

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

Executive Book Summary
Jamie Dogniez
University of Saskatchewan
EADM 835.3

August 18th, 2017
Volume 1 Issue 1

About the Book

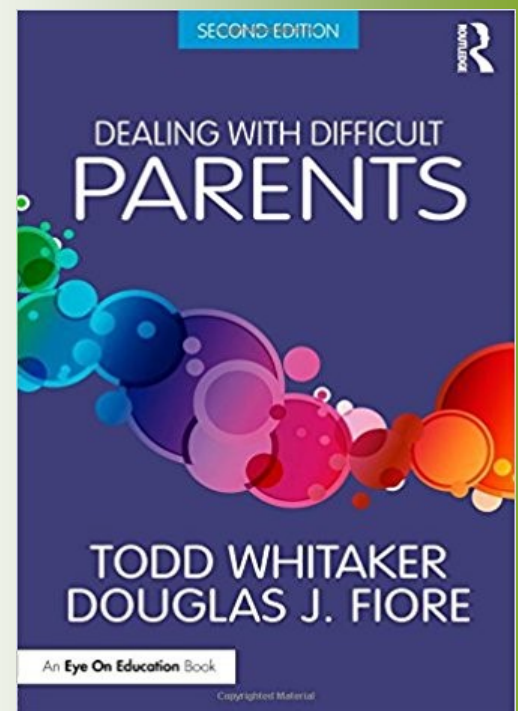
There are 5 parts to the book: (1) Today's Parents; (2) Communicating with Parents; (3) Soothing the Savage Beast; (4) Dealing with Parents in Difficult Situations, and (5) Increasing Parent Involvement. The main theme of the book is to keep a calm professional tone at all times. The authors give examples of when to ignore comments and when to reiterate phrases in a specific conversation. One philosophy of the book is the importance of positive interactions. The authors give various useful tools and strategies to use that will help educators to emphasize the positive as well as the negative of school communication. A history of positive communication goes a long way when calling a family with problems that need to be addressed. By the end of the book, the book makes a full circle by recapping how important it is to "communicate" with "today's parents," wrapping the first two parts into the final part, "increasing parent involvement."

About the Authors

Todd Whitaker is an American educator, writer, motivational speaker, educational consultant, and professor. A leading presenter in the field of education, Dr. Whitaker has published over 30 books on staff motivation, teacher leadership, technology, middle level practices, instructional improvement, and principal effectiveness. Todd is a professor of educational leadership at the University of Missouri and professor emeritus at Indiana State University. He has spent his life pursuing his love of education by researching and studying effective teachers and principals. (Retrieved from: <http://www.toddwhitaker.com/about.php>).



Douglas J. Fiore, who has spent his entire career in education, currently serves as interim provost at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio, a position he has held since August 2014. He began his duties at Ashland just two months earlier as the dean of the Dwight Schar College of Education. Prior to joining Ashland, Fiore spent nearly seven years at Virginia State University, Petersburg, Va., most recently as associate provost for extended education for one year. Fiore has won awards for his leadership, teaching and scholarship, including the prestigious Distinguished Paper Award from the American Educational Research Association, and he has authored or co-authored eight books for school administrators. (Retrieved from: <http://www.park.edu/news/2015/12/fiore-appointed-provost.html>).



In This Issue

Part 1.....	2
<i>Today's Parents</i>	
Part 2.....	3
<i>Communicating with Parents</i>	
Part 3.....	4
<i>Soothing the Savage Beast</i>	
Part 4.....	5
<i>Dealing with Parents in Difficult Situations</i>	
Part 5.....	6
<i>Increasing Parent Involvement</i>	
Critique.....	7
Questions to Consider.....	7

Proven Effects of Parental Involvement in Schools

- Students whose parents are highly involved in their school will average about .5 to .6 of a standard deviation in overall educational outcomes.
- Family participation in education is twice as predictive of student academic success as socioeconomic status.
- Students with highly involved parents can experience learning gains in reading and math.
- Students of involved parents have fewer behavioral problems.
- Older students are less likely to drop out of school when their parents remain involved.
- Students whose parents know about higher level programs, like AP classes, are likely to be in them.

Sources: hfrp.org | Michigan Department of Education | centerforpubliceducation.org | childtrendsdatabank.org | education.com

Angry Parents

As teachers, we are trained to search for answers to figure out a problem. “We do this at fault at times. Analyzing angry parents may be a perfect example” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 27).



“Rather than trying to understand precisely what it is that makes some parents angry with us, we need to look for ways to deal with their anger for the benefit of our students” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 27).



PART ONE: Today's Parents

Who are these Guys? Describing Today's Parents

“We all want high-quality education for our children, and we collectively concern ourselves with any and all issues related to school improvement. Because of this the many variables that affect school improvement all matter, and we all must strive to understand and manipulate these variables somewhat for our children’s advantage. Highly important among these variables are parents” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 11).

“The involvement of parents in the education of their children is of unquestionable significance. Students consistently indicate that student achievement increases as a parents become more involved in their children’s education” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 11).

“It is important to for all of us to recognize that parents today are facing different circumstances than the parents who raised us did” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 12).

Types of parents/families schools see today: single moms, single dads, grandparents, working parents, housewives, broken homes, foster parents, etc.

Reasons for Parents to be Difficult:

- * Family Configurations: The way contemporary families are configured, with the changes in family dynamics we are seeing more in schools.
- * Family Wealth: A combination of high cost of living, low wage jobs, and high unemployment rates is what many of our families are facing today and have countless families choosing between food, housing and other expenses. In addition to family wealth many children who are living in poverty or homeless are not attending school regularly.
- * Family Stress: This is due to family configurations, wealth, longer working hours, and many adults now are struggling with an increase in stress-induced illnesses that it is difficult for families to spend quality time together.

“Issues are not confined to the classroom, as they may have been years ago. Instead, custodians, bus drivers, counselors, classroom assistances, and other school employees are facing them as well” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 19).

What's Wrong with These Parents Anyway?

“In our way as teachers, a major thrust of our efforts should be to positively alter people’s perceptions of our classrooms and schools. It is very important to remember, though, that there are many people working against these efforts” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 23).

“Rather than judging all adult-centered behavior, we need to understand that in some cases, an adult-centered attitude grows out of a difficulty coping with the demands of daily life” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 12).

Negative school experiences can also be a factor in why parents do not want to be involved and can be angry or skeptical towards a school environment.

Taking your classroom social

"Parents are busier than ever, and their lives are far more complex than they used to be. Traditional methods of communicating with them lose their effectiveness more and more each day" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 49).

Initial Considerations:

"Make sure to consider what the purpose is of these tools in the first place. Most times, social media works best when the teacher has actually thought about her purpose for using it" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 44).

"It should not matter who see it, as long as you use good judgement" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 46). This means using social media for the right reasons.

A Few Practical Examples:



"These are the most widely used and easily accessible via smartphone" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 47) for families to use.



PART TWO: *Communicating with Parents*

Relationships with the parents of the students in our classrooms is something that needs to be built up over time with trust. "If we can establish trust with them, they will allow us great discretion in decisions that we make" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 33).

Knowing how to communicate and keep the bond between teacher and families is an important way for parents to trust and give teachers and the school the benefit of the doubt when it comes to issues or problems that could arise with their child.

There are three different ways teachers and the school should communicate with families...

* **Building Credibility - Everyone Wants to Associate with a Winner:**

- * Calling Parents individually, Touching base & Regular Communication – Builds personal connection with family.
- * Inviting parents to a back to school night to meet the teachers.
- * "Making a positive impression before we would have to deliver bad news is essential in building trust. It is essential that we build a relationship before we need the relationship" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 35).
- * Reaching out to the Community.
- * Regular Newsletters.

* **Positive Communication - An Ounce of Prevention:**

- * Positive Phone Calls
- * "As educators, we have many opportunities to catch students doing things right. Remembering them, writing them down, and then making it a point to share them with the parents of your students is essential in developing positive relations" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 56).
- * Positive emails and letters about something their child accomplished.

* **Listen, Learning & Cultivate:**

- * "Listening, learning & cultivating relationships, really boils down to having effective communication skills" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 63).
- * Communication with parents and stakeholders needs to be on a regular and consistent basis.
- * "Were glad your hear" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 68). This celebrates and welcomes all families into the school and making sure they feel welcome and safe in the school along with their students.
- * There is a time and place for all conversations!

Part Three: Soothing The Savage Beast

Initiating Contact with Parents

Email or Call?

Email is much easier than calling parents, but this is something a teacher or administrator should do when they have an established relationship with the parent(s). "However, if you do not have an established relationship with someone or he or she is a more difficult person, it is important to heavily consider whether or not emailing is the way to go" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 73).

A couple of things can happen if you email under negative circumstances, such as,

- * First "You may be worried until and about their response. This fretting stays with you because you are not dependent on how they will answer (if at all)" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 73).
- * "A second negative is they may wait to respond when they are most wound up" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 73). This will allow them to ask for help from others to write them email.
- * "A third reason is now they have a permanent written record that they can cut and paste, share as they desire, post in social media, scour for typos or misspellings, and so on" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 73).



(Remember if you are emailed from a difficult parent, wait until you are ready and call them. Do not communicate negatively back!)

"If at all possible, make the first contact. That phone is our best friend, unless it is ringing..." (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 75).

Never Let 'Em See You Sweat

"As long as you appear confident and self-assured, even the most difficult parents anger will be somewhat defused" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 82).

How do you prevent yourself from sweating-either literally or figuratively?

- * Lower your voice – This helps compensate for the shakiness that a teacher may have when they are nervous
- * Increase your movement - By moving around the room, pacing, putting things away on your desk, tapping a pencil or jotting down notes, may seem rude, distracting and uncaring it is much better to do this than for the parents to see you shaking or have wobbly knees.
- * Close the gap - Closing the gap between you and the angry person (calm and open body language) is accomplished by slow movements, while talking and best to keep eye contact.
- * They have eyes on it - "By looking an angry parent in the eye, we can convey a certain degree of understanding. More often than not, this will reduce the level of their anger" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 85).



"If difficult parents are able to intimidate you, not only do you risk losing the respect of those around you, but also you increase the odds that you will cave in to the difficult parents and yield their requests" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 87).

What if the parent is right?

It is okay for the parents to be right and for them it should be appreciated when they do take the time to uncover the details and facts about the issue.

The key if this happens it "to appreciate the parents for bringing issues to your attention and to quickly inform them that the wrong that was committed was not done so intentionally" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 90).

"In dealing with difficult parents, you should never feel the need to always be right...It should never be about winning or losing. It should be about arriving at a common understanding and doing so in an agreeable productive manner" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 90).

"Sorry" Seems to Be the Hardest Word

"When parents recognize that you are sorry when you do things incorrectly, it is amazing how willing they become to forgive you. When you refuse to acknowledge that you, or anybody else in your school, is capable of doing wrong, then many parents go on a mission to prove just how wrong you actually are" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 92).

An Ear, Not an Answer

"Often, even irate parents want someone to listen to them more than they want someone to solve their problems" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 97).

Do You Feel Defensive? If so, Something Is Wrong

"Educators should never be defensive, and they should never be offensive. If we are truly caring people, then as teachers, principals, and superintendents, we should never be defensive with parents" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 99).

"Being in touch with our feelings can help us to correct things before we put ourselves in the position of having to defend our actions" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 99).



But I Did Get a Good Deal (Examining the Car Salesperson)

If a student is in trouble and you discuss with the student and the family what happened, by giving them the bad news and some good news the parents will feel better about the situation and by reducing a punishment sounds better to the parents and the students and they will feel like they received a *good deal*.

"Making people feel like they were treated fairly, or maybe even that they got a good deal, can go a long way in developing and maintaining positive relationships" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 124).

Part Four: Dealing with Parents in Difficult Situations

Delivering Bad News:

"One of the first standards we should establish is that the worse the news, the more thought and effort we need to put into delivering it" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 108).

- * The Phone is our Best Friend...Unless its Ringing:
 - * We always want to contact the parents before the child goes home and gives their version of the issue. "If the students share their story first, then often we are in defensive mode when we finally do reach the parents" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 108).

- * He Never Lies to Us!:
 - * "Parents who respond like that are likely to be ready to argue. Instead of settling in for a negative discussion, treat them as though they were telling the truth and bring up a past inappropriate behavior by the student" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 110).



- * "Sometimes challenging people just throw stuff at a wall (or at you) to see if it sticks. They may rattle off attack after attack...Rather than feeling the need to counter each point, ignore them and see if they go away" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 111).

- * Be Aware of What you Don't Know:
 - * These are issues when you are talking to a parent that you as an administrator usually will not have observed first hand. In this case the best way to talk to a difficult parent is to be honest.

- * An example would be *"One of the tough things about this situation, Mr. Martinez, is that for the two people talking right now, neither of us was there"* (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 112).
- * This example allows you to focus the conversation on what you did have control over and have the conversation about how you and the parent can do to make sure this does not happen again.

- * But This is a Really Tough Class:
 - * "We need to make sure that we accept responsibility for the situation and not pass the buck. It may be a challenging class, possibly your most challenging ever, but that does not matter to the parents. Their primary concern is how their child is doing" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 114).

- * Please Don't Talk to Me Like That:
 - * It is important to allow parents to let off a little steam when talking to them.
 - * "However, sometimes the tirade continues a little too long or becomes too ugly. If parents have pushed your tolerance to the limit or they are being inappropriately personal or rude" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 116), use the phrase in a slow and gently tone *"Please don't talk to me like that."* This phrase is a professional and reasonable request and also shows the parent how you want to be treated, how they want to be treated and how you will treat their son or daughter.

- * Little Pitchers Have Big Ears:
 - * "As adults, if we ever say anything we do not want children to repeat, then we had better make sure they do not hear us. This is critical in educator/parent communication" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 117).
 - * "Allow parents to vent for a while. However, we will not allow them to act inappropriately with the student present" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 118).

What If They Use the "F" Word...Fair?

"Every teacher has a "classroom lawyer" who is constantly in the "it's not fair!" mode" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 127).

"When we have predetermined expectations and consequences and communicate them appropriately, it can help to reduce the "it's unfair" chanting" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 128).



Focus on the Future

"Shifting the focus from the present—which we might not all agree with—to the future can allow for the development of this common understanding." (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 134).

An example of focusing on the future is to use the phrase "how can we make sure this does not happen again?" by using this phrase, allows those involved to focus on what is happening in the present and begin to focus on what needs to happen in the future.



Parent Involvement Education (NCPIE)

List of goals for improving school-family partnerships

1. Communication is the foundation of effective partnerships.
2. Schools can reach out through community groups.
3. Families can support schools and children's learning in important ways.
4. Schools should create an environment that welcomes participation.
5. Families model and support children's education at home.
6. Educators can guide families in parent-child activities.
7. Families should be encouraged to develop their own knowledge and skills.
8. Schools can provide cultural education for staff and parents.
9. Leadership training should be provided for educators, staff, and families interested in participating in school governance.
10. Parents are advocates.
11. School should collaborate with community organizations.

(Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 142).



Part Five: Increasing Parent Involvement

"When parents are aware of school activities, involved in school governance in some capacity, or helping with their child's homework, then they have a greater understanding of what takes place at school on a regular basis" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 142).

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education

"Schools that are successful with parent involvement" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 142), including these elements:

- * Assesses families' needs and interests about ways of working with the schools.
- * Set clear and measurable objectives based on parent and community input to help foster a sense of cooperation and communication among families, communities, and schools.
- * Hire and train a parent/family liaison to directly contact parents and coordinate family activities. The liaison should be bilingual as needed and sensitive to the needs of family and community, including the non-English-speaking community.
- * Develop multiple outreach mechanisms to inform families, businesses, and the community about family involvement policies and programs through newsletters, slide shows video tapes, and local newspapers.
- * Recognize the importance of a community's historic ethnic, linguistic, or cultural resources in generating interest in family involvement.
- * Use creative forms of communication between educators and families that are personal, goal orientated, and make optimal use of new communication technologies.
- * Mobilize parents/families as volunteers in the school assisting with instructional tasks, meal service, and administrative office functions. Family members might also act as invited classroom speakers and volunteer tutors.
- * Provide staff development for teachers and administrators to enable them to work effectively with families and with each other as partners in the educational process.
- * Ensure access to information about nutrition, healthcare, services for individuals with disabilities, and support provided by schools or community agencies.
- * Schedule programs and activities flexibly to reach diverse family groups.
- * Evaluate the effectiveness of family involvement programs and activities on a regular basis.

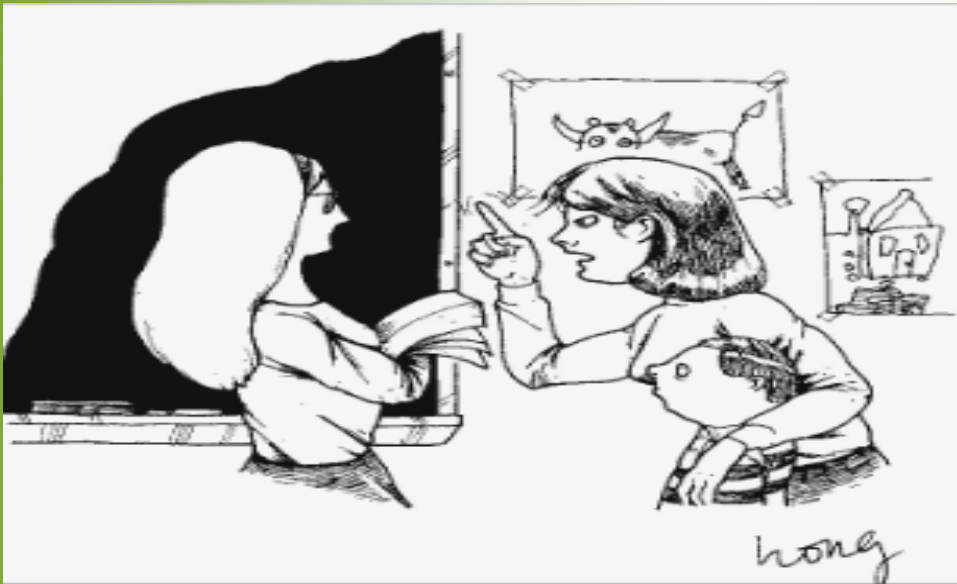
(Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 147).

"Modern schools are tasked to meet cultural, social, and educational needs of families... This not only requires schools to reach out to parents, but it also encourages them to utilize parents as resources" (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016, p. 148).

Critique

Dealing with Difficult Parents is the ultimate how-to guide for navigating the problems in education that lead to problems with parents and parental communication. Whitaker and Fiore not only provide real-world advice designed to proactively create positive teacher-parent relationships. They include the progression of families, income that has decreased, generational gaps between parents and children who have different perceptions of education, lower standards, and many more helpful areas that any teacher or administrator will have to deal with at some point in their career. Whitaker and Fiore have created a great reference tool for any educator. The book covers a wide range of topics and focuses on proactive practices any educator can utilize in those difficult parenting situations. Part V stands out to me as the section with most impact. This section targets ideas to increase Parent Involvement. As a Vice Principal of a community elementary school, I know that parent involvement is vital to the success of any school, especially community schools. This books offers a clear framework to work from, when planning for increased parent involvement.

If there were any criticisms about the book is that there were a few areas where I think the authors could have elaborated on more and one area I did not agree with was Part III, Soothing the Savage Beast. In this section of the book, Whitaker and Fiore talk about “closing the gap” between you and the parent when a family member is angry to calm this person down. I have always been told as an administrator to keep some distance and always know where your exit points are. I have a hard time with this strategy Whitaker and Fiore have suggested and a strategy I will probably not use when dealing with an angry parent. However, the rest of the book was excellent and anyone working in a school will be able to find tips and solutions to handle those troublesome situations with confidence!



“Unless you choose to live your life where you have no contact with anyone else-ever-you’ll probably have to deal with one difficult person after another” - Emily Battaglia

Questions to Consider

1. Thinking about parents in your school. Do you agree or disagree with Whitaker and Fiore (2016) that parents are different now than they were in the past and why?
2. Think about a time where you had to deal with a difficult parent. How did you handle the situation and did anyone else have to get involved, such as an administrator or superintendent? If so, how could of this been handled differently?
3. Does your school involve parents in various aspects of the school environment? If they are, who usually gets the families involved? And if this not happening, do you think involving the families more in the school would help your student's be more successful?

Reference

Whitaker, T., & Fiore, D. J. (2016). *Dealing with Difficult Parents (2nd ed.)*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.