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# 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 centred to solution focused. These strategies have been successfully presented to undergraduate education students, teachers in schools and counsellors 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 Worrall, 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; Grandey, Kern and Frone 2007; Inoue 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 (Burke and Greenglass 1995; Gavish 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 counsellors working in rural community services as well as teachers and student teachers. In terms of the latter stakeholder group, recent research verified that when preservice 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 the detailed description of the six-step communication plan that follows. Assertive behaviour, 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” (Porritt 1990, 98). To further enhance the presentation 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 depends on the teacher regulating 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 someone 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 (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 introducing 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 that enable us 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 adult, albeit 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 anyone’s 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 deepen his or her own breathing. 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 so we can move into higher-order functioning—prefrontal activation—to logically sort out the issues and find solutions that are in our best interests (Bruce 2012).

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 at a slight angle, with the arms uncrossed, and for the teacher to lean toward the person, displaying an open, relaxed facial expression even if being told something shocking. The teacher should also maintain an upright body position (Morse and Ivey 1996), as slouching could display a lack of interest, which may be perceived as a threat, thereby activating the other person’s alarm system.

### Self-Talk

Another component in disarming is to use soothing, nurturing self-talk to calm the inner panic one feels in response to a threat. The goal is to gain emotional distance from the situation, which may allow the teacher clearer, crisper thinking (Kosmoski and Pollack 2000) compared to the emotional state of fight or flight. Some helpful self-statements to use at the start of a conflict include (1) “This person is just venting with words”; (2) “It is part of my job to stay calm and listen”; (3) “Stay cool—this will become a bigger mess if I fight back”; (4) “Notice I am safe, and I am not in danger”; and (5) “Just keep breathing to think more clearly.”

The final component to step A (disarm) is to continue to send indirect invitations for the parent to disarm. An effective strategy, while the teacher focuses on self-talk and is mindful not to breathe shallowly, is to offer an authentic, welcoming message to the distressed parent. The parent may expect a defensive or passive reply after harshly confronting the teacher, but if the reply is one of gentleness and care, the movement into a solution focus may occur much earlier than if the parent received a negative or critical message back 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?”; and (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.*

If 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 concern, 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 (1) “What is your concern?” and (2) “I am interested; please tell me what has you so concerned.” After the parent has expressed the initial concern, the teacher may follow up with a “What else?” question, because there may be more issues the person needs to vent before the intensity of the person’s alarm system starts to decrease. Sample what else 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 a strong reaction from an audience to the idea of asking the adult to express even more concerns. My response is to invite the teacher 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 after the invitation 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 be able to join the teacher in a more rational and clearer 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; this often 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 way. 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 *fogging* 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. However, as a gesture of respect, ask permission before note taking. Do not interrupt the speaker because this can be perceived as being 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 B 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 her or his 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?” Move to step C (repeat back) only if the parent is ready. Finally, it may be very helpful for lowering the parent’s alarm reaction if the teacher shows appreciation for the parent addressing these concerns with the teacher. To make it easier to show this appreciation, the teacher can remind him- or herself that the parent is showing an interest in his or her children’s education, despite doing so in an intense or intimidating manner. If the parent had an apathetic 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 fight 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. You are telling me that ...*

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 fear that the teacher is not listening or taking the situation seriously. This type of interpretation might further contribute to the parent remaining in a hyper-alarmed state, 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 what is being said often 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 listener to acknowledge the feelings that accompany the person’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 steal the show—keep the 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.

### 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?*

Step D is marked by more positive energy between the two adults, as the focus shifts by using the working relationship established in steps A to C to move towards a resolution in which both parties gain (Mediation Training Institute 2006).

### 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 student is receiving 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 the ideas after the brainstorming to decrease any sense of attack on an idea. Again, keep the working relationship positive by offering reinforcing comments about brainstorming and working together, such as (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”; or (4) “I appreciate that we are talking about solutions now; thank you.”

A problem that may arise in 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 steps B and C. In this case, it would be best if the teacher returned to the earlier steps to ensure that the parent has felt heard and understood. However, if the parent keeps interrupting when the teacher shares his or her point of view even after recycling through the earlier steps, the teacher can assume that the parent wanted to vent and was not seeking solutions. Thus, it would be appropriate to respectfully end the conversation (go to steps E and F). Alternatively, the teacher may need to gently set a boundary by saying: (1) “May I finish sharing my perspective?” (2) “I am starting to feel confused, as I asked if it was okay to share my perspective and received permission to do so, yet I cannot seem to finish sharing my point of view”; or (3) “I listened to your point of view and maybe it would be useful to continue to hear my point of view.”

## 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 behaviourally specific, specifying who will do what, by 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 once-heated 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 good note by reinforcing the value of the working relationship with the parent and extending an appreciation for what the meeting 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 to check in 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. This recommendation might be met with some reserve, as the teacher may dread another encounter. However, taking the initiative to check in sends a message that the teacher prefers to handle issues directly and cares about the child's well-being. This follow-up step, delivered by e-mail or phone, or in person, might begin in the following way: "It has been a few days since we last talked. Again, I want to express my appreciation for talking to me directly and sharing your concerns. Today, I wanted to check in with you to see if you had any comments or feedback about what we talked about last week. I am also curious what is working well with the plan we developed. I would also like to share with you my thoughts and comments about the solution we came up with. Would you like to start?"

## 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 counterattack (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 a piece of feedback I need to think more about"; (4) "You could be right"; (5) "For sure, there are always things I could improve"; and (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).

## Walk Away

Despite the usefulness and value of fogging and this six-step communication plan, sometimes the parent is unable to calm down to allow for a progression out of step B (learn). There are also times when the teacher is unable to regulate his or her own alarm system. In both of these cases the teacher may want to schedule a short break (which can occur at any time in the process) to allow for some distance from the problem (Appelbaum 2009). Alternatively, the teacher can

also initiate a parent meeting for another day, as this might give more time to defuse the tension and give the teacher time to seek a consultation on how to handle the situation (Kosmoski and Pollack 2000). Regardless, it is vital that teachers understand that when they do not feel physically safe with the adult in the room, they have the full right to walk away and contact assistance.

## Conclusion

When parents verbally attack teachers it can be a very taxing and trying experience to manage, particularly if teachers have not received training in how to handle stressful adult transactions. A critical step in this communication plan depends on the teacher's ability to use the emotional regulation skills introduced in step A. When a teacher controls his or her inner alarm system, it may lessen the teacher's immediate desire to attack or go passive. Further, teachers who have resources and supports to use when they encounter a stressor, such as the parent who is overly critical, may experience fewer stress-related symptoms, and burnout may also be reduced.

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