I. Introduction
   A. Status, financial and credential differences between parents and teachers that make
      for difficult parent-teacher relationships
   B. Defensiveness on both sides: the natural fear that infects the teacher-parent
      encounter

II. Typology of Difficult Parents
   A. The Aggressive-Threatening-Abusive Parent
      1. The parent accustomed to power, for whom parenting and its inherent loss of
         control is a wounding experience
      2. The intellectually arrogant and competitive parent
      3. The parent with something to cover up, often a personal disturbance or family
         trouble
         For all of these parents, the habitual way of dealing with helpless-making
         situations or narcissistically wounding situations is to attack first; the best
         defense is a good offense.
   B. The Anxious and/or Incompetent Parent
      1. The overwhelmed and incompetent parent -- single mother with multiple troubles
      2. The chronically dependent parent
      3. The chronically anxious parent -- anxious child dyad
      4. Parents with separation difficulties
         a. the over-involved parent
         b. the "ejected" parent who cannot tolerate being left by the child
C. The Denying or Unresponsive Parent
   1. The disturbed or depressed family
   2. The overly busy or disengaged parents

III. Role-Playing Teacher-Parent Encounters

IV. Some Practical Suggestions for Dealing with Parents
A. The Threatening-Abusive-Aggressive Parent

Case #1

An obviously troubled boy in the school, after a series of minor incidents, comes to the attention of the teachers because of his remarks about suicide. A fellow student brings a written sarcastic suicide pledge to the attention of the school psychologist. The parents are notified, but the father dismisses the school's concerns with a gruff, "He's got a great sense of humor." A follow-up meeting is scheduled in which a large number of school representatives are present. Father and mother enter together, but she never says a word. The father takes over the meeting from the start; though he is superficially civil, he treats the issue as if it is a legal proceeding at the end of which blame is going to be assessed and punishment handed out. He creates an adversarial atmosphere without making clear whom the adversaries are. The school personnel are unfailingly polite and nonconfrontational, though they do insist that the son is in serious trouble. The father insists on having "evidence." He is finally presented with the "suicide note" which has a large quantity of filthy, disparaging comments about the parents in it. The father pledges to keep it confidential and transmit it only to the son's psychiatrist. He later reneges on all his pledges and uses it both to intimidate his son and his son's friend who turned it over to the school.

Case #2

A highly intellectual and arrogant family have a son who subtly provokes his teacher into an irrational blow-up in the classroom. The teacher is humiliated and ashamed by the incident and takes responsibility for his part in it. However, neither the boy nor the family will acknowledge that the boy had any responsibility whatsoever in the matter. The family insists on a series of meetings with the teacher and the administration. They request that the boy be switched out of that particular teacher's class and that the teacher be censored in some public way. Even after repeated meetings the parents uniformly refuse to acknowledge that their son could have had any role whatsoever in what happened. Their contention is that the fault lies exclusively in the teacher's character.
B. The Anxious and/or Incompetent Parent

Case #1

A family with an only child goes through a bad divorce, which leaves the mother in more or less sole custody of the son. The father is involved from time to time but takes little real responsibility for the raising of the son. The boy is enormously able. As his adolescence progresses, however, he becomes angry and socially isolated. Over the years he talks less and less to his mother. In the absence of any husband with whom to speak, she begins to call teachers to solicit their help in dealing with their son. Her suffering is obvious; everything that happens to him she takes deeply to heart. His loneliness is her loneliness. Yet the more she cares the more distant and contemptuous he is of her. She begins to ask teachers, "Would you speak to him about this, he no longer listens to me?"

C. The Denying or Unresponsive Parent

Case #1

A family has had several children go through the same school. All have manifested small difficulties. The last child, sadly, is in obvious psychological trouble from the start of her career. Her teachers hold meetings with the parents in which her difficulties are discussed. Her parents always maintain that they are temporary and that they will pass, or that they are better than they were. Every year her teachers have to rediscover her difficulties and every year the wheel is reinvented. Over time her advisor and the administration come to recognize that more serious action needs to be taken to aid this girl. The parents listen, pay lip service to the recommendations and do nothing.

Case #2

A family goes through a difficult divorce, leaving the mother taking care of the children for all of their high school years. The father is extraordinarily busy, often traveling very far away and for long periods of time. At the beginning of the senior year of the last child in this family, the mother abruptly takes a job in another city, citing her need for personal growth. The daughter is sent to live with the father in Cambridge, which translates into her living alone in a large house because he is so rarely there. The daughter expresses considerable distress in school and the parents are contacted. It is very difficult to reach them and almost impossible to find a convenient time to schedule a meeting. At the beginning of the meeting the father turns to one of the representatives of the school and says, "I want you to understand that I am a very important international entrepreneur."
HELPFUL TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

(Developed by the faculty of the Bancroft School)

TIPS FOR PARENTS:

1) Be on time for conferences and respect time limits.

2) Be honest with teachers, and make your concerns known.

3) Show appreciation for teachers.

4) Ask in advance who will attend, so you are not surprised.

5) Reflect on your child before the conference and try to prepare specific questions to ask specific questions.

6) Don’t bring your child (unless asked to) or other children to conference.

7) Try to remember that your information probably came through a child’s perspective.

8) Try to be open-minded. Try to listen first, reflect, then act.

9) Discuss issues rather than the teachers.

10) It is o.k. to feel defensive on behalf of your child, but act as an advocate for your child not as an excuse-maker for your child.

11) Try not to put a teacher (or a child, for that matter) in the middle of a family conflict.

12) Ask for specific suggestions.

13) Remember, it is o.k. to be a real person. It is helpful to let the teacher know that you struggle with parenting, because everyone does. The teacher also struggles with teaching (and may be a parent as well).

14) Remember, we’re all on the same side.
TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

1) Avoid surprises (especially unpleasant surprises) by preparing parents in advance of meetings through letters and phone calls.

2) Be prepared, have an agenda for parents and have documented facts available.

3) Establish a mutual agenda for the meeting, based on what you wish to cover and by asking the parents what they wish to cover.

4) Be honest, especially when you are struggling with a child, and encourage parental honesty.

5) Use descriptive language, cite specific examples, avoid judgmental terms.

6) Get parents to talk about their hopes, their worries, their expectations for this particular child.

7) Be a good listener.

8) When possible, hold conference in a comfortable, circular arrangement (no sitting behind a desk). Shake hands, make introductions, get everyone’s last name right.

9) Recognize your own level of expertise. Don’t take on more than your training and level of experience can support.

10) Use humor. Let your criticisms be constructive.

11) Try to remember that the child’s well-being is the purpose of the meeting.

12) Know the child, “claim” the child, know his or her interests and personality outside your classroom.

13) Don’t be afraid to check with parents on the progress of the conference; ask whether it is meeting the parents’ hopes and needs.

14) End on a positive note.
TIPS FOR ADMINISTRATORS:

1) Brief and debrief new faculty before and after parent conferences.

2) Ask the admissions office to begin the process of educating parents about the nature of the school and about the expectations of the parent-teacher relationship.

3) Request that teachers report complaints about other teachers and make the necessary interventions with parents and colleagues. Don’t leave such complaints to teachers to handle.

4) “Red flag” chronically angry or critical parents. Have an administrator regularly attend their conferences.

5) Educate board members.

6) Prepare and rehearse for conferences, especially if past conferences about this particular child have gone badly.

7) Educate teachers, parents and administrators about the chain of command and communication. Repeat every year!
PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR APPROACHING PROBLEM PARENTS

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The Aggressive Parent

1. Insist on personal meetings; what you lose in time, you will save in sanity and protection from telephone harassment during your precious time at home.

2. During the meeting, even when under attack, remember: no offense, no defense. Never defend yourself or your actions and refrain from counterattack, no matter how provoked. Your quiet listening will be disarming and disorienting to the aggressive parent, who expects to hurt or be hurt.

3. Only explain your point of view when you are sure that the parent is ready to listen and can listen.

4. Do not be afraid to articulate and clarify what is happening, for example: "...There is a lot of heat in this discussion, are you angry with me?" or, "Are you threatening me; I feel threatened." As administrators, would you consider interpreting a parent's aggressive stance? "You seem terribly worried underneath all of this upset."

5. Give the parent direct feedback in the form of your own feeling response: "This/you is/are so insulting that the more I listen, the less I am willing to continue this meeting." Or, "I'm really not comfortable with your using my remarks to punish Suzie Q."

6. End threatening meetings. If the conversation is going downhill, you can always say, “I don’t think this meeting is productive. Why don’t we end this meeting now and agree to meet later in the week with the director of the upper school?” Then stand up, shake hands and end the meeting!

6. Call in reinforcements! Attempting to deal with aggressive, insinuating or abusive parents in isolation is a mistake. Consult with colleagues, school psychologists. Role-play and practice meetings before they occur.

The Anxious Parent

1. The anxious parent is, by definition, beyond reassurance. Although you may know that it is futile, begin with your heartfelt reassurances; you will at least prevent yourself from becoming a conduit for parental anxiety.
2. Solicit the source of parental fear: "What are you most afraid might happen? What would happen if it did?"

3. Help the parent reality-test: "Is there some reason to expect that this will happen? Has this ever happened before" To you? To her? To someone in the family?" In this way parents begin to distinguish their anxiety from the reality of the situation.

4. Articulate the task you feel you are being delegated. For example, you might say, "Am I understanding that you want me to tell your son/daughter...?" "Do you mean that you believe she/he will listen to me rather than to you?"

5. Articulate the anxiety you are being expected to absorb. "The more I listen to you, the more worried I become." Or, "Your deep worry in this matter is contagious."

**The Denying Parent**

1. Put things in writing, and write honestly! Of course, you have already been impeccably honest, but be sure your observations are written so that a parent would be hard pressed to read it as more positive than you intended. For example, don't write just, "The teachers all report that Phyllis seems unhappy lately," when you really mean, "Phyllis is weeping uncontrollably by her locker and carving initials on her arm with a paper clip while in classes."

2. Be blunt in meetings. You have all learned how to positively connote your comments in order to soften the blow to the family ego, offer hope and encouragement to anxious students and families, and to save yourself the pain of bearing direct bad news. All cushioning attempts will be most unhelpful to denying families, who must be told in no uncertain terms what the trouble is, so they cannot deny it.

3. Ask provocative questions: "Have you ever noticed the way Herbert crawls under the table to avoid the germs that he believes are falling out of the air onto his desk?" "Have either of you ever worried about the way Gertrude will sleep for 48 hours straight?"

4. Gather relevant colleagues and collaborators, and hold a parent meeting in which you tell the brutal truth. "Gertrude is addicted to Seconal, which she obtains from the supply you regularly replenish in the medicine cabinet in the children's bathroom."

5. Give up. Perhaps someone else will succeed in the future, when there is an even worse crisis.

**The Culturally Different Parent**

Culturally different parents are not difficult in the same way as the three types that have been addressed above. Culturally different parents are not in the 5%). However, they may need
some special attention, and you may need to spend some extra time with them in order to understand their fears and the impact of your own cultural assumptions.

1. Do not assume that you share the same assumptions. Constantly ask the parents how they understand your school.

2. Do not interpret uncomfortable silences as agreement and plow ahead. If necessary, go over the ground repeatedly.

3. Interview the parents about their childhoods, their schools, and their hopes for their children. Ask them what is different for them having a child in your school, and how that affects their relationship with their child and their understanding of their child's education.

4. Solicit criticisms of American education, or of independent education. Ask for their cultural biases and receive them non-defensively. Then say, "Well, given that you think we teach math so badly in comparison with the Japanese system, how can we come to some agreement on your child's math program." That is, discuss the cultural disappointment issue before you get to the educational issue. Then, try to fix the perceived defect in the system in order to please the parent; ask the parents what responsibility they are going to take in helping you teach their child. In the toughest cases, solicit the help of more acculturated parents from the same background, or get help from educators of the same background as the parents.