Many beginning teachers are insecure and intimidated by parents their first few years of teaching. They often lack the confidence and experience to deal with the aggressive or persistent parent. This is a very common experience for the beginning teacher and the novice needs to understand that with time and support of colleagues we all learn to become more comfortable and collaborative with parents.

As I look back at my first year of teaching I now realize how differently things could have been managed. If I had more confidence and experience I would have felt more secure in dealing with difficult situations. One experience haunts me to this day, because I lost the trust of one of my students. It was late Friday afternoon and I was preparing for the next week when a parent burst into my room and demanded in a very rude manner that he needed to speak with me because I didn’t know how to discipline his child. I had previously sent home a short note stating that his son, Victor, had a few behavioral issues and I needed to set up a time to speak with both parents. Victor had a very creative way of using the English language. Every sentence seemed to have a swear word imbedded in it. After listening to his father shout and curse at me I had a very good idea who was modeling inappropriately for Victor.

I stood and greeted Victor’s father and asked that he not use foul language in the school setting. He stared at me for what seemed like a long time before he sat down and explained that he was sorry that his son used inappropriate language at school. I explained that we could build a plan to reward Victor for using appropriate language, but I would need time to set up the program. I told the father that we could meet the following Monday after school and we needed to include Victor in the discussion. He agreed to meet and left the classroom.

I straightened up my desk and left for the parking lot. As I approached my car I heard Victor’s father yelling at him. Victor saw me and swore that he was never coming back to class and that I was a snitch. They both got into their car and drove off before I could respond. I was not prepared for this type of confrontation.

I should have provided reassurance and support.

I should have provided positive examples of good behavior from Victor.
I should have made sure that the father was in good spirits and understood the situation before he left our meeting.

I should have reassured the father that everything would work out.

I now realize how important it is to gain the trust and respect of your students and their parents in order to make a significant difference in their lives. We need to develop a safe, nurturing and secure learning environment where children feel appreciated. This is not to say that we do not hold children accountable for their behavior or actions. To support student success and build a strong and meaningful relationship with parents I always sent home a welcoming letter the week before school opened. I introduced myself to the family and shared some of the exciting activities that students would be involved in during the coming year. I encouraged the students to bring something the first day of school to share so that we could all get to know each other. In the welcoming letter I also explained the rules and the responsibilities of each student as a member of our class. This seemed to work really well, especially for the new students entering the class.

To keep accurate records I always kept a folder for each child as a “teacher journal”. I would write information regarding academic successes or behavioral issues on a daily basis. A chart was on the inside cover to keep track of weekly progress. In this way, I had anecdotal evidence of weekly progress. If a parent had a concern or issue, I could immediately refer to the chart and journal records, which were updated on a regular bases. Using this method allowed me to keep an accurate account of the students’ progress, so no issues came up unexpectedly.

When working with parents it’s always advantageous to be proactive. Encouraging parents to respond to your daily or weekly communication notes or phone messages are a key factor in maintaining an open and collaborative style of communication. Below I have included some suggestions for parent conferencing. Remember to always act in a professional manner. If you feel uncomfortable meeting a parent alone, then ask a colleague, such as, the administrator or school counselor to sit in on the meeting. Always maintain a positive attitude and build on establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship. Remember, the parents also need your support, expertise and understanding. Utilize active listening skills by encouraging the parent(s) to participate in the discussion and decisions that affect their child. End the meeting with an action plan that encourages all parties involved taking some responsibility in making a difference in the student’s education.

Before a conference or meeting begins think about the following:

1. Seating arrangement – equal seating height, round tables are best.
2. Comfortable and private setting.
3. Do your homework-be prepared.
4. Have available resources and suggestions, which will lead to success.
5. Provide refreshments, if appropriate.
6. Have supportive documentation.
7. Have a written follow-up plan

I often sent home information for parents to help them understand their child’s disability. I also passed on information regarding developing successful parenting skills. Below is a list of some helpful thoughts regarding parenting. At the end of this article is a list of helpful suggestions to support parents.

Parenting and teaching in today’s technologically advanced society is not an easy task. It is probably the most challenging job any person encounters in their life. Many parents raise their children as they were raised, without any outside assistance or support. They live from day-to-day and situation-to-
situation with no guidelines or goals. Many families are unsure of where to go for assistance or are too embarrassed to ask for help. It has been my experience that there are no immediate or simple solutions to the many problems that concern parents and educators. The needs of children and their families vary greatly from family to family and community to community. However, there are basic concerns common to all those involved in educating our children.

Teachers and parents are responsible for creating an independent and loving individual who can cope in today’s challenging world. Exhaustive research has demonstrated that a child’s talents, abilities and potential will be lost if not nurtured in a supportive learning environment. As teachers, we must remember that all parents have hopes, dreams and special aspirations for their children. When a child does not live up to the parents’ expectations, the parents as well as the child experience stress. We must keep in mind that all students develop differently, according to their own time clock. Every child is uniquely different and we must appreciate these differences. The best preparation for adulthood is to experience a satisfying childhood in which the child learns to function independently and acquires confidence in his/her abilities.

No one promised an easy path in supporting a child to develop and mature into a successful and happy individual. We have all had our ups and downs and bruises along the way to adulthood. Teachers and parents are humans as well and sometimes they are tired or sad and sometimes they don’t even know the answer to a question. But that’s okay, because you are not expected to be perfect either. As a teacher and a professional, you are expected to put forth your best efforts in teaching as well as guiding young people to becoming successful and happy individuals.

“When adults realize we cannot continue to do the same things in schools, everyone will be happier and schools will be a nicer place to go to.”

Hofstadter (Anti-intellectualism in America)

Practical Suggestions for Effective Parent Conferences

1. **The parent as an individual**: Remember that each parent is an individual, with their own concerns and ideas about his/her child, the school, teachers and the world. Their ideas represent reality to them.

2. **Decide in advance what is to be discussed during the meeting**: Assemble a folder with evidence of the child’s work or write down the issues or concerns that you wish to share.

3. **Do not take notes or tape the meeting unless you have permission to do so from all parties concerned**: Often parents feel intimidated if you write down or record what they are saying.

4. **Begin and end each meeting with a positive statement about the child**: Many parents complain that the only thing they hear is complaints about their child. Surprise them by having positive comments to share.

5. **Do not rush the meeting**: It takes time for most people to relax and feel comfortable before discussing revealing information. Be social for a few minutes until everyone is comfortable.

6. **Listen with enthusiasm**: Parents should be encouraged to share their ideas and concerns. Remember to control your comments and facial expressions of disapproval or anger. You need to give the parents an opportunity to express themselves.

7. **Be willing to agree with parents whenever possible**: When an answer must be “no”, take your time and be firm but kind in communicating your decision. There is no reason to develop a hostile situation.
8. **Explain so others can understand**: All too often educators use language that is not familiar to parents. Do not use acronyms, but verbally express the word(s) with an explanation so the meaning is clear.

9. **Examine your own emotional reaction to criticism**: New ideas or suggesting new settings can make others feel threatened and uncomfortable. Change is not easy for anyone. Be compassionate and understanding when faced with these types of issues.

10. **Don’t let comments of other children enter into the conversation**: Avoid making comparisons to siblings or members of the child’s peer group. These are not helpful comments.

11. **Provide at least one action plan**: At the close of the conference agree to put together in writing an action plan to support student success.

12. **Don’t forget to follow-up**: In a few days or a specified time contact the parents to reinforce the continued support for the successful growth of their child.

    Suggestons for Parents
    To Help Their Children
    Become Happy and Successful

1. **Act as a role model**:
   - Be enthusiastic about life
   - Take risks
   - Discuss issues openly
   - Deal with life creatively

2. **Help your child make wise decisions**:
   - Set realistic goals
   - Provide alternatives and choices
   - Discuss consequences
   - Involve child in the decision making process

3. **Provide quality time for your child**:
   - Work and play together
   - Develop family projects
   - Visit parks, museums, libraries, historical sites, athletic events, movies, etc.

4. **Develop good communication with your child**:
   - Have open discussions
   - Listen to your children
   - Have family meetings to discuss concerns and plans

5. **Teach values to your children**:
   - Explain what you value and why
- Teach self-discipline, hard work and patience
- Explain and demonstrate how manipulation and whining is not valued and is considered destructive to communication

6. Never do your child’s homework:
   - Be supportive and encouraging
   - Act as a resource
   - Provide transportation
   - Guide and edit
   - If you feel assignments are inappropriate arrange for a conference with the teacher

7. Help your child learn how to prioritize everything:
   - Teach time management skills
   - Teach effective use of energy

8. Do not criticize or ridicule your child:
   - Be patient
   - Give less orders
   - It’s okay to repeat information more than once
   - Sticks and stones and name calling is cruel to small children

9. Validate your children by loving them because they are your children and not because of the grades they receive.

10. Always be aware that you cannot protect your children from all painful experiences. Life is challenging and how your child learns to deal with the challenges determines the type of person they will become.

11. As a parent you can provide a safe, supportive and nurturing home environment. You must allow your children to become independent and responsible for themselves.

12. Be consistent, fair and honest in all interactions. Do not be manipulative or change the rules to suit your needs.

13. Take advantage of your child’s questions to guide further learning. Be prepared to take them to the library or to someone who can facilitate greater learning.

14. Provide opportunities for the development of physical and social skills. Encourage your child to participate in a wide variety of activities.

15. Avoid comparing your child with another. Each child is unique and special.

16. Provide a place to display their work.

17. Read with your child. Share great books and stories with them. Turn off the TV.

18. Provide a place where your child can work on his/her studies and hobbies.

19. Assign household responsibilities and other tasks suitable to the age of the child.

20. For teen, encourage setting educational goals. Discuss future opportunities and decisions.

22. Speak as properly as you want the child to speak. Developing a good vocabulary is an important factor in being successful.

23. Remember that it is okay to fail or do poorly in some things. Very few people are talented at all endeavors. Help your child develop a positive attitude and a willingness to try new experiences.

24. Provide varied cultural experiences. (Places, films, foods, languages and people)

25. Be encouraging, supportive and above all loving.