

Best Practices for Parents and Schools Supporting Students with Mental Health Challenges

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Start with these foundational statements or assumptions:

- ▶ Parents/kids/teachers are all coming to the table with the best they have
- ▶ Kids don't wake up wanting to make your life miserable
- ▶ Parents want their children to be happy and to succeed
- ▶ Teachers are committed to the best interest of children

1. Approach conversations from a place of empathy and understanding

Parent to Teacher: I know that my child can be disruptive, and no one wants that, least of all my child. It is hard to manage so all your students' needs – this is what I think will help my child

Teacher/Admin to Parent: It must be challenging every day to maneuver the various school and community agency processes

2. Assume good intentions

Just as your child doesn't want to be "the problem," the school doesn't want your child to fail. Everyone wants the same broad outcomes, even if they differ on how best to get there. You do not have to love or like your teacher or principal, but you have to work with them.

3. Start from a place of strengths for your child

What makes your child amazing and wonderful? What would the school see in them if things were going well? (humour, interests, kindness, etc.) No one knows your child as well as you do, including the joy that they bring. Make sure to share that.

4. Find common ground

Focus on the "why" of what sparks negative behavior, which can then be problem solved vs "how to stop it" or boundaries e.g., you can all agree that a student shouldn't throw desks, addressing the why this happens is more likely to resolve the challenging behaviour.

5. Stay away from blame

It does not matter what lead to this point – it is important to move forward. If things are going sideways, refocus: eg., "okay, I hear you. How does this relate to my child?" or "okay, so what are we going to do about that..." etc.

6. Be clear and make goals around what is best for your child

Ensure all have the same BIG PICTURE for your child – the school's priorities and yours may be different for example: compliance, grades, self-worth or safety, simple progress with existing skills or reaching a target skill level. Ensure you are clear on your top priorities for your child.

7. Take notes - Not just at meetings

Keep a running log of problems and successes at and outside of school. Do the problems seem to have a pattern? Are they getting better or worse? Memory is not the best tool, because we tend to over or under emphasize events with time. Writing down a short note is more effective and helps for evaluating whether a strategy is working. This becomes valuable for any clinician who works with your child as well.

8. Maintain Ongoing communication

Set up times/dates for regular contact. What is the follow up to track progress? Schedule regular communication and monitoring of progress. Ensure consistent note taking for your benefit, the school, and clinicians.

9. Bring others to the table

Fresh eyes, outside expertise, or even simply an emotional advocate can help keep conversations focused.

10. Monitor and Assess Goal Progress

What are the reasons why things go sideways? Is your child missing a skill? Can they learn the skill? If so support them. Teachers are NOT usually trained in mental health, causes or best practices. This is changing but slowly. Remember that most parents wouldn't know about it if they didn't have to.

What information would help the school understand what your child is struggling with?

11. Work to repair relationships

Advocating for your child can be an exhausting and frustrating experience. It is not always easy to control your emotions. Although your heart is in the right place it can result in a challenging or broken-down relationship with school administration. Simple ways to repair such relationships may include saying things such as:

- ▶ "thank you for all that you do" (even if not enough, they are trying), or "really appreciate that you are working with me" can go a long way.
- ▶ "can we start over?" or even "I know you are frustrated with me. How can we work together to help my child?"
- ▶ Don't be afraid to apologize for being in the wrong; while it can be very hard (or even feel unfair), acknowledging when we have erred can truly help heal relationships. "I want to apologize for how my email sounded last month; it was a hard time and I was frustrated."

12. Remember we are all human

It is helpful to remember that we will all make mistakes, and we are all doing the best we can in any day.