

Diplomatic negotiation

Meetings with teachers can instill fear in the most mature of grown-ups. Here **Karen Doherty** and **Georgia Coleridge** smooth the path to happy two-way conversations

If your child is having trouble with their teacher, it can be a big problem. They probably spend more waking hours with the teacher than with you, and if they don't get on, it can have a big impact on how well they do at school.

If the problem is small, arranging to speak to the teacher is straightforward. However, if you feel the teacher is picking on your child, you might be surprised by the strength of your reaction. One parent says: *"My son was in tears. His teacher said he was a baby because he couldn't tie his shoelaces. I felt like shaking her."*

Some parents feel intimidated, as if they are the ones being criticised: *"The meeting was about my daughter's sloppy attitude, but I felt like I was the one being told off. It was hard getting the right words out. I'm sure she thinks I'm a terrible mother."*

Other parents feel out of their depth: *"I don't want to go in and hear he's done this, he's done that. What am I supposed to do about it?"*

If you're meeting the teacher, the last thing you want to do is make the relationship between your child and the teacher worse.

Here are six ways to make the meeting friendly and productive

1. PAUSE If you're feeling confrontational, put off the meeting until you can string a rational sentence together. Then, go in with the attitude that you are both on the same side. If you suspect you'll get emotional, make a list of what you want to talk about.

2. PRAISE Open the discussion on a friendly note with something you genuinely appreciate. Compliment her on the way she has displayed the class art work on the wall, or thank her for giving up her time to meet you. If you go in with a positive attitude, the meeting is more likely to go well.

Georgia Coleridge (left) and Karen Doherty offer advice on managing PTA meetings



3. TUNE IN Try to see the situation from the teacher's point of view. Instead of: *"Why do you keep picking on my child?"* Try: *"I'm sorry to hear that Adam's been bothering you."* Then brace yourself for a few nasty surprises about your child's behaviour and let the teacher talk. You need to know what's really going on, so you can help your child. By letting the teacher go first and unload some of their frustration, they're more likely to listen to you.

4. GIVE INFORMATION Teachers aren't mind-readers. They may not know your child is mildly dyslexic or that their rabbit just died. With a little background information, the teacher can be more sympathetic. *"Matilda might not show it, but underneath she's very sensitive. She was in tears last night after being told off."* *"Tim finds it hard to stand up to his friends. He didn't know how to say 'No' to the others without losing face."* Sometimes a simple misunderstanding can

give the teacher the impression that your child is naughty. The teacher needs to know what's going on so the problem can be cleared up.

5. ASK FOR IDEAS After you've both had your say, ask for solutions:

"I'd love your advice on how we can sort this out." Then make your own suggestions: *"When you mark her prep, perhaps you could point out a couple of things she's done right? I think it would make her feel better."*

6. MAKE A PLAN OF ACTION

Then agree a way forward.

"Thanks for being gentle with her. Because we're moving house, it's not easy for her at the moment." Summarise your conversation: *"Great. So you'll check everything's in his homework diary, and I'll check the worksheets come home."*

For more useful tips see *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge (£12.99, Transworld) and www.karenandgeorgia.com.