

Parents who are defensive of their child can be tricky to manage. Dealing with defensive reactions is difficult and often stressful. When people are defensive, they are often at their worst. They quickly become adversarial, irrational, hostile and angry.

Through making subtle adjustments to our approach by anticipating and endeavoring to avoid a defensive reaction before it happens, can help manage tricky situations. According to Richard Carlson, author of *“Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff”*, having the wisdom to anticipate defensive reactions allows you to avoid a great deal of conflict in the first place by not pushing certain buttons in people and by not engaging in behaviour that is likely to set them off. Respond in a composed manner, sticking to the facts and avoid personalising the situation. The payoff to you is that each conflict that you prevent is one less hassle and source of stress you have to deal with. This saves you time, energy, aggravation and stress.

To reduce defensiveness avoid backing a tricky parent into a corner.

- Don’t put tricky parents on the spot, especially in front of others
- Don’t leave parents an abrupt voice mail
- Avoid threatening them in any way
- Provide an opportunity for them to “save face”

Most people don’t listen with the intent to understand.

Whilst some justify that communicating via email creates a ‘trail’ of evidence, the tone of an email can be misinterpreted. I’d certainly avoid sending an email when you are feeling angry. It will almost certainly come back to hurt you.

Most people listen with the intent to reply.

Stay calm and professional and don’t interrupt: They have probably rehearsed their whole complaint in their head. They are not ready to change from speaking to listening until they have said whatever they have prepared.

Use Active Listening: When a parent is expressing their concerns or complaints, practice active listening. Give them your full attention, make eye contact and nod to show that you understand. Repeat back what they’ve said to ensure you’ve understood correctly. This can help parents feel heard and validated, reducing defensiveness.

Show Empathy: Acknowledge their feelings and validate their perspective. When it is your turn to talk, start with something you can agree on. You don’t have to agree with what they said. For example you could agree it’s good that the two of you are talking. Just by using the words “I agree”, prevents them automatically putting their defenses up.

Tell them what you have learnt: After listening to them and telling them that you agree, tell them something that you have learnt from listening to them. For example, you could say, “After listening, I have learnt that this topic is really important to them.” Hearing the phrase, “I have learnt...” helps them feel understood. This communicates that you are open to working together with them. Avoid becoming defensive as this is likely to provoke them to become defensive and heighten their response.

That’s helpful to know – try using the phrase “That’s helpful to know!” Telling them that they have been helpful makes them feel more invested in working with you.

Clarify Misunderstandings: Take the time to clarify any misconceptions and provide additional information or context as needed. Clearing up misunderstandings can often alleviate tensions and prevent defensiveness.

Focus on Solutions: Shift the conversation from dwelling on the problem to focusing on finding solutions. Collaborate with the parent to brainstorm possible ways to address the issue at hand.

Key points

Avoid provoking a defensive response

Be wary of voice mails and email

Stay calm and professional and don’t interrupt

Give your full attention

Show empathy

Start with something you agree on

Tell them what you have learnt from listening

Clarify any misunderstanding

Focus on solutions

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