Other Children
- ✘ 4. Friendships
- ✘ 5. Potential for Discounting Child’s Abilities
- ✘ 6. Transitions
- ✘ 7. Conclusions

From: Taub, D.J. (2006). Understanding the Concerns of Parents of Students with Disabilities: Challenges and Roles for School Counselors. Professional School Counseling Journal , October 2006, 10(1),52-57.

# OUTREACH TO MINORITY PARENTS

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- ✘ Have all *essential* regulations and materials in their first language, as well as in English.
- ✘ Make sure the translation gives the same message as the original and is correct in connotations as well as content, vocabulary and grammar.
- ✘ When using names – draw on the family’s culture (i.e. “Miss Jean”)
- ✘ Be careful when using a translator – look at the parent or guardian, not the translator.
- ✘ Don’t assume a lack of parental initiative reflects a lack of interest. (Respect for Teachers – Greek and many other cultures.)

# AN IMPORTANT ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

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**The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed** Hardcover use pre-formatted data that complies with legal requirement from media matrix – August 11, 2015 by [Jessica Lahey](#)

It might almost be called:

“Confessions of Recovered *Helicopter Parent*”

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# ***Questions and Answers...***

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# ***Concluding Remarks***