

Handling Difficult People

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With an average middle-class income and his wife not working, it takes a lot of commitment and a real sacrifice for Ralph Jones* to send his three children to an Adventist school. He believes in Christian education. But every now and then, Ralph gets on the phone and shares a piece of his mind with the principal. "The school is not following the blueprint," he says. "I don't see much difference between this church school and the one down the road." Call it the philosophical syndrome.

Mary Smith* is a single mother. She loves her 12-year-old son dearly. She, too, sacrifices a lot in sending him to an Adventist school. The boy had been doing rather well until this year. "Something's the matter," she complains to the principal. "His sixth-grade teacher is not as good as other teachers he has had before. She does not motivate the students. She probably doesn't know how to handle a boy on the threshold of his teen years. Can you do something about the teacher, please?" Call it the protectionist syndrome.

Jerry Berger* no longer has any children in school, but his wealth allows him to continue to be a good supporter of the school. Now and then, however, he expresses regret that he no longer is a member of the school board, and wonders why the board, largely made up of new members, fails to give proper direction to the school administration. "The school is going down the drain," he wails to anyone he meets. Call it the frustration syndrome.

As teachers or school administrators, how do we deal with difficult parents or patrons?

Often, the difficulties may arise from real or imagined perceptions about the school's basic philosophy and administration or the performance of a teacher. Three basic steps may help:

Listen to the complaint. "Lend an ear and solve a problem," says an old Indian proverb. Ralph Jones may be angry or disappointed. But by inviting him in for a chat, seeking his opinion about the "blueprint," and assuring him that you will pay close attention to his ideas, he will leave your office quite flattered, despite the fact that he himself does not know what the blueprint is.

Give parents the attention they deserve. Parents come in different modes—supportive, critical, indifferent, passive—but they are the last to concede that their children may be the cause of any problem. Parents tend to defend their children and to believe the stories they tell. So the protectionist syndrome comes naturally to parents. In the process, they do not hesitate to criticize the school or the teacher. Show them you genuinely care, and seek professional assistance so that their problems can be addressed.

Keep open the lines of communication. Effective and positive communication is an essential tool in success for the best of times. It is even more so when you are facing difficulties. An Adventist school needs all the friends it can get: conference leaders, parents, pastors and church members, board members and ex-board members, and the public. The more they know about the mission, direction, purpose, and the functioning of the school, the more they will be your allies.—**John M. Fowler.**

* Not their real names.

For additional suggestions on dealing with difficult parents, see Judy Shull's article on page 38.