

SUCCESSFUL DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS

A guide for teachers



S O N I A G I L L

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Introduction

I'm Sonia Gill, author, founder and director of Heads Up. I'm a qualified teacher and a graduate of the prestigious John Lewis leadership programme.

When I was a teacher, no-one told me how to manage parents! Working in a school means you're inevitably going to have to deal with parents and some of these conversations will be difficult.

If you sometimes struggle with these conversations, then I know I can help you improve them. My team and I have helped hundreds of school leaders and teachers have more successful difficult conversations with the adults they work with, including parents.

At Heads Up, we're known for resolving difficult conversations and we leave school leaders and teachers feeling empowered to handle healthy conflict.

In this book

I'm going to show you how you can manage these conversations better by looking at:

- 1) Some fundamentals to 'up your game'.
- 2) What to do when the parent comes to you and starts a difficult conversation.
- 3) How to start a conversation you need to have with a parent.
- 4) Common issues and how to resolve them.

Please be aware that nothing in this book constitutes legal advice and should not be treated as such. Employment law is a complex area and you should always seek expert advice on legal issues.

I will give you a range of techniques that will serve you well. You will have to exercise your judgement as to when to use them and I will help you as much as I can with developing that sense. Sadly, I can't give you a 'successful difficult conversations by numbers' book; nothing can fully instruct you in exactly what to do and say in any given situation. You have to make those decisions yourself. There is no such thing as a perfect successful difficult conversation, but there are better ones and my aim is to help you have more of these.

Difficult conversations with parents can be harder than with staff

Difficult conversations are not fun to have, whoever they are with. With staff they are hard, however there are sanctions if the issue gets serious enough.

With parents there are very few sanctions and so you are left with the skills of reasoning, persuasion and influence to resolve the issue.

Meeting with parents is an important and unavoidable part of your role. You're both significant adults in a child's life and you both want the best for them; you just might not always agree on what that is.

As a teacher or leader in school, you can get better at having difficult conversations with parents through trial and error and by learning from others. You can also improve when you have specific skills and knowledge to help you.

Some fundamental tools

I have trained a lot of schools' staff on how to have successful difficult conversations and I've written a book about it (<http://www.johncattbookshop.com/>). There is one definition and two tools you need to know at the outset of this book to help you have difficult conversations with parents more successfully:

- 1) Definition of a successful difficult conversation.
- 2) how to start the conversation.
- 3) how to structure it.

1) What is the definition of a 'successful difficult conversation'?

Quite simply, it is a difficult conversation that **creates positive change, quickly and kindly.**

This contrasts with the definition of a 'difficult conversation' which is a dialogue about a situation where something needs to improve and where voicing the issues is likely to upset someone to some degree. (If you're sure someone won't be upset then it's unlikely to be a difficult conversation).

2) Starting the conversation

This is the most fail-safe way for starting the conversation:

I, issue, the outcome

The commas demarcate the three sections.

1. Start with 'I'

'I' is less accusatory than 'you' and it helps to depersonalise the conversation. You might say: I feel, notice, believe, observe, think – whatever words are right for you.

2. The issue

Now clearly and specifically state what the issue is. Avoid broad, abstract words, the more concrete and specific you can be, the better.

3. The outcome

Now say what you would like to happen. This is not to 'talk about the issue' as I've seen many people say, that's a method; it's the end results you want to achieve.

3) Structuring the conversation

My structure is called 'STORM' and it honours the work of Bruce Tuckman (Tuckman, 1965) and the importance of effective storming in teams.

1. State the issue

Start the conversation by clearly stating the issue, using your 'I, issue, the outcome' sentence.

2. Their side

Invite the other person to share how they see the issue and outcome you have raised.

3. Options

Discuss ideas for achieving the outcome.

4. Resolution

Decide what ideas you are going to take forward. You want to be clear on: i) what is to be done, ii) by whom and iii) by when.

5. Move on and follow up

This is a great time to acknowledge the positives of the conversation. Make sure you arrange a time to follow up on the conversation; this means you can both touch base, talk about anything that hasn't been resolved with the issue, or talk about the fact that things are improving.

Go online: You can access a free short video course on structuring the conversation using STORM here: www.ukheadsup.com/storm/

Section 1: When a parent wants something from you

Often, a parent comes to you with an issue. It could be for a range of reasons, including:

- Parent believes child is at a different level to the teacher (e.g. reading stage).
- Child should be in a sports team/play which they haven't been chosen for.
- Their child is being bullied.
- Their child does or doesn't need additional support.

Understand their 'I, issue, the outcome'

Parents rarely come to us with the necessary clarity for their difficult conversation (this is true for most people in general, not just parents). When a parent comes to you, your job is to understand their 'I, issue, the outcome' to the point where you can say it back to them. In fact, when you do say it back, people are often grateful for the clarity you have provided and feel like you have really heard them – which goes a long way in building a bridge with them.

What's the real outcome?

Many will come and ask for the solution (e.g. move a child onto another table/out of class because their child is being bullied) but this is not really the outcome, which could be 'I want my child to be happy at school and be able to learn in every lesson'. Often, the stated outcome is not the real one; it's a method they think will lead to the problem going away but, without a clear understanding of the outcome, you can find that trying all the supposed solutions won't get you any nearer to the problem being fixed.

Talk now or talk later?

A parent comes to you. You spend five minutes understanding their 'I, issue, the outcome' and you say it back to them to check it's right. Do you continue the conversation now or later?

If the fix is quick and easy, then go ahead and resolve the issue now using some or all of the STORM structure.

If it's not quick and easy, you have a choice. If you're willing and have the time to talk now, then do.

But if not, or you'd like some time to gather your thoughts or look into something you can say:

'Now I understand the issue, I can see it's really important and we need to give it some time to talk about, which I sadly don't have right now. Would you be able to meet me on...'

This respects the issue, buys you time if you need it, and also allows the issue to be given the time it deserves.

What's more, you will have gathered a lot of useful information whilst uncovering their 'I, issue, the outcome' sentence. Make sure you make a note of this sentence so you can start your meeting with the parent with it and then have a productive discussion around it.

Commons issues when talking to parents

I've seen a lot of difficult conversations with parents and there are three common issues I see:

1. Feelings of inequality with the parent (especially for newer teachers).
2. The parent takes control when you meet.
3. You lock horns with the parent and can't seem to move forward.

1. Feelings of inequality with the parent (especially for newer teachers)

This is really common and typically happens with newer teachers whose students have a parent who is perhaps older than you or at the very least has been a parent for a lot longer than you've been a teacher. You can feel like it's not your place to tell this person what to do, or to ask something of them. I see this a lot.

Feelings of inequality can also arise in situations where the parent might feel, or be perceived by you, as superior, for example because they are highly educated and in a highly esteemed profession (like law, medicine or business).

Top tip

To reduce this, you need a reframe. This is where we look at the situation in a different way (like when you put a new frame on a picture, it can make it look quite different). For example, my suggested reframe is:

You and the parent are not equal because you both bring different skills to the child and, as such, neither one of you is better than the other; you are different, and this is your strength. You are an educational professional and with you comes knowledge from working with, and educating, many children. Your views are as valid, as are the parents'.

If you are feeling inequality with a parent, it's likely you are in the role of a 'Co-operative Child' (wanting to please, not feeling good enough). The above reframe will help you shift into the Adult person you really are when in this situation. Feel free to change the reframe to words and messages that suit you.

2. The repeat offender

This is a parent who will demand time from you, at variable times, to talk about a range of issues. There's often a feeling of relief when they are not at your door and an impending sense of dread when you know they are probably going to appear soon because it's been a while – but you don't know when. Do you have a parent like this; one who will repeatedly expect your time whenever they choose?

I worked with a school where a particular parent would come in, typically once a half term, and have lengthy meetings about various gripes. A school leader would listen and do what they could, but found the parent wouldn't respond to requests to meet about the issues they raised or to talk to the school about their child. It was a very one-way relationship, taking up hours and not moving anything forward. This parent very much controlled when he met with school staff and this approach didn't forge an effective working relationship for the benefit of his child.

Top tip

Take back control. In the example above, the school offered the parent a half termly meeting where the parent could come and speak to them. This removed the dread of him appearing but also let the school structure their time to support him best. Of course, they would speak to him ad hoc about any serious or urgent issue, but if topics he raised weren't serious or urgent, then he would need to raise them at the regular meeting they had offered.

This wasn't about wresting control from the parent, it was about creating parameters to create a supportive structure for both the school and parent to meet.

If you have a parent who expects your time often for issues that are not serious or urgent, consider setting up a regular meeting where these can be aired. Simply knowing when this is going to happen, instead of confrontation being sprung on you, will help you have a better conversation. It's also likely to reduce the amount of complaints brought to the meeting by the parent because, as time passes between meetings, some issues will seem less important.

3. You lock horns with the parent and can't seem to move forward.

This is a classic. You get caught in a dialogue where you lock horns and get stuck there:

Parent: Jean needs to be moved, she's picking on my daughter.

You: They need to be together for some lessons which means they'll be sitting on the same table.

Parent: But they can't, you need to move one of them.

You: They are not together for every lesson, just one or two.

Parent: They can't be together for any! My daughter is being bullied.

This is an impasse and it happens because both people are putting forward what they believe is right.

Top tip

The above interaction isn't a conversation. It's two people stating what they want to happen and not truly listening to one another. To break this, you need to seek to understand the parent more than putting across your own view: What is it Jean is doing? What is it her daughter is doing? Has this happened before? By understanding, you can create a platform to have a dialogue and a dialogue can put you on the path to a good resolution.

Got a question? Ask me at Heads Up TV where, every week, I answer a question about difficult conversations from a teacher or school leader: www.ukheadsup.com/asksonia/

Useful tools when parents come to you

Here are four of the best tools you can use when a parent comes to you with an issue.

Tool 1: Be willing to be convinced

Tool 2: We're on team child

Tool 3: Take a break

Tool 4: When a parent comes to you guns blazing

Tool 1: Be willing to be convinced

When to use: when someone is adamant they are right or they clearly have a different view to you.

How it works: Tell the person you're willing to be convinced about what they say. Tell them what would convince you.

Example:

A parent believes their child should move up a reading level.

You don't think they should.

Explain that you are willing to be convinced and tell them what would convince you, which typically are the reasons why you're not convinced yet, e.g.:

- That you would see the child reading without being asked.
- That they could accurately answer comprehension questions on the text.
- That they could summarise the story back.

If you say that you are willing to be convinced, you need to mean it. As long as sufficient evidence of what you want to see is given, then there should be no reason for you not to shift your position.

Tool 2: We're on team child

When to use: When it feels like you're working against each other and there is a lack of agreement.

How it works: Explicitly state that you're on their child's side. In the midst of an issue, this can be lost, and this is a nice way to move the conversation from a less argumentative or fractious tone to a more helpful one.

Example: There are various ways in which you can do this. Below are a few examples.

- I think we're both so passionate about this because we both want the best for Mo, we just don't agree on what that is right now.
- We're both on your François' team, aren't we? So how do we make sure... (state your outcome)?
- Like you, I'm on Precious' side, I want the best for her. I think the best way to (state your outcome) is if we...

Tool 3: Take a break

When to use: When the conversation feels hard, like it needs some air.

How it works: Sometimes the best thing you can do is give both you and the parent a break.

Example:

You might get you both a glass of water, leaving the room so that they can have a moment without you and you a moment without them. This gives you both valuable breathing space.

It might be that you're not getting very far with the conversation and that you both need some time to think, in which case you can suggest that you meet again at a later date. If you do this, it's best if you can say what you both need to think about before you come back together. The outcome is a good place to start, but also, what is making someone resistant to a change? Or why is this so important for them?

Tool 4: When a parent comes to you guns blazing

When to use: A parent might come to you very emotionally.

How it works: Diffusing the emotions by acknowledging and validating the emotions.

Example:

Parent: I want a word with you! He's been picking on my son again and I'm not having it anymore!!!

You: Picking on your son? I'd be angry about that too; let's go inside and you can tell me about it.

You're not agreeing with them, but you are acknowledging that they have a right to be angry based on what they believe. This quite often surprises parents because they can expect defensiveness, not agreement. The key is you're agreeing with their emotion, not what has happened. As with all of these techniques, you need to exercise your judgement as to when to use them.

You know that parents come to you because they care about their child, as do you. Your job in that situation is to have the most useful conversation you can, and these tools will help you have those difficult conversations more successfully, therefore resolving the issue more quickly.

Section 2: When you want something from a parent

Sometimes you are looking for the parent to do something and so you might initiate the difficult conversation. This section will help you with that kind of conversation. The fundamentals of starting the conversation and structuring it are just as important for these conversations, if not even more so, as for those where the parent comes to you.

When you are initiating the conversation, you need to be clear about your 'I, issue, the outcome' sentence. This is the only part of the conversation you can script. So, plan it, write it down, check with a colleague that it is crystal clear, and that it has all three parts of the sentence. I know this takes time but it's quicker and less stressful than a difficult conversation that goes wrong!

Common examples of when you might initiate the difficult conversation are:

- Special educational needs (SEN) assessment
- Bringing their child to school on time
- Their child always having their PE kit

Useful tools for when you initiate a difficult conversation

Here are three tools I find very useful in moving the conversation forward which address 3 problems:

- 1) When the parent doesn't agree with you.
- 2) When they don't want to agree to the actions you are asking for.
- 3) When they don't take the actions they said they would.

1) When the parent doesn't agree with you.

In difficult conversations, it's common for the parent to disagree with you on what you are asking (if they didn't it would be a lot easier conversation!). A great tool for overcoming this problem is 'chunking up'.

When we chunk up, we move to a higher conceptual level. That sounds quite fancy but it's really quite simple. Let me demonstrate this with an example, the higher conceptual level is underlined.

Maybe a parent is adamantly against their child having an assessment for dyslexia or autism, or a teacher refuses to follow the marking policy. You can find yourself with your metaphorical horns locked and the conversation can't progress.

Parent: "She doesn't need an assessment, there's nothing wrong with her."

You: "Mrs Jones, I think we both want your daughter to do well in school, to be happy and to learn as well as she can. Would you agree?"

Parent: "Well yes, of course I do!"

You: "Great, me too. I'm worried that if we don't have the assessment, we might not know all the ways we can help her do her best and that would mean she wouldn't learn as well as she can because we wouldn't know how to best support her."

You can couple this with another technique called 'Get a yes', where we try to get the person to agree to three things, to show our common aims, and to move them from saying 'no' to a place where they are saying 'yes'. If I carry on with the example above, it might look like this:

Parent: "I just don't think she needs it."

You: "I think we both want the best for your daughter, don't we?"

Parent: "Well yes, of course."

You: "Great, and I think we both want her to do well now and in the future."

Parent: "Yes, she's my daughter, of course I do."

You: “Me too, and we both want to make sure she’s getting the most out of her education.”

Parent: “Mmmmm” (nods in agreement).

You: “I am worried that if we don’t have the assessment, we might not know all the ways we can help her do her best and that would mean she wouldn’t learn as well as she can because we wouldn’t know how to best support her.”

2) When they don’t want to agree to the actions you are asking for.

You might be asking for their child to always have their PE kit, which is a reasonable request, but in the conversation you might feel that they will ‘try’ but not truly commit to making sure this happens.

‘Two-worlds’ is great technique for when someone doesn’t understand the importance and consequence of not taking the action you are asking for.

At the moment, the child is walking towards a future created by them or the adults in their life. In one future, the current, there is a negative consequence and it’s why you’re having the difficult conversation; in the other future, there is a more positive outcome.

Using the PE kit example:

In future one (current, negative future), the child will miss out on PE, which means they don’t get to learn sports and skills that they might want to use in future, they might not have a desire to exercise in future, and this could hamper their health and well-being both now and as an adult.

In future two (possible, positive future), the child takes part in PE lessons, they learn a range of skills, possibly even finding ones they love. They will learn how to keep themselves fit and healthy and could develop a love of exercise which will serve them well as an adult.

Using this technique, you are explicitly showing the choice the parent has and asking them to actively choose which consequence they want. Most people, when faced with such an explicit statement of the consequences, will choose the positive future.

3) When they don't take the actions they said they would.

You've met with the parent. You've come to an agreement about what you and they will do. But they don't do it.

If you've followed the STORM structure, you will have an agreed time to follow up and this will make broaching the subject easier. If you haven't, then you'll need to arrange a time or catch the parent when you see them.

To move this forward, you want to understand what has made it hard for them to take the actions. Do keep focused on the outcome you began the original conversation with (your 'I, issue, the outcome' sentence) and keep coming back to the outcome; the discussion is about how they can meet that outcome. Perhaps the actions were a good idea at the time, but in practice, they are not realistic, in which case, help them think of new ways that will let them make sure Czarina has her PE kit or that Joshua is in on time every day or that Pedro is listened to reading at least three times a week.

In following up, you show that you are committed to the change and that you are truly on their child's team, even if it means having a difficult conversation with mum or dad.

Good luck!

I hope this e-book helps you to have more successful difficult conversations with parents, whether they come to you with something to resolve or you go to them. Getting good at these conversations takes practice, but you're having them anyway so why not try some of the suggestions in here to see if they help.

Try to keep in mind that you both want the best for their child even if you disagree on what that is. That is essentially the problem your difficult conversations will solve. It is my hope that this e-book enables you to solve these with less stress and more success. Good luck!

Successful difficult conversations training - How we help you

If you're wondering how we can help you and your team master successful difficult conversations then the good news is there are several ways:

- Free resources to help make your difficult conversations successful.
- Ask me a question on our weekly TV show.
- Books.
- Online training.
- In-house training.

Free resources

We have an abundance of free resources on our website for you to use and we will continually offer more so keep checking the website for new resources.

The best way to keep up with our new material is to sign up to our monthly newsletter, which is packed full of useful content for you and always has a 'two-minute top tip' to help you achieve more successful difficult conversations.

You can sign up for the monthly newsletter at: www.ukheadsup.com/heads-monthly-newsletter/

We always respect your data, we don't spam and we won't share your details.

Ask me a question

Do you have a question about a difficult conversation you need to have or difficult conversations in general? Send your question to me and I'll answer it on our weekly 'Heads Up TV' show, ask me at:

www.ukheadsup.com/ask-sonia And don't worry, it's confidential.

Books

Buy this book for anyone in your team you think could do with developing their successful difficult conversation skills. You can buy it at:

<http://www.johncattbookshop.com/> or <http://bit.ly/2zigL3P>

If you're buying 10 or more copies, contact John Catt for bulk buy discounts via imorphew@johncatt.com

Online training

I have created an online training programme to develop your team's skills in successful difficult conversations. This empowering training is available to buy just once a year for a limited time.

It comprises five modules of video training where I guide you through the knowledge and skills you need to master successful difficult conversations. They are bite-size so you can fit them into your busy schedule.

Online training is a cost-effective and time-effective way to train.

If you'd like to know when the next training is available, sign up for notifications here:

www.ukheadsup.com/successful-difficult-conversations-online-training/

In-house training

We will come to your school and train your team on how to have successful difficult conversations. This training is incredibly effective because we train you in the skills and coach your team on the specific areas *they* need to improve. It is 100% recommend by hundreds of school leaders.

We have three levels of training:

1. Core Skills for Successful Difficult Conversations.
2. Confidence in Difficult Conversations.
3. Versatility in Difficult Conversations.

You can find out more and download our full brochure at:

www.ukheadsup.com/successful-difficult-conversations-programme/

Hear from schools we have trained at: <http://bit.ly/2wAdbNO>

And you can book a complimentary discovery session where we will explore how the training could work in your context by looking at:

1. Where you and your team currently are in relation to holding successful difficult conversations
2. A plan, tailored to your school, to tackle difficult conversations consistently, effectively and kindly

You can book your discovery session at: www.ukheadsup.com/discovery-session-sdc/

Contact us

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Journey to Outstanding Programme

A school leadership team programme designed to let you create the high-performing, outstanding school you have always dreamt of leading.



Strategy 1 - Vision: create your compelling value based vision, so your team is truly on-board



Strategy 2 - Healthy Conflict: create great performance and behaviour in your team, through successful difficult conversations



Strategy 3 - Growth: create excellence by developing your whole team's skills to deliver an exceptional quality of education

Successful Difficult Conversations Programme

A school leadership team programme to learn the skills and have the confidence to tackle those tricky conversations successfully.



Part 1 - The core skills of having successful difficult conversations



Part 2 - Flex your leadership style for quick improvements



Part 3 - Keep within the parameters of the law



Part 4 - Get to the point quickly and kindly



Part 5 - Tools and techniques to make all difficult conversations successful

Personal Coaching Programme

Individual coaching is a fantastic way to support school leaders maximise their potential and their impact on your school and children.

For a no-obligation meeting to find out more about any of our programmes go to www.ukheadsup.com or email us at info@ukheadsup.com or call 07973 769 678