

Accepting and responding in a difficult situation

How to Defuse an Angry Parent

by Diana Stanley

"I saw a bite mark on my son's leg last night. Why didn't someone tell me he had been bitten yesterday?"

Anger, one of the strongest emotions, can explode with extreme behavior and damaging words. A defensive response is normal when a parent yells about your center's inadequacy. But a different approach will defuse a parent's anger in order to settle a misunderstanding or reach an agreement.

First, listen carefully without interrupting. Even better, listen with eye contact. Your undivided attention tells the parent you take his complaint seriously. He doesn't have to yell louder or be dramatic to get your attention and action.

Second, restate the parent's complaint to be sure you understand what the parent believes about the problem. Did he say: "I'm angry because the teacher didn't prevent the bite?" or "Why didn't someone tell me about the bite?" Perhaps parents of a toddler will understand an occasional bite but will not tolerate an irresponsible teacher who fails to report the incident.

Third, accept the parent's feelings. This doesn't mean you agree with

his interpretation of the event or will lay down while he verbally assaults your staff. It does mean that you acknowledge the parent is angry about what he believes happened.

Accept his feelings with a short statement, "I can see why you're angry you weren't told about the bite." Be warned, the phrase "I understand" makes people angrier — it translates into "I don't know why you're so upset but this trite phrase should calm you down."

Next, state your plan, "I'll visit with your child's teacher and call you within 24 hours." Include this callback step even if you know how to answer. Sometimes the best explanation, in the heat of the moment, can begin an argument. This step gives parents time to calm down enough to listen and hopefully accept your explanation. It gives you the chance to respond when you are calm, prepared with the facts, and armed with viable solutions.

Discussing a parent's complaint with a teacher is a fine line to walk. Select your words and tone of voice to avoid a defensive reaction. Omit the word "you" from your statement.

Note the tone of these two sentences:

Director: "Mr. Jones said you didn't tell him that Tim had been bitten yesterday."

Director: "Mr. Jones noticed a bite mark on Tim's leg."

The second sentence invites a teacher to act instead of react.

Teacher: "Yes, I meant to tell him about it, but I was so busy when he picked up Tim that I forgot."

Director: "Closing time is always hectic. Maybe we need something to remind us about a situation we need to discuss with the parent."

Teacher: "We could write the parent's name on a folded note and jot a few words on the inside. If we taped it to our door, it would remind us, plus it would signal the parent that we needed to talk before he leaves."

Director: "That should work! Let's try it. I'll call Mr. Jones and let him know we found a way to keep this from happening again."

Director to parent: "Mr. Jones, how are you? I just walked by Tim's room. He and a friend are busy working on a

puzzle. I'm calling to tell you about Ms. Wilson's idea. . . . Will this work for you?"

Your staff might think of many creative solutions. If so, choose the ideas that benefit both parents and staff to share with the parent: "Ms. Wilson thought of three ideas . . . what do you think will work best?"

Some call-backs will be an opportunity for parent education. When a parent is upset her child played games instead of completing homework during afterschool, you can explain how your staff considered her child's needs for relaxation when they planned the afternoon. Then you and the parent can discuss the child's needs.

These four steps also work when a parent's anger stems from center policies such as late fees or cash payments due to returned checks. Tell parents why the center chose the policy.

Clarify the problem —
"You'd rather not pay in cash."

Accept feelings —
"It seems unfair for just two returned checks."

State your plan —
"I'll review our center's policy and get back with you."

Call back —
"Ms. Brown, I'm calling about our earlier conversation. I know you feel cash payments are unfair. This particular policy was written to solve a problem we had collecting on returned checks. It has worked for us. Unfortunately, I can't afford to waive the policy."

This approach is not a magic formula to defuse every angry parent. It is a way to let them know you care about them and their children, even if you can't solve every problem. It gives families an understanding of how you operate your center; as the director, you will not take sides, but you, your staff, and parents can work together to correct and prevent problems.



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