

De-escalating an Angry Conversation

Understanding how to defuse a confrontation with an angry parent may prevent an argument from becoming violent.

By Judy Brunner and Dennis Lewis

Imagine that you are the administrator in charge of a Friday evening basketball game with your biggest school rival. At the end of the game, there is a one-point spread between the two teams. As the players leave the court, you observe the father of one of your school's players corner the coach and engage him in a heated conversation using considerable profanity. The mother of the player is attempting to convince the father to leave but to no avail. The situation is quickly escalating, and the coach is looking for you to intervene.

You know that:

- The parent has been cautioned before about his behavior at school sporting events
- There are other parents still in the gym
- Your assistant principal is outside on the parking lot managing traffic flow.

Has a similar situation happened at your school? Unfortunately, it probably has. Whether in the gymnasium or the school office, principals are sometimes

forced to deal with verbally aggressive adults.

Before reading further, take a few minutes to identify the key pieces of information that might determine how you could start to de-escalate the situation and consider the actions you would initiate.

What to Do

Although most conversations with parents are both civil and productive, there will be times when communication about an unfortunate incident will become verbally aggressive. Sometimes it occurs during a phone conversation; sometimes it happens face to face. Either way, there are a few tips you will want to remember.

Stay calm and listen. All parents have the right to be heard, and angry parents are no exception. Remember that you will not be able to solve the real problem until both parties can communicate openly, honestly, and

without malice. Think of the angry parent as a client, rather than an adversary. This can put an emotional distance between the two of you that will enable you to treat the situation rationally and professionally.

Do not take anything personally.

Although an angry parent may say things of a personal nature, as an education professional you must keep your remarks professional. Some parents deserve the same type of "learner leeway" that you give students. Remind yourself that very angry people are experiencing many of the physiological signs of stress, including increased heart rate, difficulty listening, and tunnel vision. These physical changes make it exceedingly difficult to communicate with them, so limit your words accordingly.

Use a low tone of voice. Appearing agitated or yelling back will serve little purpose other than fueling the fire you are trying to calm. There are times when it is even advisable to speak so softly that the parent must strain to understand what you are saying, which may serve as a distraction from the anger.

Try to move to a more private setting. Separating an escalating, verbally aggressive person from an audience may remove part of the reason for the behavior. In most situations, however, it is not advisable to put yourself in a one-on-



Judy Brunner (judy@edu-safe.org) is the assistant director of the Greenwood Laboratory School at Missouri State University in Springfield.



Dennis Lewis (dennis@edu-safe.org) is the director of school public safety for the Springfield school district.

Brunner and Lewis are the cofounders of Edu-Safe LLC (www.edu-safe.org), a school-safety consulting firm. Creating Safe Schools and Classrooms, their DVD safety training series, is available from Edu-Safe.

Although most conversations with parents are both civil and productive, there will be times when communication about an unfortunate incident will become verbally aggressive.

one setting with an angry person. Try to have another school employee with you for the discussion.

Ask the parent's permission to take notes. Whether the conversation is taking place on the telephone or in person, say, "I want to make sure I understand all of your concerns. Do you mind if I take some notes?" This sends two very powerful messages: First, it indicates that you want to remember exactly what is being said so you can resolve the issue—taking notes provides an accurate form of documentation. Second, it puts the parent on notice that his or her remarks are being recorded for further reference. This alone may cause some parents to eliminate foul language from their part of the conversation.

Do not interrupt. Interjecting "Yes, but..." to correct inaccurate statements may escalate, rather than de-escalate, the conversation. Even if the parent's statements are not based upon the facts as you know them to be, it is usually counterproductive to try to insert your own perspective or to correct his or her inaccuracies at that time. Wait until he or she is finished and then diplomatically provide information from the school's perspective.

Do not use such phrases as, "Calm down," "I understand," or "I know what you're going through." Parents may interpret these phrases as condescending or arrogant, even when they are not intended to be so. In many instances, you will not be able to empathize or understand what the parent is experiencing, and to imply that you do may be considered insulting.

Ask for the parents' help in solving the problem. Jot down possible solutions from both the school's and the parent's perspective. After being heard, parents are often willing participants in a rational and productive problem-solving conversation.

Assure the parents that you are willing to listen carefully and consider all possibilities. Although you may not be giving them the answers they would prefer to hear, you can tell them that you will revisit the circumstances surrounding the problem to make certain you have the most up-to-date and accurate information. If the problem needs to be investigated further, provide a time frame to speak with them again. Even giving daily or periodic updates on your investigation can help assure parents and remind them of your genuine desire to be fair and consistent.

Maintain eye contact without staring. Keep your hands at your sides and never touch or point at an agitated individual. If you are seated behind a desk, do not make any quick movements. This may further inflame the problem. If you are standing, maintain ample personal space between the aggressor and yourself. Moving into another person's body space when they are upset will not serve any positive purpose. If possible, stand at a 90-degree angle from the approaching person. This may be viewed as nonconfrontational and might help diffuse the situation.

Take a few deep breathes and think before you speak. Even if the pause in the conversation is a bit uncomfortable,

use caution and reflect before proceeding so the parent does not become angrier and upset by your tone or choice of words.

The Scenario Revisited

In the scenario, initial actions should include removing the parent or the coach from the scene of the confrontation. Because the parent's initial anger is directed toward the coach, redirecting his focus toward you may enable you to alter the environment in which the conversation will continue. It may be advantageous to say, "I want to hear your concerns, but let's get out of this crowd so we can talk" or to set an appointment for the parent to come in at a later time. This removes both the coach and the audience from the situation and allows for a cooling-off period to occur.

Because the parent has been warned before about his behavior, this confrontation may indicate that he is not prone to compliance. Summoning another staff member or security should provide added safety for all. From the facts in the scenario, you know that the situation is escalating quickly and may require the removal of the parent. In that case, it is always best to have additional school or law enforcement personnel present.

Although every situation will be different and individuals will not always react the way you hope, understanding best practices of how to interact with verbally aggressive people will give you a better chance of successfully returning to normalcy. **PL**