Difficult Conversations With Parents: Practical Skills for Teachers

Susan Graham-Clay

Abstract

Teachers play a key role in communicating with parents to support student learning. One of the more challenging aspects of this role for teachers is having a difficult conversation with a parent about their child. Difficult conversations, when needed, are best accomplished face-to-face incorporating effective communication skills to promote a positive and productive interaction. This article reviews a number of key practical communication skills that teachers can use when communicating with parents including use of clear vocabulary, active listening, I-messages, questioning strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, leveled information, as well as attention to nonverbal messages. Strategies to support both planned and unplanned difficult conversations are discussed. Barriers to having difficult conversations between teachers and parents are outlined as well as new directions for research. Effective communication skills are integral for teachers to hold difficult, yet productive, conversations with parents to promote partnerships and to support student success.

Key Words: teachers, parents, communicating, communication skills, teacher–parent communication, school–home communication, difficult conversations, partnerships, family engagement, active listening, clear vocabulary, jargon, I-messages, questioning strategies, paraphrasing, summarizing, leveled information, nonverbal messaging, partnerships, relationships

Introduction

The positive impact of effective parent–teacher partnerships on student success has long been discussed in the research literature (Epstein et al., 2019). Communicating with parents has been described as a key component of effective partnerships. In fact, teacher communication skills have been highlighted as a strong predictor of parent involvement (Gisewhite et al., 2021; Park & Holloway, 2018). In this article, the term "parent" includes those adults in a child's life who may interact with the child's teacher to discuss student progress (including parents, guardians, grandparents, foster parents, etc.).

Contacts between teachers and parents may include in-person meetings (such as yearly parent–teacher conferences), phone calls, and report cards, as well as a range of digital interactions (e.g., email, texts, a variety of communication apps, websites, newsletters; Graham-Clay, 2024). Proactive communications through a variety of formats help to support the development of trusting relationships with parents early in the school year, before there is a need to share any concerns about a student's progress (Leenders et al., 2019).

Razer and Friedman (2017) noted that parent–teacher relationships are "infused with anxiety and other strong emotions" (p. 117) that are usually "undiscussed." The authors suggested that there is a natural shift that occurs from parents having primary responsibility for and control over their child's learning to a shared responsibility when the child enters school. This can be a stressful transition for many parents and may be a source of tension between teachers and parents. Gartmeier et al. (2017) further identified three important differences between teachers and parents that impact their communication interactions and are important for teachers to recognize and appreciate. First is the relationship *to* the child. Parents are much more emotionally attached to their child, whereas teachers maintain an appropriate professional distance and have a more detached relationship with the child. Second is the scope of responsibility for the child. Parents are broadly reponsible for their child in a variety of ways, and many maintain a caring role for their child throughout their lifetime. Conversely, teachers have a time-limited instructional role and may be more objective and realistic as a result. Third is the respective roles that teachers and parents have in the school system. The authors suggested that while parents know their child well, they have "low school-related expertise" (p. 7). Teachers, on the other hand, have a strong understanding of the school system and their instructional role. Because the communication dynamics are complex, Gartmeier et al. (2017) noted that establishing "professionalism" in teacher–parent conversations poses "high demands" on teachers (p. 8).

Given this important communication role and the potential for conversations to become emotionally charged and difficult at times, it is essential that teachers develop effective communication skills that promote positive and productive dialogues with parents. Unfortunately, there is a knowledge gap between highlighting the need for teachers to be trained and the actual skills that need to be trained. The focus of this literature review is to outline a series of practical and effective communication skills that teachers can use to nagivate difficult conversations with parents. This is intended as a companion article to a more in-depth discussion of the broad range of strategies available to teachers when communicating generally with parents (Graham-Clay, 2024).

Teacher Training

Training of communication skills for teachers has been highlighted as both important and needed (Fuentes et al., 2017; Ortega & Fuentes, 2015). However, a significant and ongoing issue for both preservice and practicing teachers has been the continuing lack of training available. Two cross-cultural reviews emphasized the lack of formal training for teachers on family–school partnerships and noted that training was dependent on the priorities of individual instructors (Epstein, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018). Willemse et al. (2018) also noted the lack of such training for preservice teachers based on a review of teacher education in North America, Australia, and Europe. Barriers included the lack of a consistent standard and multiple course priorities.

More recently, Luke and Vaughn (2022) reported that few teacher training programs require courses on collaboration and noted that the "interpersonal aspects" of teaching were not adequately addressed. Beilmann et al. (2023) also emphasized the need to train future teachers in communication skills as well as incorporating communication skills training as an ongoing component of professional development for all educators. They noted that the "variety in parents' educational and occupational backgrounds and skills demands that teachers are prepared to perceive and approach them as different target groups to make the best use of parents' various competences and expertise in school–home collaboration" (p. 10).

While the lack of formal teacher training on communication skills has been a consistent finding in the research, several studies have addressed teacher training initiatives in different ways. In their in-service training program, Symeou et al. (2012) focused on the development of specific communication skills including active listening, asking questions, paraphrasing and summarizing, as well as nonverbal communication. Teachers participated in five afterschool training sessions and reported increased confidence in their capacity to use the skills after the training. The use of simulations, videos, and mentoring have

also been used for training (see Future Directions below). Indeed, a meta-analysis of 39 studies indicated that teacher training initiatives positively impacted skill development for teachers with respect to family engagement outcomes, with communication skills considered a key intervention component (Smith & Sheridan, 2019).

Teacher–parent communication has been described as relational in nature and requires the appreciation that each parent is unique in terms of his/her feelings, beliefs, perspectives, culture, values, and past experiences with school (White, 2016). What is consistent is that teachers must respond to the strong feelings that parents have about their own children (White, 2016) which may lead to difficult conversations at times.

Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations have also been called challenging, courageous, and crucial conversations. The three components of a difficult conversation involve: (1) differing opinions during an interaction when (2) the stakes are high and (3) emotions run strong (Grenny et al., 2022). Although parents want the best for their children, the opinions of parents and teachers may differ with respect to the most suitable approach to take (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). In the case of difficult conversations between teachers and parents, the stakes of the conversation are high because the result may impact the student's learning and well-being as well as the relationship between the parent and the teacher. Emotions may also run high with the potential that both the teacher and parent may feel that their capacity is somehow questioned.

A review of teacher training programs in England identified communication skills with parents as the most valued element to be taught, specifically the skills needed to prepare and run parent–teacher meetings and to manage difficult conversations (Jones, 2020). In fact, the current reality for teachers may reflect an increasing need for difficult conversations with parents given potential concerns related to a number of factors such as the rising rate of digital learning environments, student progress post-pandemic (COVID-19), varying modes of school–home communication that may not always meet the need, responding to increasing cultural and language diversity of students and their families, as well as changing political landscapes and impacts on education. That said, many educators are legitimately hesitant or actually fearful of having difficult conversations with parents which may include the potential of responding to an unpredictable parent who may yell, intimidate, or become rude or hostile (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). Teachers who are better prepared to hold difficult, yet productive, conversations with parents will feel more confident responding to these evolving dynamics in education.

Research indicates that difficult conversations are best approached during a live interaction, ideally in person, or potentially virtually or by phone if necessary (Chappel & Ratliffe, 2021; Weinzapfel, 2022). Face-to-face interactions are preferred as these provide important nonverbal messages that help to reduce the potential for misunderstandings and provide opportunities to respond to various nuances that may not be as evident in other communication formats. In-person meetings also provide a better opportunity to show samples of student work if needed.

The primary ingredients to support a difficult conversation with a parent are trust and relationship that are built upon a series of positive communications over time. As previously noted, the development of a trusting relationship with parents is important to establish early in the school year "*before* there is anything substantial to talk about" (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 529). A strong relationship allows the teacher to take the perspective of the parent into account during a conversation (Buhl & Hilkenmeier, 2017). Relationship is also essential for a parent to hear information that may not be consistent with his or her perspective about their child without becoming highly reactive, potentially to the point of rejecting the information or even the meeting. Ultimately, positive relationships with parents must be cultivated (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016).

The best way to prepare for and support difficult conversations with parents is to plan for them from the outset of the school year by establishing positive communications with parents. Early positive phone calls home were described as an "ounce of prevention" by Whitaker and Fiore (2016). Additional communication opportunities include home visits or parent–teacher conferences, as well as by providing information through classroom newsletters and websites (Reinking, 2019). The most effective teachers are those who communicate with parents "on a regular and consistent basis" when things are going well and also when challenges exist (White, 2016, p. 64).

When difficult conversations between teachers and parents are needed, it is typically because a teacher has a concern to share about a student's academic, social, and/or behavioral progress. Alternatively, the parent may bring forward concerns about the child's progress. Parents may also express concern about how their child has been treated (Jaksec, 2013). In order to respond successfully, it is important that teachers use a range of effective communication skills to navigate difficult conversations with the primary goal to support student success.

Communication Skills

The following section outlines a series of practical skills for teachers to use when communicating with parents, including the use of clear vocabulary,

active listening, I-messages, questioning strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, use of leveled information, and awareness of nonverbal messages. These effective communication skills will help a teacher to be "the cool, calm, collected person who does everything they can to help" students (McEwan-Adkins, 2022, ch. 5, p. 15).

Clear Vocabulary

Communication with parents will be enhanced when the vocabulary used is clear and expressed as simply as possible (Kullar, 2020; Weinzapfel, 2022). Examples of more straightforward word choices include "start" for commence, "remembered" for retained, "use" for utilize, and "near" for proximity. Teachers should also avoid using what could be viewed as "loaded" language that may create an emotional response on the part of the parent. For example, a child may have taken an item *without permission* in school, however "stealing" the item adds judgement and a negative connotation that may impact a constructive conversation with a parent about the issue.

Weinzapfel (2022) outlined a number of additional strategies to make communication with parents more conversational. She suggested using short sentences with only one fact per sentence and promoted the use of contractions (e.g., "don't" versus "do not") that are more conversational in nature. Having just one person in mind will help to make the message clearer and more effective. Weinzapfel also suggested avoiding the use of technical terms, jargon, and acronyms whenever possible. Education is fraught with technical vocabulary that is not readily understood by parents. Terms that are absolutely needed should be carefully defined and explained (Weinzapfel, 2022).

Active Listening

Listening is not the same as hearing. Bodie (2019) described listening as multidimensional, involving affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes ("the ABCs of listening"). The affective component involves an individual's personal views about listening and may include potential barriers to doing so. Listening behaviors involve specific actions to engage such as eye contact, leaning forward, and asking questions. The cognitive component of listening involves internal processes such as attending, interpreting, and making sense of what has been said.

Hughes and Read (2012) described listening as the "number one" communication skill and as an "active" process that involves being "fully present" with the goal to form a positive relationship. The authors described the key components of active listening as (pp. 31–33) as:

1. Paying undivided attention to the speaker
2. Showing that one is in fact listening (e.g., by nodding, having an open posture)
3. Providing feedback by reflecting on what the speaker has said
4. Defering judgement by not interrupting and allowing the speaker to finish
5. Responding appropriately by being candid, open, honest, and respectful

Surveyed primary teachers and principals reported using a range of active listening skills including paying attention, listening to the parent's words without interrupting, adopting a neutral attitude, and showing empathy. Educators also asked clarification questions, repeated and summarized the parents words, and attempted to convey an understanding of the parent's concerns and feelings (Chatzinikola, 2021).

McNaughton and Vostal (2010) outlined a specific approach for teachers to promote active listening in order to improve communication with parents. The strategy is based on the acronym "LAFF Don't CRY" and is summarized below (p. 252):

L	Listen, empathize, and communicate respect
A	Ask questions and ask permission to take notes
F	Focus on the issues
F	Find a first step
Don't	
C	Criticize people who aren't present
R	React hastily and promise something you can't deliver
Y	Yakety-yak-yak

The authors promoted "LAFF Don't CRY" as a positive active listening approach for teachers that is easy to remember and to use effectively. Teachers were encouraged to listen, to ask questions, and to focus on the issue at hand, while at the same time avoiding criticizing others, responding thoughtfully, and limiting unnecessary talk ("yakety-yak"). Finding a first step to move forward is key to the model that can be applied to both informal and formal interactions with parents. Preservice teachers trained in this strategy were rated by parents as more effective communicators who were better able to demonstrate empathy and understand parental concerns (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010).

I-Messages

The use of I-messages (also termed I-statements) can be very helpful to diffuse negative emotions and to build connection with a parent during a difficult

conversation. The benefit of using an I-message is that the speaker acknowledges that his/her comment is from a personal perspective, thus recognizing that there will also be other valid perspectives.

To illustrate: Imagine your daughter Lina has recently been late for school on a number of occasions. There is a lot going on at home right now that you have not shared with Lina's teacher, who has asked to speak with you. You are already worried. In your conversation the teacher says: "Lina is coming to school late too often, which is becoming a problem because it disrupts the start of the day for everyone in the class." How do you feel about the teacher's comment? You might feel that your parenting is being judged. You might feel defensive, guilty, embarassed, or a combination. You might even feel angry at the teacher. The flavor of the conversation going forward for you now may reflect a mix of negative emotions on top of your current stressors. On the other hand, perhaps the teacher says: "I feel worried when Lina is late for school because she misses hearing about the plan for the day and the instructions for the first activity." How do you feel now? It would be unusual for a parent to become upset with a teacher who is concerned about their child.

An I-message is intended to convey thoughts and feelings in a way that does not cause the other person to feel shamed, judged, or criticized. I-messages own the concern. Creating an I-message involves three elements: *I feel…when…because….* As per the example above, the statement includes: I feel (identify the feeling: worried) when (describe the concern or student behavior: Lina is late for school) because (explain the effects of the concern or behavior: she misses key information at the start of the day).

In a study on the use of I-messages, Rogers et al. (2018) noted that subtle changes in language were influential and that I-statements had a lower probability of creating a defensive reaction. Use of I-messages can be a very effective way for teachers to respectfully voice their concerns while also promoting an ongoing and constructive conversation with a parent.

Questioning

The use of questioning techniques is an important communication skill when teachers meet with parents to share information and to better understand concerns. Different types of questions will elicit different types of answers, specifically the use of closed and open-ended questions (Stapleton, 2019).

Closed-ended questions are useful to obtain specific information and typically prompt a short response (Stapleton, 2019). This type of question may be particularly helpful at the outset of an interaction. That said, caution is needed not to overuse closed-ended questions as too many may reduce the participation of the parent. Examples of closed-ended questions include:

- questions that can be answered with a yes/no response (e.g., “Does Jo like recess?”)
- selection questions (e.g., “Did she seem angry or sad when she got home?”)
- identification questions requesting a specific piece of information (e.g.,“What is Kai’s favorite sport?”; Stapleton, 2019)

Conversely, open-ended questions are invitational and provide more freedom of response (Stapleton, 2019). Open-ended questions are useful to gain new information, to explore issues in more depth, and to express empathy and concern. These questions also allow parents to provide the information they consider to be relevant. “How does Dara feel about math?” and “Can you tell me more about your concerns?” are both examples of open-ended questions. Further questioning may then follow to sustain the conversation and obtain more detailed information.

When engaged in a dialogue with parents, it is important for teachers to remember that individuals vary in the time it takes to process and respond to questions. This is especially true if a second language is involved. Parents also come with their own educational experiences that may or may not have been positive and may influence their willingness to engage. Some parents will respond quickly to questions, and others will take more time and/or may be reticent to answer. Wait time is important, and it can be difficult to quietly hold space for a response. For a parent who seems shy or anxious, it may be helpful to start with several closed-ended questions to engage the parent, to obtain initial information, and to gain some rapport before moving to a more open-ended approach. Conversely, sometimes closed-ended questions can be helpful with a highly verbal parent to hone in on specific information that is needed. Understanding how and when to use closed-ended and open-ended questions will help teachers to feel more confident when seeking information from parents.

Paraphrasing and Summarizing

The skills of paraphrasing and summarizing are very helpful to clarify meaning during a conversation. First it is important to actively listen to the information before attempting to solve the problem at hand (Boult, 2019). Paraphrasing involves the listener clarifying the points that have been made by the speaker (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017). This does not involve judgement or evaluation of the content. Rather, the goal is to listen to the meaning of what has been said and to rephrase using your own words (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). Paraphrasing is intended to be tentative and brief and may contain both facts and feelings (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). It is often helpful to paraphrase in the form of a question. For example: “It sounds like you

are worried that Jack is struggling to make friends at school. Am I correct?" Paraphrasing enhances a conversation by providing an opportunity to check in with the parent to verify their message has been heard and understood and also encourages clarification if there is a disconnect.

As the conversation proceeds, summarizing involves gathering together the key themes and feelings that have been communicated. This can be an especially helpful strategy when several issues have been raised by a parent. The intent is to provide some "order" to the information, to capture the key points that have been shared for accuracy, and not to add additional information from the listener's perspective (Midwinter & Dickson, 2015). The parent has the opportunity to hear a summary of his or her own words and concerns, and again there is a chance to agree or to clarify. The use of paraphrasing and summarizing demonstrates a level of attention that can help to create a bond between the teacher and the parent (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017).

Leveled Information

It is important for parents to know that the teacher recognizes and appreciates their child as a whole person. Teachers reported that their communications with parents first focused on positive characteristics of the child followed by a statement of the teacher's concerns (Chatzinikola, 2021). For example, Remi is artistic and athletic, and he also struggles with reading. Kira is very social with many friends, and she also struggles to pay attention in class and is often out of her seat. The first step for the teacher is to identify the student's strengths and the specific areas of concern prior to connecting with the parent.

Tharinger et al. (2008) outlined the application of a conceptual framework involving different levels of information when psychologists provide assessment feedback to parents. This approach may also be useful for teachers when sharing observations of a student and concerns with parents. The three levels relate to how easily the information to be shared fits within the parent's view of their child:

Level 1: information is consistent with the parent's perspective

Level 2: information requires reframing of the parent's perspective

Level 3: information conflicts with the parent's perspective

Level 1 information is consistent with the parent's view of their child and should be noted at the outset. This will provide some initial reassurance and help to reduce parental anxiety. Acknowledging Remi's artistic and athletic skills and Kira's social skills are examples of Level 1 information, typically provided early in a parent meeting, to recognize the child's strengths.

Level 2 information generally involves details such as test scores and student observations that may cause the parent to modify or reframe their view

of their child somewhat, but will not cause the parent to give up "closely held beliefs" or to feel judged (Tharinger et al., 2008, p. 604). Level 2 information might cause the parent to think or to say: "I hadn't thought about it that way, but that makes sense." For example, concerns about incomplete work for a primary child may be reframed as difficulties with writing. A high school student who refused to talk in class was found to have high anxiety. When concerns are being shared, the authors suggested that the majority of feedback typically involves Level 2 information. The parent remains engaged; however, reframing of information allows the parent to shift their view of their child to incorporate a new perspective.

Level 3 information, on the other hand, markedly conflicts with the parent's view of their child (Tharinger et al., 2008). Unless a strong foundation of relationship and trust has been previously built with the parent, this type of information may cause the parent to feel highly anxious or upset, to the point of outright rejection at times. Understanding this possibility helps to explain the hostile reactions of some parents during meetings when significant concerns are shared and reinforces the importance of building relationship and trust with parents through a variety of strategies well in advance and prior to the need for a difficult conversation. Examples may include regular parent contacts regarding student strengths and needs, sharing support strategies in place, as well as encouraging opportunities for parental input and shared goal-setting. It may not always be possible for a teacher to predict what type of information will fit each level for a particular parent. Tharinger et al. (2008) suggested that close attention to the way a parent describes their child at the outset of the conversation will provide helpful clues.

Nonverbal Messages

Nonverbal communication involves sending and receiving messages without using words. "A substantial amount of what we communicate comes through nonverbal behaviors and the information those nonverbal behaviors give others about how we truly are feeling" (Fiore & Fiore, 2017, p. 48). Nonverbal messages have been called our "silent language," and these can "supplement or replace verbal communication" (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017, p. 55). Indeed, verbal and nonverbal communication have been described as complementary to one another and equally important (Zhang & Qin, 2023). Nonverbal communication also exists within a cultural context, and nonverbal messages may be intentional as well as spontaneous.

"Nonverbal communication is often more subtle and more effective than verbal communication and can convey meaning better than words" (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017, p. 53). Our nonverbal messages can help to

reinforce the words we speak or can potentially create misunderstanding if there is a disconnect between the two. In fact, if the listener is faced with a disconnect, the nonverbal message tends to be more trusted than the words spoken (Burgoon et al., 2022). These authors suggested that before a meeting even starts, nonverbal communication provides an advance "frame of reference" for interpreting the words that are to come. Knowing this, it is extremely important that teachers monitor their own nonverbal messages, both at the outset and throughout a meeting with parents.

It is helpful for teachers to be aware of the different types of nonverbal messages and their functions in order to appreciate how these interact and relate to interactions with others. Examples include (but are not limited to):

- Body Language: eye contact, facial expressions, posture, gestures
- Touch: shaking hands
- Paralinguistic: tone, talking speed, volume, pitch, use of silence
- Space (proxemics): the amount of space between the participants
- Physical characteristics: professional attire, hygiene

Soukup (2019) proposed that the range of nonverbal messages serve three important functions during communication. First, nonverbals serve to reinforce the verbal message. Second, nonverbals help to express emotions, such as conveying concern with one's facial expression. Third, the use of nonverbal messages can help to regulate interactions during a conversation, such as encouraging turn taking when talking through eye contact, a gesture, and the use of silence.

According to Kullar (2020) "your body can speak for you even when you are not saying anything" (p. 114). When meeting with parents, teachers are encouraged to present a friendly demeanor, use a positive tone, hold space for silence, consider sitting alongside the parent(s) rather than across a desk, use eye contact respectfully, and present a professional appearance. In addition, displaying interest in the parent, maintaining an open body posture (open versus closed arms), and using a conversational tone are nonverbal messages that will support the words that are spoken. It is also very reasonable to respectfully check one's perception of another's nonverbal messages, such as: "I notice that you are crossing your arms. Are you unhappy with something I just said?" (Fiore & Fiore, 2017, p. 51).

Some nonverbal messages and their meanings tend to be universal while cultural differences also exist (Ren, 2014; Soukup, 2019). For example, smiling is generally recognized as a universal expression of happiness (Okon, 2011), however the frequency of smiling, acceptable occasions, and intent, varies across cultures (Tiechuan, 2016). The use of eye contact also varies across cultures and can lead to miscommunication (Tiechuan, 2016). Similarly, various

gestures have markedly different meanings across cultures (e.g., OK sign and thumbs up; Tiechuan, 2016). In order to enhance the congruence of their own verbal and nonverbal messages with parents, teachers are encouraged to become familiar with the various nuances of nonverbal communication that may be part of the different cultures within their school community.

Difficult Conversations: Planned and Unplanned

Difficult conversations between teachers and parents are often planned interactions where the goal is to discuss specific concerns about a child's academic, social, and/or behavioral progress. Such interactions may occur during parent–teacher conferences or planned meetings with parents at other times during the school year. Planned interactions allow teachers time to prepare in advance, to gather information they may need (e.g., student data) and to identify specific goals for the conversation. However, difficult conversations with parents can also be unplanned and come "out of the blue" (McEwan-Adkins, 2022) when a teacher may be caught by surprise by an upset parent and must navigate a challenging interaction without time to think or prepare (Grenny et al., 2022). A number of strategies are outlined below for teachers to hold both planned and unplanned difficult conversations with parents.

Planned Conversations

Prior to a planned difficult conversation with a parent, it is important for the teacher to take some time to reflect on his or her feelings about the student, parent, and the concern at hand (Sanderson, 2013). This will help the teacher plan how to best approach the interaction. It may help to think of difficulties in terms of situations and actions instead of people (Packard & Race, 2013). The most important step is to prepare. "The worse the news, the more thought and effort we need to put into delivering it" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 108). It may be helpful to consider and plan for the meeting in three phases: setting up the meeting, managing the discussion during the meeting, and bringing the meeting to an end.

Setting Up the Meeting

- Consider which school staff should attend the meeting with the parent. Often the meeting involves the teacher and parent alone. When there is a known challenge with a particular parent, school administration should be part of the planning and may elect to be present. On some occasions it may be helpful to include a staff member who had a positive relationship with the parent in the past and who may be able to support a productive conversation (such as a former classroom teacher). Weinzapfel (2022)

recommended keeping the meeting small so the parent is not overwhelmed and ensuring the parent is aware of the meeting participants in advance.
- Initial steps include extending an invitation to the parent and arranging an appropriate time and location to meet. It is important to be respectful of the parent's schedule as much as possible in order to promote the parent's attendance.
- A home visit may be appropriate in some cases, although typically parent–teacher meetings are held at the school. Sanderson (2013) suggested holding the meeting in a neutral location in the school building (e.g., conference room) rather than in the child's classroom. It is helpful to support nonverbal communication by arranging comfortable seating on adult-sized chairs around a table versus across a desk. It is also courteous to provide water, coffee, or tea (Weinzapfel, 2022; Whitaker & Fiore, 2016).
- Consider any special needs on the part of the parent that will require attention and planning, such as a second language and need for an interpreter, as well as any culturally-based nonverbal messages to be aware of. Also note if the parent has a disability that requires consideration (such as vision loss, hearing loss, or mobility needs; Fiore & Fiore, 2017).

During the Meeting

- Develop an agenda for the meeting. Kullar (2020) recommended structuring the meeting with a clear beginning (introductions and expectations for the meeting), middle (state the problem and discuss), and ending (develop an action plan). It may be helpful to prepare and rehearse a first line (Kullar, 2020). Identify two or three key goals for the conversation (Weinzapfel, 2022).
- Ensure that notes are taken during the meeting (Weinzapfel, 2022), either by the teacher directly or by another staff member attending. When difficult conversations occur, it is important to "write down the details of conclusions, decisions, and assignments" (Grenny et al., 2022, p. 243).
- Honor each participant's time by clarifying the timeframe for the meeting from the outset (Applebaum, 2009). A specific timeframe in mind helps to structure the conversation and provides those gathered with a clear endpoint that will help to manage the meeting flow.
- Acknowledge the talents and abilities of the child (McEwan-Adkins, 2022; Reinking, 2019). This would be Level 1 information discussed above and presented early in the meeting. Reassure the parent that school staff care about and want the best for their child (McEwan-Adkins, 2022).
- Briefly identify the main concern(s) in clear language using a neutral tone. Use of I-messages at this point will help the teacher to own the concern about the student. If the parent has identified the concern and requested to meet, thank the parent for bringing the concern forward to make school

staff aware. Avoid the use of educational jargon and "loaded" language, and present factual information without judgement (Weinzapfel, 2022). It may be appropriate to provide a brief history for context (e.g., review of past supports; Sanderson, 2013). If the concern is academic, it may also be helpful to provide examples of the student's work as well as examples of "average" student work (e.g., a sample of text the student is reading versus grade level text, or a math sheet or writing sample by another student with their name removed that reflects grade level performance).

- During the meeting, utilize the key communication skills previously outlined. Listen actively and use silence to your advantage (Kullar, 2020). Actively seek to understand the parent's concern, and encourage parent input by incorporating open-ended questions to gain information and close-ended questions to confirm details. Check and clarify your assumptions by paraphrasing the parent's comments and by summarizing key points. Reclarify if indicated to ensure accuracy. Acknowledge and validate the parent's feelings throughout the discussion (McEwan-Adkins, 2022). It may also be helpful to clarify what the various participants need to address the problem (Sanderson, 2013).
- Pay attention to the nonverbal messages of the participants in the meeting (e.g., eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, volume, tone). The teacher should also pay close attention to managing their own nonverbal messages. It is important that school staff model the behaviors they wish to see in the meeting. Whitaker and Fiore (2016) emphasized that school staff should "never argue, yell, use sarcasm, or behave unprofessionally" (p. 6).
- School staff should be prepared to understand, even if they do not agree with the parent (Packard & Race, 2013).

Ending the Meeting

- Discuss possible next steps and use summary statements to finalize a plan. When a plan is created, consider asking permission from the parent to carry out a particular course of action with the child (Razer & Friedman, 2017). This approach serves to share control over what happens.
- Wrap up the meeting by summarizing the next steps for each individual involved and end on a positive note (Jaksec, 2013). It may be appropriate to arrange to provide meeting minutes to all participants once the minutes are prepared. Seek to agree to keep the communication lines open (Weinzapfel, 2022). Schedule a follow-up conversation or meeting if indicated.
- When the meeting is over, Weinzapfel (2022) recommended thanking the parent sincerely for attending and offering input. Take time to accompany the parent to the front office or exit door after the meeting has concluded (Jaksec, 2013).

Unplanned Conversations

When an unexpected and unplanned difficult conversation ensues with an upset or angry parent, the first thing to do is to take several deep breaths to calm (Weinzapfel, 2022). In a neutral tone, thank the parent for bringing the concern forward and observe the parent's verbal and nonverbal body language. Paraphrase the parent concern so the parent feels heard and the teacher clearly understands the issue at hand (McEwan-Adkins, 2022). The teacher then needs to determine if their schedule allows time to have an immediate conversation with the parent, if is reasonable to do so, and if another staff member should be present (e.g., principal). Conversely, sometimes it is the school adminstrator who must respond to an unplanned difficult conversation with an upset parent who arrives at the office and must consider who should be present.

If an immediate meeting is possible, invite further conversation and, when possible, move the parent to a comfortable, private, and safe location. Clarify the intent of the meeting and the timeframe available. Take notes. Proceed using the communication skills previously discussed including active listening, questioning strategies, paraphrasing and summarizing, and observing the nonverbals in the conversation. Bring the conversation to a close with a proactive plan if possible. If there is still discontent on the part of the parent, book a follow-up time for a planned meeting. When the meeting is over, take time soon after to review the notes and consult with appropriate school staff to discuss next steps.

If there is not sufficient time to meet with the parent in the moment, book a time for a planned meeting with the parent in the near future. Grenny et al. (2022) recommended reducing the "lag time" between when a problem is brought forward and when the problem is discussed and resolved. The message to the parent is that their concern is heard and there will be an opportunity for further discussion very soon. Sometimes deferring the conversation to another day may result in a calmer parent (although not always the case), but it does allow the educator time to prepare and to investigate the issue (if needed).

For both planned and unplanned difficult conversations, it is important for teachers to have a response plan in the event that a parent engages in angry cricitisms and/or accusations that may include inappropriate language. Whitaker and Fiore (2016) suggested a comment said calmly and slowly, such as: Mr./Ms./Mrs. XXX, "Please don't talk to me like that. I will *never* speak to you like that, and I will *never* speak to your child like that, so please don't talk to me like that" (p. 116). This approach accomplishes two things according to the authors. First, it is a "reasonable and professional request" (p. 117). Second, it is a promise that demonstrates how school staff will treat the parent and the

child. It is challenging interactions such as these that reinforce the need for educators to learn, practice, and actively use effective communication skills to listen, understand parent perspectives, recognize and attempt to diffuse strong emotions, and develop action plans to best support student success.

After a Difficult Conversation

After a difficult conversation with a parent, it is important to take some time to review the notes of the meeting and to personally debrief the experience (Weinzapfel, 2022). If other staff were present, an opportunity for joint reflection is helpful. Teachers should consider their feelings about the meeting including the general experience, the content, the demeanor of the participants, and the concluding plan of action. If the conversation went well, review the strategies that were helpful. If the conversation did not go well, it is helpful to consider the tone and nonverbals during the meeting and for educators to evaluate their own role in the conversation (Sanderson, 2013). Also consider potential factors that may have influenced the outcome (such as differing opinions that became evident, differing goals for the child, and/or strong emotions). Once again, teachers can use the experience as a learning opportunity to consider what could be done differently if a similar situation arises in the future (Packard & Race, 2013) as well as potential next steps. Going forward, it will be very important to carry out the plan arrived at during the meeting, to monitor the student's progress over time, and to follow-up with the parent (Kuhler, 2020).

Barriers to Difficult Conversations

A number of barriers exist that may negatively impact difficult conversations between teachers and parents. Lack of training on effective communication skills has been identified as a primary barrier for preservice teachers in their preparation programs. For practicing teachers, the lack of professional development time and competing educational priorities negatively impact the potential for focused on-the-job training.

The stress involved in having difficult conversations with parents may also create a barrier for teachers. Difficult conversations can be highly stressful, creating strong emotions that may produce a fight or flight response (Reinking, 2019). The flight response for the teacher may be to ignore or to avoid the conversation altogether. Teachers who have had a previous uncomfortable interaction with an angry parent may fear initiating yet another difficult conversation (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). Teachers may avoid difficult conversations with parents for many other reasons as well, including: a concern the parent

may come to dislike the teacher, discomfort with the topic, fear of confrontation, a "nothing-will-change" attitude towards the parent, time constraints, as well as uncertainty about how the parent will react (Kullar, 2020). There is also the worry about making things worse (Grenny et all., 2022). The potential outcome of having a difficult conversation is that it is handled poorly (e.g., strong emotions get in the way and the conversation is not productive) or that it is handled well, with a clear, go-forward plan and an improved relationship (Grenny et al., 2022).

Parents also face many barriers to having difficult conversations with teachers. Many parents are dealing with multiple and significant pressures such as a lack of positive parenting role models, difficult school experiences themselves, financial and job pressures, stressful family situations, and challenges related to language and cultural diversity. In addition to these factors, parents typically lack knowledge about the school system and curriculum demands and about support services that may be available to them. Parents may also not have a realistic sense of age-appropriate expectations for their child. Any of these factors may affect a parent's willingness to become vulnerable and discuss a concern about their child. Strong parental emotions may also cause parents to avoid difficult conversations with school staff. The source of strong reactions by parents is often fear or confusion associated with not understanding the situation (McEwan-Adkins, 2022) or feeling their child has been mistreated or wronged (Jaksec, 2013). An important premise for teachers to keep in mind is that "parents have their child's best interests in mind and do their best under difficult circumstances" (Razer & Friedman, 2017, p. 127).

Future Directions

Communication skills for teachers are a significant, perhaps underestimated, and certainly less researched component of home–school partnerships. The lack of training for both preservice and practicing teachers has been well documented, and the number of skill sets needed are broad in scope, including in-person communication skills, skills to communicate effectively through various forms of technology, as well as knowledge of culturally responsive practices (Graham-Clay, 2024).

With respect to practical in-person communication skills, continued research is needed to expand the use of innovative approaches to train preservice teachers in the specific communication skills they need to hold difficult conversations with parents. Several innovative approaches to teacher training have been described in the literature, including the use of simulations (Walker & Legg, 2018), videos (DeConinck et al., 2018), and a cross-discipline

certification training course (Miller et al., 2018). In particular, research is needed on strategies to develop the communication skills of currently practicing teachers, such as incorporating the use of role plays during staff meetings, use of mentoring by experienced teachers (e.g., Mosley et al., 2023), as well as the creation of Professional Learning Communities focused on specific skill development (e.g., Wages, 2021).

Continued research is needed to develop effective strategies to train teachers who are communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse families, including effective use of translation (e.g., Yan et al., 2022) and interpretation services (e.g., Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). It is also important that training alerts teachers to the potential racial and cultural biases that may shape their communications with parents (Cherng, 2016) and may negatively impact their interactions with many famlies.

Research on the application and effectiveness of using leveled information (Tharinger et al., 2008) by teachers when sharing assessment information with parents would be most interesting. Lastly, future research is needed that explores the best fit between various topics of communication with parents (e.g., general information, student progress, student concern) and the mode of communication used (e.g., in-person, e-mail, text) to inform effective practice.

Conclusion

Communication between teachers and parents is relational in nature, built upon a range of communication formats (including both in-person and digital interactions), and develops over time. As part of this ongoing communication exchange, the potential for differing opinions and strong emotions between teachers and parents is real and should be anticipated (Razer & Friedman, 2017). In fact, communication is at the root of most misunderstandings (Fiore & Fiore, 2017). The prospect of having difficult conversations with parents can be unnerving for many teachers. Unfortunately, gaps continue to exist in the training of effective communication skills that will help teachers build confidence and maximize effective interactions with parents. This article outlines a range of practical communication skills that teachers can use to hold difficult conversations with parents, and is intended as a companion to the essay and discussion article by Graham-Clay (2024) that focuses on a broad range of strategies that teachers can use when communicating with parents.

Effective communication goes beyond just the exchange of information to include "understanding the emotion behind the information" (Rana, 2015, p. 29). During difficult conversations, teachers are encouraged to use leveled information to engage the parent, to listen actively to the parent's comments and

concerns, and to attend to and monitor the nonverbal messages of the participants in the meeting (themselves included). Use of I-messages will help teachers to own their concern for the child and help to diffuse negative emotions on the part of the parent. Teachers are also encouraged to use open- and closed-ended questioning techniques to obtain and confirm information, as well as paraphrasing and summarizing the parent's message to ensure accuracy of understanding. The vocabulary used by the teacher throughout the discussion should be clear, and educational jargon and loaded language should be avoided.

When a difficult conversation with a parent is needed, teachers are encouraged to plan and prepare in advance (when possible), to remain calm, to seek to understand the parent's perspective, to identify the key concerns, and to use the effective communication skills discussed to promote an open and respectful interchange of ideas to determine a course of action to support the child. When difficult conversations are impromptu and unplanned, there are still effective strategies that can be used in the moment to manage the interaction. Ultimately, each communication exchange provides a learning opportunity for the teacher to inform and support future parent interactions.

Many relational and emotional factors impact the interactions between teachers and parents and may cause communication to become challenging at times. When conversations with parents become difficult, it is important for teachers to remember that "parents do the best they know how" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 4). Use of effective communication skills on the part of the teacher will build teacher confidence to hold difficult conversations with parents when needed and will help to channel the strong emotions parents feel for their child into meaningful and productive partnerships. From this perspective, every communication exchange with a parent provides an opportunity for future positive interactions to support student success.

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Susan Graham-Clay is a school psychologist with 30+ years' experience working in schools, both as a front-line clinician and as a senior psychologist with a Canadian school board. She currently has a private practice consulting in schools and conducting psychological assessments with children and youth. Dr. Graham-Clay meets regularly with teachers and parents to discuss student learning. She has been an itinerant instructor at three universities and has presented at local, national, and international conferences. Dr. Graham-Clay has a special interest in school–home communication. Correspondence related to this article can be directed to Dr. Graham-Clay at this email: susangrahamclay@gmail.com