

## Summary

*The following is an outline of a workshop I delivered to assist staff deal with those difficult parents who can cause substantial levels of stress in an educator's working life.*

### **Dealing with Difficult People**

There is an acknowledged increase in the amount of verbal abuse and harassment experienced by all staff members at school. There is an amount that comes from the students but that is reasonable easy to deal with. What is becoming a more and more regular form of abuse is coming from parents or guardians who are unhappy with some event that has affected their child. Invariably the school executive and teachers are expected to bear the brunt of this parent aggression. Although theoretically we are not required to be subjected to the aggression and harassment the reality is we do take on more than we should because we want to support the children.

As a principal I have a personal and professional responsibility to protect all staff members from the physical and psychological impact of aggression and abuse and the following information outlines some techniques that will help me deal with this problem.

If you know beforehand the parent is coming to the school you can be well prepared but more often than not they just arrive at your door. When this happens get ready, set and then go into the meeting. These are those steps:

#### **Ready - Create Time:**

If the person arrives unannounced get a quick summary of the issue. If the issue is difficult, excuse yourself for a short time and if possible seat them in a quiet pleasant place. If they phone the school, if possible, ask them to hold for a moment while you deal with someone who is already on hold (remember the person on the other end cannot see you). This gives you time to:

- Check your own emotional condition (you may already be stressed from the day to day activities)
- Calm yourself down
- Make sure your boundaries are on; protect yourself physically and mentally

## **Steady**

As soon as possible return to the person in a confident manner:

- Stand up straight, appear confident and use appropriate eye contact -do not appear aggressive
- Model appropriate behaviour
- Let them tell their story without interruption
- Take the complaint seriously
- Validate their emotions without conceding the validity of their complaint
- Let them know you're listening in a non-aggressive manner
- Don't take their anger personally
- Make sure you really understand the issue. Summarize the main points as you see them and repeat them back to them
- Seek clarification if needed
- If possible reach an agreed understanding of the dispute
- Summarize the issue as you see it

## **Go**

When you have a clear understanding of the situation it is time to take an active part in the conversation. At this time you should:

- Take responsibility for your role in dealing with the problem
- Be confident; know the procedures or where to find information
- Acknowledge mistakes
- Ask them what they would like to happen
- If possible offer a choice of resolutions
- Follow up to make sure you have fulfilled any commitment

There are a few things 'not to do' if you want a successful outcome. When in a tough meeting do not:

- Interrupt, they will only start again.
- Jump to conclusions.
- Pass them on to someone else without explaining why
- Be impatient
- Use sarcasm
- Use Department jargon
- Tell them to call back
- Patronize them

- Say it's none of your business
- Say 'it's not my fault'
- Accuse them of making a mistake
- Make excuses
- Explain too much
- Don't engage in a debate, tell them what you will do
- Personally attack them or their family
- Give a double message (your body language and your verbal message don't match)
- Fail to follow up if you have committed to do that

### **Dealing with Serious Offenders**

Serious offenders only make up about 2% of complainants but they create the lion's share of stress. These really difficult people who:

- Won't let go of their complaint
- Have issues that cannot be satisfied
- Make unreasonable requests or demands that are illegal or immoral
- Are rude and abusive
- Are aggressive

### **Other Tactics**

If a person's constant complaints become too draining on your time the following tactics can be useful:

- Limit the times when you will take a call or see them
- Do not take calls etc. unless the complaint has been forwarded in writing
- Don't take calls on issues that have already been dealt with
- You will take correspondence but will only respond if new, confirmed information accompanies the correspondence

### **Know your legal rights**