When Harshly Criticized or Verbally Attacked: A Six-Step Communication Plan for Teachers

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Abstract
This article outlines a six-step communication plan to help teachers, particularly those new to the profession, handle critical, verbally abusive adults, particularly parents, in a respectful and assertive manner. The plan offers a step-by-step guide of how to engage in self-regulation, be assertive and use conflict resolution strategies to move the interaction from problem centered to solution focused. These strategies have been successfully presented to undergraduate education students, teachers in schools and counselors working in community services. Research on the six-step plan revealed beneficial changes in student teachers’ levels of confidence and abilities to stand up to verbally intimidating parents when they followed this plan of communication. Ample examples and author commentary are actively integrated to make the communication plan an informative read.

Introduction
Teachers are often well prepared to handle conflict in the classroom, but a review of research revealed a significant gap in the teacher education literature on how teachers can assertively manage conflict with verbally abusive adults, such as parents (McBride and Worrell, forthcoming). The serious impact of being harshly criticized or yelled at has been well documented and includes self-esteem and confidence struggles, physical exhaustion and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Evans 2010; Grantey, Kern and Fronc 2007; Isaac et al 2006). These reactions, coupled with the stress teachers already experience on the job (Milfont et al 2008; Montgomery and Rupp 2005), may contribute to the high burnout rates reported by teachers (Berk and Greenglass 1995; Gerlach and Friedman 2010). The aim of this article is to provide teachers with a meaningful and useful coping strategy to use when encountering an angry adult, as research has shown that people who are given resources to help them deal with stressors can often reduce the cognitive and physical impact of stress (Bruce 2012).

For the purpose of this article, the adult in question is a parent of one of the teacher’s students. However, the communication plan outlined in this article could be applied to other adults the teacher finds intimidating, such as administrators and colleagues who may be communicating aggressively. In fact, this communication plan has been successfully taught to counselors working in rural community services as well as teachers and student teachers. In terms of the latter stakeholder group, recent research verified that when pre-service teachers were taught this six-step communication plan in a half-day workshop, they reported a significant, positive shift in their levels of confidence and perceived abilities to manage an encounter
with a parent who was communicating to them in a critical or harsh manner (McBride and Worrall, forthcoming).

The foundational elements associated with communicating assertively are interwoven in a detailed description of the six-step communication plan that follows. Assertive behavior, classically described, is “that which attends to and informs others of one’s own needs and feelings and sends the message to the other in such a way that neither person is belittled, put down or blamed.” Through further expansion of the representation of the six steps, I have included an active commentary that is based on my 20 years of teaching assertiveness skills to various stakeholder groups, including teachers.

Step A: Disarm

Okay. I need to breathe. This might be scary, but I have handled worse.

Turn Down the Alarm Reaction

When a teacher is confronted by a parent who is belittling or criticizing the teacher, the very first step in this communication plan enhances the teacher's ability to regulate his or her thoughts and emotions to be able to resist the urge to fight back (that is, become defensive), become passive (give in) or freeze (be unable to think) (Kosmoski and Pollack 2000). These reactions are part of our nervous system's biochemical stress response to a perceived stressor (Lupien et al. 2007), such as yelling at you. This biochemical reaction, which is akin to our internal alarm system being turned to high, operates from a rather primitive state of brain functioning in which the focus is on survival, with the arms uncrossed.

To enhance the message that the teacher is willing to listen, it can be very helpful if the teacher looks at the parent, maintains neutral eye contact and slightly tilts his or her head, as this often signals a message of interest (Simonds and Cooper 2010). It is also advisable for the palms to be open and as a slight angle (that is, how do I “win”), not on logical thinking. Thus, our inner alarm reaction needs to be turned down before we respond to the person interfering with the conflict. One of the most effective ways to turn down the alarm reaction is to shift to belly breathing, because this activates the diaphragm (Davis, Eshelman and McKay 2008). As Bruce (2012) explained in his master of counselling project about stress management, belly breathing causes an important biochemical reaction within us that allows more blood flow to the parts of the brain which may allow the teacher to think, and thereby offers us faster, clearer, more logical thinking.

Body Language

When breathing more into the belly, also try to drop the shoulders to reduce a defensive posture and to soften the face to reduce showing fear; these additional strategies show that you (that is, the teacher) are not a threat, thereby inviting the other person unconsciously, to also disarm. That is, by turning down your alarm reaction, you are able to send an indirect message to the adult (that is, the parent) that there is no threat to their survival and thus there is no need to remain in a fight (defensive) state.

From experience I know that when I purposely take a few belly breaths in front of someone whom I perceive is verbally intimidating me, the person will slowly start to deflate, perhaps with a smile on their face. This is a very desirable reaction, because my hope is to disarm the other person’s alarm reaction while in the process of disarming my internal alarm reaction (from the teacher) (Kosmoski and Pollack 2000). Some statements that may help the parent to unconsciously disarm are (1) “I want to learn what you are concerned about; please have a seat.” (2) “I know you have taken time off work to be here, and I appreciate that.” (3) “May I get you some coffee before we sit down to talk about your concerns?” (4) “It is important that you are here; thank you for coming in.”

Step B: Learn: What Else?

Please, tell me what you would like me to know.

The parent quickly and harshly confronts the teacher, Step A (disarm) is even more important because the teacher, if still in a state of alarm, will have great difficulty listening to the parent’s concerns, which defines step B. The teacher’s main job, at this point, is to simply collect information about the parent’s concerns (Kosmoski and Pollack 2000). Information can be effectively gathered using probes or open questions (Morse and Ivey 1996), such as “What were your concerns?” and “I am interested; please tell me what you have so concerned.” After the parent has expressed the initial concern, the teacher may follow up with a “What about?” question, because there may be more issues the person needs toivent before the intensity of the person’s alarm system starts to decrease. Sample what further inquiries include (1) “What else would you like me to know about this?” and (2) “What other concern do you have? Please tell me more about that.”

Sometimes I receive messages from an audience to the idea of asking the adult to express even more concerns. My response is to invite the child to imagine that the parent’s concern and emotions are represented as a large balloon. The teacher’s task is to help the parent slowly release the air in the balloon. Sometimes the parent’s balloon will deflate almost instantly. The child is then able to talk about a concern, whereas other times the parent may have stored a pile of concerns. By inviting the parent to empty the balloon, it is likely that the parent will remain in the teacher in a more rational and cleaner discussion, because the parent’s alarm system may also be turned down by the end of this session. Some teachers reflect that this step is the easiest because the teacher can focus on listening and does not need to focus on saying anything. The teacher does not have to agree with what is being said. There is also value in recognizing that some people struggle to articulate their thoughts; often this occurs because their alarm is turned on high, so their feelings talk for them. Only after people have released a lot of air from their inner balloon are they able to begin speaking in a calmer and more focused tone of voice. However, if the parent’s alarm reaction is not diminishing despite the teacher’s gentle and affirming style, then the teacher may need to use the techniques of engaging or walking away, which are addressed later.
When working through step B (learn), keep the following in mind. Consider taking notes, as it demonstrates to the parent that the teacher is taking his or her concerns seriously. It may also be used as a gesture of respect, an ask permission before note taking. Do not interrupt the speaker because this can be perceived as boing rude. Likewise, it is critical in my experience, for the teacher not to go into “fix it” mode (that is, finding solutions, offering advice). The teacher should avoid the temptation to defend his or her actions. Step C is focused on the parent’s needs, not the teacher’s needs. Even if the parent becomes silent, it does not mean it is a cue for the teacher to share his or her perspective. Instead, when there is silence, maintain an air of interest and curiosity by keeping eye contact and a gentle, open body posture, and continue asking, “What else?”

**Step D: Ask, Brainstorm and Plan**

Perhaps this might be a good time for me to share my perspective? Or shall we shift our focus to how to resolve this concern?

**Teacher’s Perspective**

If it is appropriate and relevant to do so to promote a resolution, ask the parent if it might be useful to hear the teacher’s perspective on the situation. Sample questions are (1) “I have different information from your view. Shall I share with you what I saw happen with your daughter?” and (2) “Do you want to hear my perspective, or leave things as they are, or perhaps we can look at some solutions?” Sometimes the mere act of venting and being validated is the solution the parent was looking for and this can be checked out by asking the parent directly, “Do you want to talk about solutions or was it more that you really wanted me to hear your concerns?”

**Brainstorming**

The teacher may invite the parent to participate in a brainstorming session to search for possible solutions in which the teacher does not compromise the integrity of the school, the curriculum or the teacher’s code of ethics and in which the parent believes the measure is a careful means of improving quality education and fair treatment. A possible lead-in question might be “What problem shall we find a solution for first?” If the parent accepts the invitation to problem solve, invite him or her to offer a solution. The brainstorming tactic enables the two adults to find a solution together, rather than imposing ideas on one another (Appelbaum 2009). Brainstorming also acknowledges the parent’s expertise and ability to come up with solutions.

Note that brainstorming typically works best if there are at least three solutions, as the first solution might be the parent’s desired solution, the second the teacher’s preferred solution and the third a compromise. I usually advise identifying up to five solutions. When problem solving it is good to explore the pros and cons of each idea and then use the brainstorming tactic to decrease any sense of attack on an idea. Again, keep the working relationship positive by offering reinforcing comments about brainstorming and working on the task. For example, (1) “I really look forward to finding a solution with your help and input”; (2) “Do you think that between the two of us we can come up with five brainstorm ideas?” (3) “Thank you for sticking around so we could find a resolution”; (4) “I appreciate that we are talking about solutions now; thank you.”

A problem that arises with Step D (ask, brainstorm and plan) is the parent continuing to discuss problems and concerns rather than focusing on a resolution. It may be that the parent felt rushed through the conversation, despite doing so in an intense or intimidating manner. If the parent had an anxious attitude toward education, the parent would likely not be in contact with the teacher. Thus, the parent is coming from a place of care, and perhaps fear. It is also possible that the parent lacks the awareness or skills to manage his or her flight alarm reaction and thus might benefit from the teacher role modelling how to disarm one’s alarm reaction.

**Step C: Repeat Back, Lots!**

I want to make sure I am following you. Your concerns are clear.

Before inviting the parent into problem solving, it is important for the teacher to solidify the relationship with the parent by demonstrating that the teacher understands the parent’s point of view, because people tend to calm down when they feel heard (Simonds and Cooper 2010; Kottler and Kottler 2007). If the teacher fails to demonstrate an understanding of the parent’s concerns, the parent may feel that the teacher is not listening or taking the situation seriously. This type of interpretation might further contribute to the parent remaining in a hyperalert state and thereby negating the teacher’s invitation to focus on solutions. Techniques for gaining an understanding of another person’s point of view and ensuring accuracy in communication include paraphrasing and offering empathy.

**Paraphrasing**

This core communication technique restates the main theme or concern that is being addressed in the listener’s own words (Morse and Ivey 1996). Examples are (1) “Let me make sure I am understanding what your concerns are; they are...”; (2) “The main issues you are telling me are...”; and (3) “There are many topics you are raising, and I want to remember them. May I summarize what you have told me so far?”

**Empathy**

Being able to show understanding of the other person’s viewpoint also requires the teacher to be aware of the feelings that accompany the parent’s distressed state (Morse and Ivey 1996). Some examples are (1) “It makes sense to me that you are feeling concerned and maybe a bit disappointed”; (2) “Wow, that is a lot of stuff you are bringing to my attention, and I now understand why you are feeling some frustration”; and (3) “To be so worried about how you think I treated your son must have caused you great distress.”

Just as in the other steps, the listener needs to be careful not to lose focus on the parent. This is not the time to offer examples from the teacher’s life to demonstrate understanding, nor is it appropriate to disagree with the parent’s point of view at this point in the process. Once the parent feels heard and validated by the teacher, the tension in the room often drops considerably and it feels natural to move to step D.
The Plan

The Mediation Training Institute (2006) suggested that the selected solution should be one in which both parties benefit and that it should be behaviorally specific, specifying who will do what, when and for how long. The parent and teacher might find value in creating an informal written record of their roles in implementing the solution. Sometimes both parties may require more time to identify or refine a solution so the plan might be to set up another meeting and/or to consult with another professional.

Step E: Leave on a Good Note!

I appreciate that you spoke to me directly about your concerns. Thank you for that respect.

Once step D (ask, brainstorm and plan) has been finalized, the method of closing a one-to-one conversation can be just as important as how the teacher responded to the parent in the first step. The goal is to end the conversation on a high note by reinforcing the value of the working relationship with the parent and extending an appreciation for what has been accomplished. Useful phrases might be (1) “I appreciate that you took time to come in and see me”; (2) “I’m glad we’ve got this out in the open”; (3) “This was such a hot topic, I fully understand why you felt so strongly. It is a relief we sorted it out, and I am very thankful for that”. and (4) “I know we disagree strongly on this point, but I don’t believe it undermined our willingness to work as a team for the sake of your son.”

Once the parent leaves the meeting, the teacher may notice a re-emergence of an alarm reaction (for example, sweaty hands, shallow breathing, confusion), which is normal after a stressful encounter. It may be helpful for the teacher to revisit step A (disarm). It is also healthy to vent or debrief with appropriate personnel about such an encounter. The key in the debriefing process is to share in such a way that the teacher does not reactivate his or her alarm system (for example, becoming overly dramatic, exaggerating or talking negatively about the parent). When debriefing, the teacher should talk about the distressed adult with respect and protect the parent’s dignity. Avoid mentioning his or her identity if the identity is not relevant, and avoid criticizing the parent’s child. After the encounter, the teacher’s nervous system will gradually activate the parasympathetic system, thereby allowing the teacher’s body to engage in reparative work as a result of handling an unexpected stressor (Bruce 2012). The teacher, when ready, might also want to engage in analysis of what worked and what did not work so that modifications to the communication plan can be made.

Step F: Follow Up!

I am calling in to check about how well our plan is working. It is advisable to contact the parent about a week later in the interest of maintaining a good working relationship with a parent, ensuring that the plan is being followed and that the concerns have been addressed. Useful phrases might be (1) “I know you were concerned about the child’s spending time with the other child” or (2) “I’m glad we’ve got this out in the open”.

Cautions

In some cases, when implementing the six-step process, the parent’s alarm reaction does not diminish. In these cases it may be appropriate for the teacher to use the techniques of fogging or walking away.

Fogging

If a parent launches into attack mode (for example, harsh criticism), fogging is a useful technique that can be used to prevent a confrontation (Smith 1975). The premise is to avoid defending oneself in response to a zinger (for example, “You are far too young to be teaching my daughter”). Recall that when people’s alarm systems are highly activated their ability to listen and be logical is compromised. Much like how fog does not hold onto anything, when the teacher is fogging he or she allows the zinger to drift away (Smith 1975). To do this, simply acknowledge there might be some remote speck of truth in the zinger, particularly since we are flawed human beings. Possible examples of fogging are (1) “Yeah, that may be true”; (2) “Yes, I do look young to be a teacher”; (3) “That’s one piece of feedback I need to think more about”; (4) “You could be right”; (5) “I shall think about it” or (6) “Yes, you are raising a number of things I need to think more about.”

After fogging it is very important to remain silent—an awkward silence might emerge because often the person sending the zinger is expecting a return attack, not a statement that acknowledges what was said. Sometimes this approach will even cause the parent to apologize. In this case, return to step B (learn) or C (repeat back) until it is logical to move to step D (brainstorm).
Career Planning Integration with Language Arts, Social Studies, Art, Health, and Information and Communication Technology at the Grade 1 Level

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Abstract
This article explores the effectiveness of having Grade 1 students participate in a career-planning unit consisting of various learning activities. This unit integrated Alberta Education curriculum outcomes from the language arts, social studies, art, health, and information and communication technology programs. The unit itself is outlined with clear descriptions of activities the students participated in along with data collected from the student evaluations of the unit. This career planning unit was delivered to a Grade 1 class in a small rural community in southern Alberta, Canada, consisting of 21 students from Caucasian and First Nations heritages. Objectives of the unit were met, with 100 per cent of the students reporting that the unit plan helped them to learn a lot about themselves, 86 per cent stating that this unit plan helped them to learn a lot about careers, 100 per cent noting that this unit plan made them excited about what they could do with their life and 90 per cent reporting that this unit plan made them want to learn more about different careers. Career planning at a Grade 1 level that uses activities that enhance student awareness of self, strengths, uniqueness, interests and community helpers is demonstrated to be successful.

Introduction
Teachers are increasingly being asked to link their curricular objectives and learning activities to the world of work. Nonetheless, schools are just beginning to incorporate career planning across levels from kindergarten to Grade 12, with an emphasis on integrating career planning within the curriculum. “If one accepts the concept that children make decisions about themselves and the world at a very young age, it follows that development of the skills required for effective life career planning must begin early.” (Magnusson and Scan 2000, 90). Unfortunately, there have not been any evaluative studies of their effectiveness for students at the Grade 1 level. This paper describes how teachers can successfully implement career planning into the curriculum at the Grade 1 level by integrating career planning with language arts, social studies, art, health, and information and communication technology, and effectively evaluates this career planning program. Career planning involves much more than selecting an occupation; it is a lifelong journey consisting of many decisions along the way. One of the main tasks of a career planner is to help other people learn about themselves; this self-awareness is fundamental to successful life planning and career planning.