

PARENT COMMUNICATION · ALL GRADES

# Difficult Conversations

A framework that works

## When you need this

Some conversations with parents are genuinely difficult. Common ones: • Raising concerns about a child's progress, behaviour, or wellbeing • Discussing possible SEND assessment • Responding to a complaint • Talking about hygiene, attendance, or home situations • Having to deliver difficult news • Dealing with a parent who is upset, defensive, or hostile These conversations have predictable patterns. Going in with a framework — not a script — makes them go better.

## Before the conversation

<p><b>Get clear on your purpose</b></p> <p>What do you want this conversation to achieve? Just informing? Inviting partnership? Resolving a complaint? Different purposes need different approaches.</p>	<p><b>Anticipate their reaction</b></p> <p>How might this land? Defensive? Tearful? Angry? Grateful? Mentally rehearse different scenarios.</p>
<p><b>Know your facts</b></p> <p>Specifics. Dates. Examples. Avoid generalisations under pressure — they crumble. 'On Tuesday' beats 'sometimes.'</p>	<p><b>Check the timing</b></p> <p>Don't deliver bad news at 8:50 when they're rushing to work. Find a real time when both of you can talk.</p>

## During the conversation

<p><b>Open with care</b></p> <p>'Thanks for making the time.' 'I appreciate you coming in.' Neutral, warm. Not 'I needed to talk to you' (sounds threatening).</p>	<p><b>Lead with strength briefly</b></p> <p>Genuinely. 'I want to start by saying [specific positive].' Then move on. Don't dwell.</p>
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<p><b>State the issue specifically</b></p> <p>'What I want to talk about is...' Be specific. Don't bury the message in pleasantries — they'll get nervous.</p>	<p><b>Use 'I' not 'you'</b></p> <p>'I'm worried that...' beats 'You don't seem to...' I-statements feel like sharing; you-statements feel like accusing.</p>
<p><b>Pause and listen</b></p> <p>After the issue is raised, STOP. Let them respond. Don't fill the silence. Their response tells you what to say next.</p>	<p><b>Validate before solving</b></p> <p>If they react emotionally — 'I can see this is hard to hear.' Don't rush to solutions. Acknowledgement first.</p>

## Phrases that work / phrases to avoid

Try	Avoid
I've been thinking about [child]...	I needed to talk to you about [child]...
What we've noticed is...	[Child] has been...
I'm wondering if...	You need to...
Help me understand...	Why don't you...?
I'd love your perspective on this	What do you think you should do?
Together, we...	I'd suggest you...
I might be wrong, but I'm noticing...	I've noticed clearly that...
What might be going on?	Is everything OK at home?
Some children find it helpful when...	You should try...
I want us to figure this out together	Here's what needs to happen at home

## Handling pushback

<p><b>If they get defensive</b></p> <p>'I can hear this is hard. Take a moment.' Don't argue. Acknowledge. Pause.</p>	<p><b>If they disagree with you</b></p> <p>'I might be wrong about this. Help me understand what you're seeing.' Genuine curiosity de-escalates.</p>
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<p><b>If they cry</b></p> <p>Pause. Tissues. Quiet. Don't fill the space. 'Take all the time you need.' When they're ready, continue.</p>	<p><b>If they get angry</b></p> <p>Lower YOUR voice. Slow YOUR pace. Don't match their energy. 'I can see this has hit hard. Let's pause.' If aggression, end the meeting and reschedule.</p>
<p><b>If they blame you</b></p> <p>Don't defend reflexively. Listen. 'Tell me more about what's not been working from your side.' Often you'll learn something useful.</p>	<p><b>If they go silent</b></p> <p>Wait. Some parents need processing time. Don't barrel on. 'Take your time' is enough.</p>

## Closing the conversation

1. **SUMMARISE WHAT YOU'VE AGREED.** 'So we've said... I'll do... and you'll...' Specific. Concrete. 2. **AGREE A FOLLOW-UP.** 'Let's catch up in two weeks. I'll email Tuesday week.' Builds accountability. 3. **THANK THEM.** 'Thank you for hearing me out. This is hard.' Closes warmly. 4. **WALK THEM OUT.** Door, smile, eye contact. Don't end on transactional terms. 5. **RECORD THE CONVERSATION.** Briefly. Date, attendees, key points, agreed actions. Within 24 hours.

## After the conversation

1. **EMAIL A SHORT SUMMARY** same day. 'Thank you for coming in. We agreed: [bullet list].' Confirms shared understanding. 2. **DO WHAT YOU SAID.** The trust is built or broken in the follow-through. 3. **CHECK IN** earlier than the agreed date if appropriate. Sooner contact often surprises positively. 4. **PROCESS YOURSELF.** Difficult conversations are draining. Talk to a colleague. Take care.

