

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *A Genuine Concern for School Personnel*

### **ARE CONFRONTATIONAL PARENTS A PERTINENT ISSUE?**

I could safely presume that the individuals who consider reading this book have at least thought of the difficulties that a confrontational parent presents. To go a step further, I could also make two assumptions. First, most of these readers have actually encountered a confrontational or aggressive parent, and second, very few of these encounters resulted in pleasant farewells between the staff member and the parent.

One question immediately arises: “How pertinent is the issue of school personnel and their encounters with confrontational parents?” I think I can best answer this question by first defining the word “pertinence” as the degree to which something affects or is important to an individual. Answering the question of “pertinence” using this definition allows me to reason that parental confrontation really is an important issue to many types of school personnel. This issue is made all the more obvious when you realize that any confrontation is significant because it alters the behavior of the staff member in his or her efforts to address the issues of the aggressive parent.

Confrontation is a powerful tool because, when used properly, it allows another individual to consider the effects of his or her behavior. Unfortunately, as many educators discover, confrontation with an overly aggressive parent usually produces little in the way of positive results. Parental aggression also comes in many forms, including

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physical or verbal. In addition, threats such as the invasion of personal space or gestures made in an effort to intimidate also constitute types of aggression.

Yes, confrontational parents need to be addressed. For any type of school personnel, interactions with parents who display aggressive or confrontational behavior rarely occur without repercussion. Whether these interactions result in an inconvenient disruption of a workday or even a threat to the employee's safety, parental aggression is a problem not to be ignored.

### **HOW OFTEN DOES PARENTAL AGGRESSION OCCUR?**

When I first considered conducting research on the topic of parental aggression, the issue of frequency was the first question I wanted to answer. "How often were educators actually being confronted by aggressive parents?" Before I answer this question, it is important to explain—and emphasize—that the type of aggression being perpetrated by the parents largely determined the frequency of aggression. For example, concerning the specific issue of verbal aggression toward school administrators, I asked administrators to respond to the School Administrator Parent Aggression Survey (SAPAS) (Jaksec, 2003). Six hundred sixty-nine surveys were sent to school administrators (mostly principals and assistant principals) in Florida's 67 school districts. Florida can be generalized to other states because its districts adequately comprise suburban, rural, and urban schools throughout the nation. Socioeconomically, school districts in Florida are also well represented. I discovered that

- 60% of the administrators had profanity or shouting directed at them by parents on at least two occasions during the school year.
- 70% of the administrators had false accusations leveled against them by parents during the school year.
- 79% of the school administrators—on three or more occasions—reported receiving parental threats to contact "other authorities," that is, attorneys, school board, and so on.

Parental aggression, specifically verbal aggression, does occur, and more often than I originally suspected.

While I was conducting this research on parental aggression, colleagues from around the country sent me headlines involving stories of confrontational interactions with parents. I recall one episode that involved a superintendent in California who was actually handcuffed by two parents, placed under citizen's arrest, and taken away in their car, all while being videotaped by the mother. Fortunately, 10 miles later, a sheriff's deputy stopped the car and freed the superintendent. The reason for the parents' actions? The couple, long dissatisfied with district policy, sent a 15-page letter accusing school officials of giving sexually explicit materials to students. After the couple imposed a deadline to resolve their concern (which was not met), they accosted the superintendent.

In another incident, a 31-year teaching veteran in Boston was attacked by a mother who objected to discipline issues regarding her son. The teacher suffered a seizure and a broken cheekbone that required surgery. In addition, the teacher's eye remained dilated and glaucoma may have resulted. Dental surgery was also considered.

It is easy to read these sensational media headlines and assume that "it only happens to someone else," but aggression, even perpetrated by parents, can occur anywhere and at any time. Aggression also presents itself in not-so-newsworthy forms. For instance, a parent might threaten an administrator with legal action because he or she feels negligence was exhibited during a field trip, a physical education teacher might be confronted on the playground by a parent whose child has reported being bullied by a peer, or a school social worker might have profanity directed toward him or her by a parent during a conference. These situations can understandably affect the way school personnel function, and they occur more frequently than you think.

## **DO EMPLOYEES HAVE TO TOLERATE PARENTAL AGGRESSION?**

We've established that some forms of parental aggression and confrontations occur quite frequently. Now, the question emerges, "Do I have to tolerate it?" In any circumstance, aggression from a student is difficult to accept for school personnel. An aggressive act by a parent or guardian remains an even more difficult pill to swallow. Understandably, educators expect that parents are mature adults

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who, for all intents and purposes, know better than to resort to nonconstructive, confrontational behavior. Alas, this is not always the case.

Certainly, no one actually tells school personnel that abuse is acceptable. In fact, there has been an increase in civility policies in our nation's school districts. These policies emphasize that any threatening behaviors—on the part of any party, including school personnel—will not be tolerated and are sometimes punishable. Illogically, school personnel continue to encounter aggressive parents who, for a variety of reasons to be discussed in this chapter, challenge school employees. Regrettably, during these interactions, communication can erode so that little is accomplished.

Who are the real “losers” as the result of these encounters? Quite possibly the students, because, in all likelihood, they will learn the same negative styles of communication as their parents. The parents, though, also suffer because their poor manner of communication might interfere or delay a solution to the problem facing their own child. In addition, the educators lose because these turbulent encounters have a cumulative effect, which might possibly affect their performance.

Are school personnel paid enough to put up with confrontational parents or their acts of aggression? No way! However, I'm also aware that of the countless numbers of school employees whom I have interviewed and with whom I have corresponded through the years, very few have encountered a problematic parent and, as a result, said “goodbye” to the field of education. Are the personnel who have encountered such a parent frustrated and angry? Of course they are, and understandably so. However, I believe that if an effective, yet simple manner of dealing with these parents were available for school personnel, their jobs could be made much easier and less aggravating.

### **COULD PARENTAL AGGRESSION AFFECT ME?**

Could a confrontational or overly aggressive parent affect any type of school personnel? I would undoubtedly answer yes. I could dedicate several chapters to comments made to me by school administrators who, in the past, had the misfortune of encountering hostile parents. Many of these encounters produced uneasy feelings and even physical reactions that genuinely affected the way the staff members functioned. I have heard personnel discuss various

ailments, including muscle tension, fatigue, hypertension, teeth grinding, and an assortment of other medically related issues that were the direct result of these turbulent encounters. School personnel have also explained to me that they have suffered from depression, anxiousness, sleeplessness, or a host of other ailments that they directly attributed to difficulties with hostile parents. Logically, not all school personnel are affected to the same degree; however, I have observed that very few educators emerged physically or emotionally unscathed from unpleasant encounters with parents.

Turbulent encounters also seem to produce a level of response that is commensurate with the staff member's level of experience. The effects of parent hostility could possibly be more devastating to a staff member with little experience in contrast to an employee with vast experience. It should be emphasized, however, that seasoned school personnel are not immune to the effects of aggression because of their experience, and ramifications, some serious, remain for both inexperienced and experienced school personnel.

Experienced professionals have told me of their intention to change career fields, transfer schools, or change positions in order to avoid conflicts with parents. I find this very unfortunate because the movement of these competent professionals ultimately places the student at a disadvantage. Fortunately, the great majority of educational personnel who discuss with me their interactions with aggressive parents chose to remain in the field of education. It is important to remember that the choice to remain does not indicate that these encounters do not take their toll on the educator in a variety of ways.

### **WHY DOES THE TOPIC OF PARENTAL AGGRESSION SEEM OBSCURE?**

Discussions regarding aggression within our nation's schools usually involve student-perpetrated violence toward staff or classmates. The amount of information and research available regarding this type of aggression is seemingly limitless, and this topic presents itself continuously. The emphasis on student-perpetrated aggression has also piqued nationwide interest on the topic. Subsequently, this has resulted in a decline of violent acts in our schools.

In contrast, the topic of parental aggression toward school employees does not receive nearly the same amount of exposure.

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This is evident by the lack of research and literature on the topic. Unquestionably, the topic of parental aggression toward school personnel is somewhat obscure. But why? I find three possible reasons for this uniqueness: responsibility, resiliency, and a lack of awareness.

### **Responsibility**

One reason for the uniqueness of the topic of parental aggression is the mind-set that school personnel are actually responsible or expected to deal with the parent regardless of the parent's disposition. If this mind-set is prevalent—and it may, in fact, be—it is unfortunate and dangerous. Although educators should be responsive to parent needs and requests, they do not have the same responsibility if the behavior of these parents becomes hostile or aggressive.

### **Resiliency**

The one word that most accurately describes most educators is “resilient.” Whether it is the math teacher who determinedly attempts to teach fractions to a distracted student; the school social worker who tirelessly tries to build rapport with a detached parent; or the front-office worker who addresses myriad concerns, requests, or complaints on a daily basis, resiliency at most schools is on display 5 days per week. One problem with this resiliency is the educator's occasional failure to expose or report incidences of parental aggression. The longer the actions of an aggressive parent go unaddressed, the longer that parent is free to interact aggressively with other school personnel.

### **Lack of Awareness**

Parental aggression remains a somewhat obscure issue because it is conceivable that educators may be unaware of the effects of these turbulent encounters. Perhaps educators consider the emotional or physical effects from parent aggression to be similar to the effects of any other type of conflict (i.e., a conflict with a student or an argument with a colleague). Subsequently, incidences involving aggressive parents are not reported by school personnel. Although it is not possible to measure the effects of different types of conflict, educators should be aware of the ramifications of these altercations.

If educators rethink their responsibility to interact with aggressive parents, acknowledge their resiliency, and become aware of the ramifications of interacting with volatile parents, the issue of parental aggression might transform a very obscure issue into an important concern.

## **WHAT MAKES PARENTAL AGGRESSION A UNIQUE ISSUE?**

When we discuss parental aggression toward school employees, we tend to think about this topic as part of the larger issue of school violence. Although this is true, parental aggression is also a unique issue for several reasons.

### **It's Your Kid But It's Our Student**

When a hostile parent is encountered, chances are, the problem has something to do with his or her child. Ironically, this same child attends your school. Obviously, the parent sees nothing more important than the welfare of his or her child. Similarly, school personnel are in the position to assist, not hinder, the student. Unfortunately, staff members and parents often find themselves at odds for any number of reasons, and as unnecessary as these conflicts may be, they do occur. Much like a divorce, the child is placed in the middle of the conflict. To the credit of most educators, I have met few individuals who let their view of the parent taint their relationship with the child. However, it remains a difficult challenge for staff members to maintain a favorable attitude toward a family when one or both of the parents prove to be aggressive or confrontational.

### **The Volatility of the Issue**

Optimally, parents and school personnel work as partners in order to provide the academic environment and support necessary for student success. Usually, this arrangement is successful. When disagreements do occur, the educator discovers that few issues create more emotion than a parent who believes that his or her child has been wronged in some way by someone or something at the school. Unfortunately, by the time parents make their problems or demands

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known, they occasionally become so emotional that school personnel are unprepared in their attempts to address the parents' problem. These situations can quickly deteriorate to the point where little, if anything, is accomplished.

Parent aggression occurs at every level within a school district. From the front office to the superintendent's office, parent aggression can emerge and pose many problems for everyone involved. As we will see later in this book, this extensive problem often necessitates a multidisciplinary approach by school personnel.

### **Repercussions for the Educator**

Parental aggression is also unique because volatile parents are capable of exercising options that cause legitimate concern and stress for school personnel. Most educators have encountered a parent who unnecessarily chose to take an unresolved problem or conflict to the next level of administration. Other parents may have even threatened school board or legal action. Although some educators refuse to take these threats seriously, others do, and so these parental options are perceived as a threat to the educators' professional standing. Many employees have "sweated out" a parent's decision to move a complaint, whether warranted or unwarranted, to the next level in an effort to receive satisfaction. The impending repercussions are very stressful to these professionals, but nonetheless, these options remain at the parent's disposal.

### **An All-Encompassing Problem**

If you briefly recall an instance in which a parent became aggressive toward a school employee, it will become immediately obvious that the situation involved several other types of school personnel. For instance, front-office personnel inform a principal of the arrival of an irate parent. The principal initially summons the assistant principal and asks if he or she is aware of any previous violent behaviors on the parent's part. Upon hearing that the parent has a history of violence, the school resource officer is asked to remain near the conference room.

This situation involved four types of people: front-office personnel, principal, assistant principal, and school resource officer. Luckily, this situation was responded to by personnel who just happened



to be available when school personnel required their services. In subsequent chapters, more complicated scenarios will be presented that illustrate the actions of various types of school personnel when they are confronted with aggressive or hostile parents. Parent aggression is truly unique in that it involves many types of school personnel.

What follows are discussion questions that relate to school personnel interactions with aggressive or confrontational parents. Discussion questions will also be included at the conclusion of each subsequent chapter. These questions are intended to help the reader apply the information from each chapter to his or her own experiences.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In the past 2 years, how many times have you encountered an aggressive or confrontational parent? Try to recall the reasons for the parent's disposition and behavior. Do you feel he or she was justified?
2. Do you know a colleague who has been physically or psychologically affected by an encounter with an aggressive parent? Have you noted a specific type of staff member that may be more prone to parental aggression than other types of personnel?
3. Is your school district aware of the issue of parental aggression? If so, what has been done to address this issue? In your opinion, could more attention be directed toward it?