

FROM ADVERSARIES TO ALLIES:

Working with “Challenging” Parents

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CARING PARENTS

- ✘ Most parents care for and want the best for their children.
- ✘ Those same parents are often not sure how best 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*

- ✘ Socially intelligent
- ✘ Charismatic
- ✘ Certain of their position(s)
- ✘ Do not tolerate disagreement

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

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- ✘ They may justify bullying behavior by saying it is for a higher purpose.
 - ✘ That purpose is the welfare of their child/children.
 - ✘ A believer in “*let the kids work it out on their own*” – until it is her child who has been “wronged”

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- ✘ QBMs can be **skillful story-tellers** and create narratives to support their point of view.
 - ✘ When the stories are about another parent, they do not see this as gossiping. It is seen as merely as "informing" you to help you understand.
 - ✘ They share the sad story to gain sympathy for the person's hard times or bad luck. The message they convey is that the other person about whom they are speaking is not competent to do anything to improve his/her own situation or to control his/her own child.

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- ✘ They almost never apologize for their child's behavior because it is the *other* child who is either “overly sensitive” or just “took it the wrong way.”

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- ✘ There is seldom, if ever, admission of error and/or an apology. If there is, they expect (and may demand) an admission of guilt in return. Or, they show they are apologizing only because they are so good: “I’m sorry you took it that way.”

KING PIN DADS:

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

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- ✘ They may **start at the top** – principal or superintendent – before speaking with you about a problem.
 - ✘ They often speak with administrators as though they are allies with them against overemotional, over-reacting and/or incompetent counselors.

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- ✘ Many King Pin Dads believe the best way to resolve any conflict with the school or with a counselor is to threaten a lawsuit.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- ✘ Other parents may disagree with these parent “types” but seldom wish to challenge them publicly.
- ✘ They may come to you privately and offer condolences and “support.” However, such support often does not go beyond that private meeting.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- ✘ Counselors are often the target of choice for QBMs/KPDs because they believe the counselors will take it. They may also do it because they have seen in the past that can get away with unacceptable behavior – experiencing a feeling of “control.”

[Note: Pillows or tissues in your office may mark you, not as a caring professional, but as someone who is easy to attack.]

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:

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?

- ✘ **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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- ✘ **Word statements 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 points personal and attribute this to you (when what you are doing is 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 this first point.
 - + Ask the parent to tell you specifically what they believe can make the situation better.

✘ 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. Just as students should be informed that being a teenager does *not* excuse bad manners, parents may need to be reminded of the same thing. 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.”

SPECIAL PARENT ISSUES

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

- ✘ 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:

- ✘ 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:

1. Avoid the following:

- +a. Becoming obsessed with the brand names.
- +b. “Friending” your child’s Counselor on Facebook.
- +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):

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

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

- ✘ Parents often put up WALLS of DEFENSE because they feel overwhelmed and vulnerable.
- ✘ Counselor needs to respond first 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 defenses.

KEYS WHEN APPROACHING PARENTS:

- ✘ **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:

- ✘ 4. **Let the Parent Lead** – 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 and concerns about the parent's own behavior toward his/her child.

KEY ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS:

- ✘ 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

- ✘ 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 to using “**boring punishment/consequences and exciting rewards.**”

KEY ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS:

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

KET ELEMENTS FOR APPROACHING PARENTS

- ✘ **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:

- ✘ **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:

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. Don't offer information or advice before listening to what they need to tell you.
5. Don't give too much advice.
6. Do comment on their child's strengths.

DEALING WITH ANGRY PARENTS:

- ✘ 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

- ✘ 6. Respond to What They're not Saying:
 - + 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."

DEALING WITH ANGRY PARENTS

- ✘ 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:

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:

- ✘ 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

- ✘ 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

- ✘ 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.
- ✘ 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

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

It might almost be called:

“Confessions of Recovered *Helicopter Parent*”

Questions and Answers...

Concluding Remarks