

TREAD LIGHTLY

When dealing with school issues, parents do better by keeping their tempers in check

Whenever I'm talking to a school official about one of my kids, I'm usually hyper-conscious of the need to keep my tone friendly and my words measured. And it's almost comical how long it can take me to draft and revise a two- or three-paragraph note or e-mail to one of their teachers.

I want to be careful not to come off as a complainer or as a clueless parent who doesn't have a realistic view of her child's abilities or needs. Above all, I want to make sure I'm raising my particular concern in a manner that won't be viewed as confrontational.



COLLEEN DISKIN

THE MOTHER LOAD

At the same time, though, I don't want to ever feel like I haven't done a good job of sticking up for my children if their best interests aren't being served. Sometimes it is a parent's job to push a little, or maybe even a lot.

It's just hard sometimes to know when and how much – and how to do it in a way that builds a collaborative rather than a combative relationship with teachers, guidance counselors and principals.

"The tone is 1,000 percent important in any conversation about a problem at school," advises Diane Dellanno, director of the New Jersey State Parent Information Resource Center, a non-profit that advises parents on how to communicate effectively with their children's schools.

Just last week in Hasbrouck Heights, a school community got a glimpse of the extremes that can be reached when healthy dialogue between a parent and a school official breaks down.

A mother whose 13-year-old daughter had her pants pulled down by a boy in gym class was charged in municipal court last Wednesday with disorderly conduct. Cindy Schwalb pleaded not guilty to the charge brought by school officials after she shouted an obscenity at the principal at a September workshop on bullying. Schwalb said she lost her temper because she believed the parents' workshop was inadequate and that the school district was not doing enough to prevent the type of "pantsing" incidents suffered by her daughter and other kids at the school.

See **MOTHER LOAD** Page **F-4**

Schwalb later expressed remorse for her outburst. But the district escalated the dispute by filing the disorderly conduct complaint, a move guaranteed to bring only more finger-pointing and a further erosion of trust.

Such incivility among the adults involved in this conflict certainly seems to undermine the goal of getting middle-schoolers to behave more civilly toward one another.

But it isn't hard to see how high emotions can quickly run when parents feels school officials aren't responding to their concerns, said Diana Autin, executive co-director of Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, another organization that conducts workshops teaching parents and school officials ways to communicate effectively with one another.

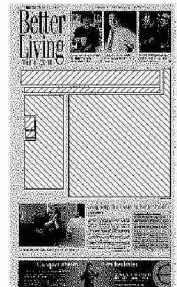
While counseling parents to keep their emotions in check, Autin said she understands why some parents' frustrations can get the better of them, particularly if school officials aren't doing their part to keep the communications positive and productive.

"Parents are obviously very emotionally invested in their children," she said.

Unfortunately, though, parents who come into a school meeting angry or upset can often have trouble organizing their thoughts and communicating their desires clearly.

Besides being too emotional, the other common mistakes that Autin thinks parents make are assuming the school official doesn't care about their child's progress or well-being, deciding how a problem should be solved before even hearing the school official's views and not knowing all the facts of the situation and all the policies and procedures of the district.

As a longtime math teacher at Wayne Hills High and a father of three young girls, Bruce McNutt sees the communications challenge from both sides of the schoolhouse door. Over the years, he's had parents storm in,



make demands and treat him with little respect, but that's the exception more than the rule, he said. Now as the parent of twins in first grade, McNutt knows well the value of reacting calmly to the classroom issues his children have encountered.

"What I would say to parents is, 'Don't assume you're getting the full picture of what's happening at school from your child,'" McNutt said. "You've got to ask questions and check into things and not just make up your mind that the teacher or the school is doing the wrong thing."

Dellanno's organization offers similar cautions. "The main advice we give to parents is to be informed," she said. "Being informed before you go in and point fingers and accuse is always the better way."

It can often seem to parents that the school holds all the power in the relationship, and it can be harder still not to feel this way at a parent-teacher conference when the teacher is sitting in the big chair behind the big desk and the parent is looking up at him or her from a child-size desk.

But Dellanno said parents aren't powerless to seek more services or assistance for their children as long as they are educated about the law and the policies and procedures of the school district in question.

Hopefully, though, battles can be avoided, and one way to prevent them is to get to know your child's teacher and administrators from the moment your child enrolls in the school, rather than

meeting them only when there's a problem. She advises parents to volunteer and attend school meetings so that they can get a clearer picture of how things are run at the school and develop a good working relationship with teachers and staffers.

"If the only time you come into school is to complain, then you leave a different impression than if you demonstrate from the start that you are interested in being involved in your child's school and their education in a positive way," Dellanno said. "That's the tone you want to set."

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BRUCE McNUTT, LONGTIME MATH TEACHER AT WAYNE HILLS HIGH AND FATHER OF THREE GIRLS

Keep your cool

Advice for parents trying to resolve a school conflict:

- Prior to a school meeting or conversation, make a list of your concerns and questions, and then prioritize, deciding which ones must be addressed first and which can possibly be discussed at a later date.
- Practice what you want to say and how to say it. Try to stay centered on the child and focused on the positive but be clear about your goals. Listen, ask questions and be sure to get your answers clarified.
- Avoid displaying negative body language or facial expressions.
- Try to begin your questions with the words "what" or "how," which can create less defensiveness than "why" or "who." For example: "How can we help my son feel safe on the playground?"
- Be direct if you do not understand something that is being said and keep asking until you understand.
- Rather than stating a hard and fast position, state what your interest and goals are in order to encourage discussion of the possible options. Have some options in mind and present them in a collaborative way: "We can ..." instead of "You should ..."

Source: Parent Education & Advocacy Leadership Center, based in Pittsburgh

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STAFF ARTIST

