

# Family-School Collaboration and PBS

**Applications at the  
School-wide Level**

**Part 2: Communication Strategies**

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©Kathleen Minke



Extremists think "communication"  
means agreeing with them.

Leo Rosten

The most important thing in  
communication is to hear what  
isn't being said.

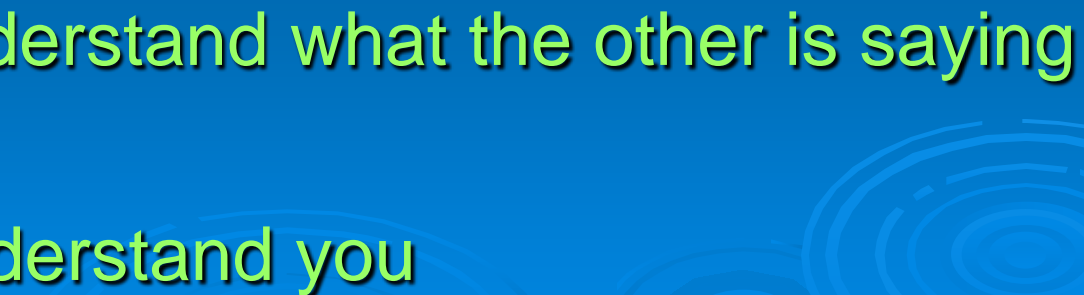
Peter Drucker



# Talking to Families

## Communication Strategies/Skills

By using good communication strategies,  
you can increase the chances that:

- you understand what the other is saying
  - they understand you
- 



# Potential Miscommunications

Teacher says:

∅ *“He doesn’t always do his homework.”*

∅ *“Her pre-reading skills are a bit low.”*

∅ *“He really loves to watch television,  
doesn’t he?”*





# Skill #1

## Attend to nonverbal communication

- Ø Increase awareness of nonverbal communications (yours & theirs)
- Ø Model the use of good attending skills for others
  - Look
  - Lean
  - Encourage



# Skill #1

## Attend to nonverbal communication

- Ø Acknowledge what you observe- be open and candid.

*“You seem a little uncomfortable. Is there something I can do about that?”*

- Ø Consider cultural differences

*“I’m worried that I might be talking too fast. Let’s back up a minute and make sure we’re on the same page.”*



# Skill #2

Listen to understand:  
reflect/clarify/empathize

## Ø **An empathic response:**

- **Helps the other feel heard and understood**
- **Usually involves both content and affect**
- **NEVER involves judgment**
- **Does not introduce the speaker's point of view**



## Skill #2

Listen to understand:  
reflect/empathize/clarify

### Ø **Be quiet & listen!**

- **Sounds easy but...** automatic thought processes may interfere:

#### **Thought #1:**

*“How does the information  
being offered relate to my life?”*





## Skill #2

Listen to understand:  
reflect/empathize/clarify

### ⊘ **Be quiet & listen!**

- **Sounds easy but...** automatic thought processes may interfere:

#### **Thought #2:**

*“How would I go about solving this problem?”*



## Skill #2

Listen to understand:  
reflect/empathize/clarify

Ø **Seek only to understand; do not offer your opinion**

- Now is not the time to agree or disagree.
- Now is the time to validate the speaker and clarify your interpretation of the message.



# Skill #2

Listen to understand:  
reflect/empathize/clarify

**An empathic response accomplishes two goals:**

1. It helps the speaker feel understood.
2. It keeps the speaker talking.



# Guidelines for creating empathic responses

- u Ask yourself, *“What does this person need me to understand?”*
- u Avoid making judgments.
- u Try to reflect just the “core message”; don’t list everything the other just said.
- u Keep your interpretation flexible and tentative.
- u Keep your response short.
- u Eliminate *“Why?”*
- u Monitor *“I.”*
- u Invite the person to continue talking



# Empathy practice scenario

*“I am having a terrible day. My 4 yr old got into the pantry this morning before I got up and tried to make breakfast in the middle of our newly carpeted living room- white carpet! He had blueberries, maple syrup, peanut butter and flour.*

*He said he was trying to make pancakes. I wanted to beat him within an inch of his life and send him to his bedroom until he is 18. But I just sat down and cried!”*



# 10 ways to ignore an emotion/message

- Ø No response
- Ø A question
- Ø A cliché
- Ø Assertive interpretation
- Ø Opinion
- Ø Advice
- Ø Minimize/patronize
- Ø Pretend to understand
- Ø Sympathy/Agreement
- Ø Parrot back

*What do you think.....?*

*Boys will be boys!*

*I don't think you understand.*

*I think you will be fine.*

*You should try.....*

*That's something kids do.*

*I know exactly what you mean!*

*I'm so sorry that happened.*







## Skill#2

Listen to understand: reflect/empathize/clarify

### Ø Create an empathic response:

Think carefully about the thoughts and feelings the individual just stated or implied.

- Try to put yourself in their shoes in order to understand the core message.
- Make a brief verbal statement communicating what you heard.
- Check to see if you are correct.



# Empathy Practice

**Mom (speaking quickly and in great distress):**

*My son is driving me crazy. At ten years old you would think he could be responsible for himself at least a little bit! He can't accomplish a single thing unless I'm standing right there, nagging him all the way through.*

*Homework is a nightmare! I feel like I'm the one with homework and we struggle for at least two hours before it is done. This can't go on. He's not learning and I'm out of patience!*

*How can I help him?"*






# Empathy Practice Responses

Ø *“It sounds like you’re very frustrated that he can’t be more independent completing his jobs and you sound worried that what you’re doing now isn’t helping either one of you. Is that close?”*

OR

Ø *“Parenting Johnny sounds like a real challenge and you’ve been working really hard to meet that challenge. But now it seems you feel you’re at a roadblock and you’re looking for new ideas.” [Questioning look]*



# Empathy Practice

## Mother's Responses

- Ø *“Yes, that’s it exactly. I could handle everything else if I got him on the right track with homework.”*

[This would lead to more exploration of homework and what she is already doing.]

OR

- Ø *“Yes, that’s it exactly. I’ve been feeling so helpless and overwhelmed since Johnny’s father has been in the hospital for these past two months.”*

[This will lead to an entirely different discussion.]



## Parent:

*“That bus driver should be fired! She drives way too fast and this morning she almost ran over my dog. Someone is going to get hurt.”*

## Educator- Assertive Opinion Response:

*“Oh, I’m sure it was just an isolated incident. Mrs. Smith has always been very responsible.”*





Parent:

*“That bus driver should be fired! She drives way too fast and this morning she almost ran over my dog. Someone is going to get hurt.”*

Educator - Empathic Response:

*“I can see you are angry about this but also worried that something might happen to a child. Tell me more about what happened.”*





## Parent:

*"I was so thrilled with the science unit you did on bees. Sally couldn't talk about anything else for weeks. She has read three books on beekeeping and she's absolutely desperate to see real bee hives. I haven't seen her so excited about learning since she started school!"*

## Educator:

### Minimizing response:

*"Thank you, all the children seem to like that unit."*

### Question response:

*"Thank you, do you think all of our units are challenging and exciting?"*





## Parent:

*"I was so thrilled with the science unit you did on bees. Sally couldn't talk about anything else for weeks. She has read three books on beekeeping and she's absolutely desperate to see real bee hives. I haven't seen her so excited about learning since she started school!"*

## Educator - Empathic response:

*"It sounds like Sally's excitement has been contagious and you're excited about her learning too."*

**PARENT:** *Jimmy's reading is just so slow. His brother was reading all kinds of science books at this same age. Jimmy won't read anything but comic books and I don't see how that will help him.*

## **MINIMIZING RESPONSE:**

*"I understand, but children do develop differently. I'm sure Jimmy will catch up."*

The background of the slide is a solid blue color. In the lower right quadrant, there are several faint, concentric circles that resemble ripples in water, creating a decorative pattern.

**PARENT:** *Jimmy's reading is just so slow. His brother was reading all kinds of science books at this same age. Jimmy won't read anything but comic books and I don't see how that will help him.*

**Empathic response:**

*"You are worried because your two sons are so different and it sounds like you're not sure what to do to help Jimmy succeed."*





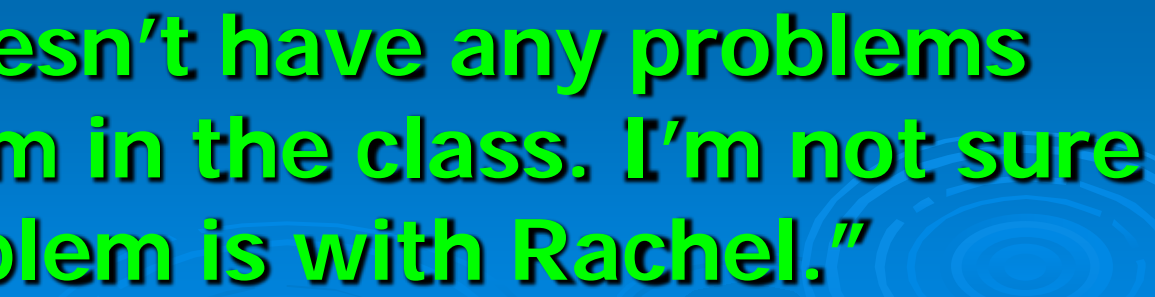
**Art teacher to kindergarten teacher:**

**“Rachel is very aggressive during art class. She hits, kicks, bites, and pushes. The other children are afraid of her! Why aren’t you teaching her to control herself?”**

**Defensive response**

**Kindergarten teacher:**

**“She doesn’t have any problems when I’m in the class. I’m not sure the problem is with Rachel.”**





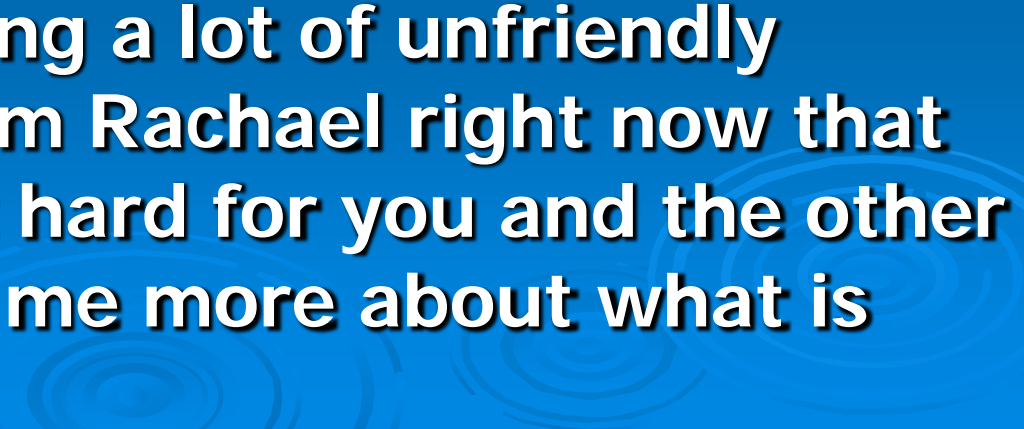
**Art teacher:**

**“Rachel is very aggressive during art class. She hits, kicks, bites, and pushes. The other children are afraid of her! Why aren’t you teaching her to control herself?”**

**Empathic Response**

**Kindergarten teacher:**

**“You are seeing a lot of unfriendly behaviors from Rachael right now that are making it hard for you and the other children. Tell me more about what is happening.”**



# Activity 3: Empathic Responding Practice

- Ø Split into **groups of four**. Each group will need a “speaker” and a “listener.” Remaining two group members are observers.
- Ø The **speaker** should present a worry or concern from his/her own experience. Be brief.
- Ø The **listener** should provide an empathic response **ONLY**. No questions are allowed.
- Ø Try to keep the conversation going for several “turns” using **ONLY empathic responses**.
- Ø **Observers** should stop the interaction if any responses are given that are not empathic (including questions, comments, etc.)



# Skill #3

## Model the collaborative role

### ⊘ Resist the role of “expert”

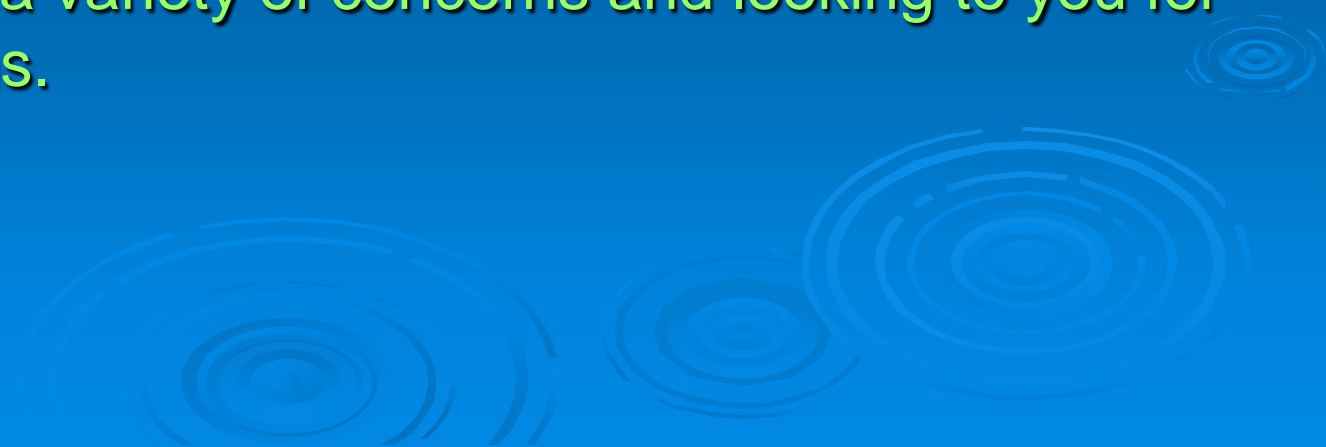
Participants may seek your expertise...

**...directly**

*“How should I help Johnny with his homework?”*

**...indirectly**

by listing a variety of concerns and looking to you for solutions.





# Skill #3

## Model the collaborative role

### Ø Conversation Stoppers to avoid

#### 1. labeling –

- Negative adjectives- e.g., *lazy, unmotivated*
  - . Describe actual behavior instead
- Diagnoses as explanations- e.g., *ADHD, LD*
  - . Do Not make child a diagnosis; use person-first language



# Skill #3

## Model the collaborative role

### Ø Conversation Stoppers to avoid

2. **jargon**- eliminate the “ABCs of Education”

example: *“The MDT discussed the IEP and decided that the LRE would be an SCC for the child who is SED.”*

3. **laundry lists**- telling every problem all at once

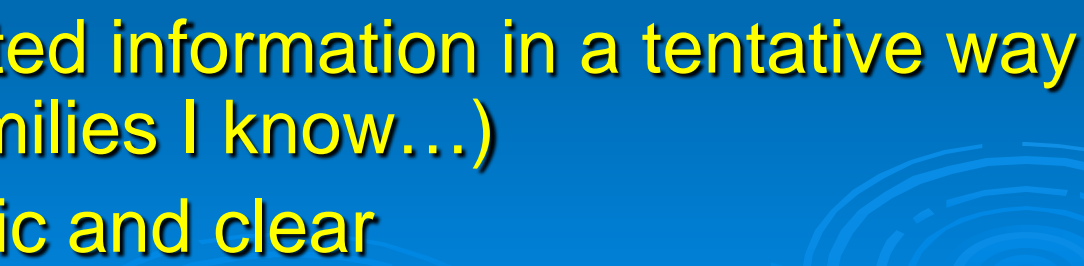




# Skill #3

## Model the collaborative role

### Strategies to use

- u Validate others' feelings & views through empathic responding
  - u Seek related information
    - ü More details on the problem
    - ü Past solution attempts and their effectiveness
    - ü Ideas considered but not yet tried
  - u Give related information in a tentative way (Some families I know...)
  - u Be specific and clear
- 



# Skill #3

## Model the collaborative role

First commandment of collaboration-

**Ask before you answer!!!**

- § *Solicit the other participants' ideas **before** offering your expertise.*
- § *Do this even when you have valuable suggestions.*

**Why?** *A solution may emerge from the group, optimizing chances for mutual investment in change.*





# “PRAY” for Collaboration

Pause

Reflect & elicit more information

Ask others' opinions, previous solutions, etc.

You offer your view and any necessary supporting information





# Skill #3

## Model the collaborative role

### ✗ Adopt the “Ambassador” Perspective

- maintain an open mind
- ask questions and listen carefully
- assume others know more than you
- expect and respect differences
- help others pursue their own goals
- always curious, often confused

• Adapted from Murphy and Duncan (1997)



# **Skill #3**

## **Model the collaborative role**

### **Question Starters from the Ambassador's Perspective**

- **I'm wondering if....**
- **Could it be....**
- **Is it possible that....**
- **Help me understand how....**
- **Let me make sure I understand...**



# Skill #4

## Search for Strengths/Positive Qualities

Ø As you are listening try to identify the speaker's strengths and ask yourself:

- *What do I hear that reflects concern, effort, and successes?*
- *What are the ways in which parents are supporting their child?*
- *What are the ways that parents have risen above life's circumstances to help their child?*



# Skill #4

## Search for Strengths/Positive Qualities

Ø As you are talking:

- emphasize the positive

Focus on what the student has learned; not what they have NOT learned

- highlight parent's contributions to the child's success & competence.

# Search for strength examples

- Ø A mother describes how hard it is to help with homework (although she does it periodically) because she works nights.

**AVOID:** making suggestions

**INSTEAD:** comment on the efforts she has made already:

*“It sounds like it is very difficult for you to juggle all of your responsibilities. In spite of that you have been able to help Johnny’s with his spelling words. It really shows.”*



# Search for strengths examples

- Ø In a school meeting with a student (Ellen) and her mother, you want to comment on Ellen's recent improvements in behaving respectfully with adults at school.
- Ø How can you acknowledge both Ellen's and her mother's contributions to her success?

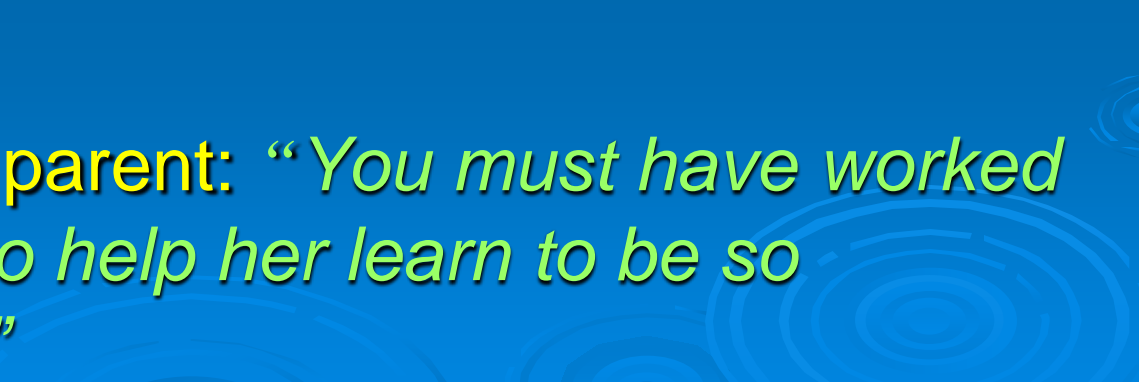




# Search for strength examples

Instead of: “*Ellie is very respectful.*”

Try:

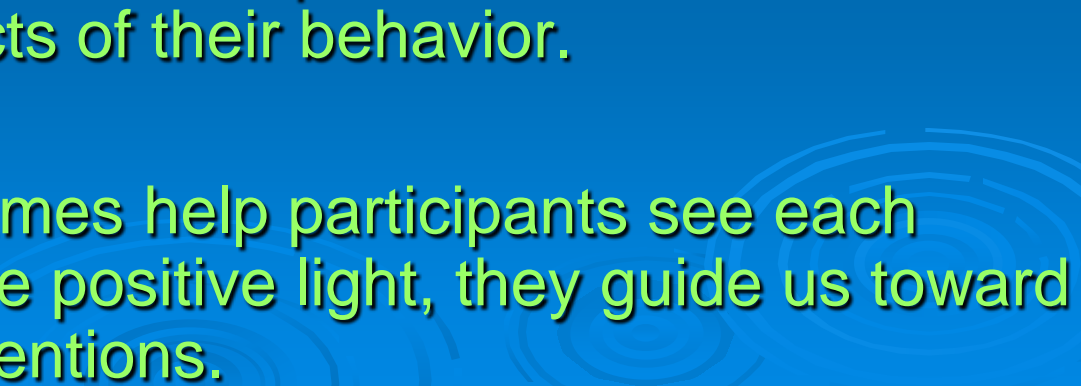
- **Looking at Ellie:** “*One of the things I really appreciate about you is how polite you are to me and other adults. That’s not always an easy thing to remember to do!*”
  - **Looking at parent:** “*You must have worked very hard to help her learn to be so respectful.*”
- 





## Skill #5 Reframing

**Reframing** = reconstructing a negative statement or belief to have some positive meaning

- For a reframe to be effective, you must believe it! Reframes emerge from commitment to the CORE beliefs. All are doing the best that they can.
  - People will be more cooperative if we focus on the positive aspects of their behavior.
  - Because reframes help participants see each other in a more positive light, they guide us toward positive interventions.
- 



# Reframing Example

Amy is 16 and engaging in many “*acting out*” behaviors. She violates curfew and is hanging out with the “*wrong*” crowd.

She sees her mother as controlling and complains vigorously about her father monitoring her behavior, which she frames as “*spying*” on her.

Mom feels helpless; dad feels angry



# Example continued

Mom says

*"I tell Amy to behave, but she won't."*

## Ø Goal for reframe

Emphasize the positive quality of caring rather than the **helplessness** of mom.

## Ø Possible reframe

*"You must care a lot about Amy to try so hard to get her to do what is best for her"*





# Example continued

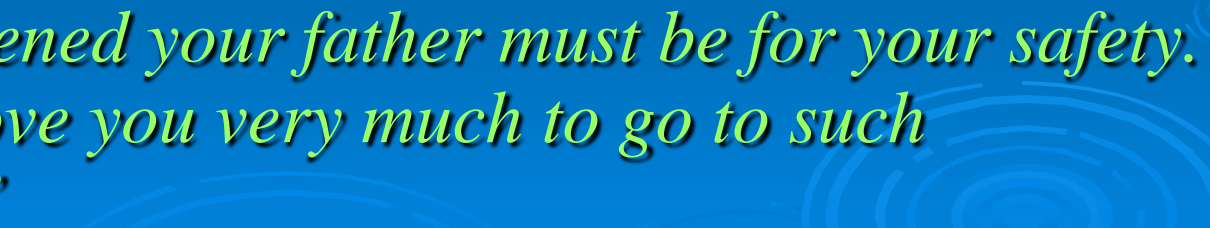
Amy complains that  
her father is “*spying on her*”.

## Ø Goal for reframe:

Stress the positive quality of caring

## Ø Possible reframe for Amy:

*“How frightened your father must be for your safety.  
He must love you very much to go to such  
extremes.”*






## Example #2

A single mother has lost her job. She is trying to keep her five children (ages 3-7) together as a family.

Although the oldest especially has missed a lot of school, mom has managed to keep the family afloat. She is explaining the family's situation to you.





# Example #2 continued

She finishes by saying:

*"We were living in one room without heat or hot water for months!"*

## Ø Goal for reframe?

stress the management skills it must take to survive such adversity.

## Ø Reframe

*"You've really managed to conquer a lot of adversity and still care for your children! That's remarkable."*





# Activity 4: Reframing Practice

<u><b>DESCRIPTOR</b></u>	<u><b>POSSIBLE REFRAME</b></u>
<b>1. Controlling</b>	
<b>2. Defiant/uncooperative</b>	
<b>3. Argumentative</b>	
<b>4. Immature</b>	
<b>5. Impulsive/hyperactive</b>	
<b>6. Withdrawn</b>	
<b>7. Passive</b>	
<b>8. manipulative</b>	
<b>9. Rigid</b>	

Adapted from Murphy (1997)

# Activity 4: Reframing Practice

<u><b>DESCRIPTOR</b></u>	<u><b>POSSIBLE REFRAME</b></u>
<b>Controlling</b>	Likes structure/direction
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<b>Passive</b>	accepting, laid-back
<b>manipulative</b>	convincing
<b>Rigid</b>	committed to a plan



## Skill #6 Delivering/Receiving Difficult Messages

- ✗ A main source of educator's trepidation about working with parents is the need to both give and receive information about problems.
- ✗ Educator's worry about being blamed for problems.
- ✗ Natural reaction of defensiveness can shut down communication

# Skill #6: Delivering Difficult Messages

## Ø *Limit:*

Choose no more than one or two negative pieces of information to be delivered. (*Think about the most important pieces of information the parent needs from the school.*)”

## ➤ **Be calm and “wondering” in your presentation.**

Wondering, tentativeness, willingness to be wrong,




## ➤ ***Be clear and specific.* Cite observable behaviors instead of judgments.**

“Johnny is unmotivated” vs. “Johnny seems to have a difficulty time getting started on his seat work—especially if it is math”





# Skill #6: Delivering Difficult Messages

- ✗ Be brief and ask for reaction after a couple of sentences.
    - Do not support your positions with a lot of examples
  - ✗ Convey confidence (optimism) the problem can be solved.
    - Not me vs. you
    - But you and me vs. the problem
- 
- 
- 



## Skill #6: Delivering Difficult Messages

- Ø Several of your students comes to talk to you about the field hockey team. They tell you that the coach, Ms. Howell, has been belittling, crude, and downright mean to the team. She yells and calls them fat and lazy.
- Ø Your students want to just quit the team, but they agree that it is ok for you to talk to the coach about the problem. You are meeting with the coach.



## Skill #6: Delivering Difficult Messages

⊘ Thank you for meeting with me, Ms. Howell. I'm worried because a number of students have come to talk to me about the field hockey team. They said that they feel disrespected and discouraged. I know how hard you are working to help them improve their game, but it seems like your message is getting lost. Can you tell me what you think is happening?



# Skill #6 Delivering/Receiving Difficult Messages

## Ø Receiving

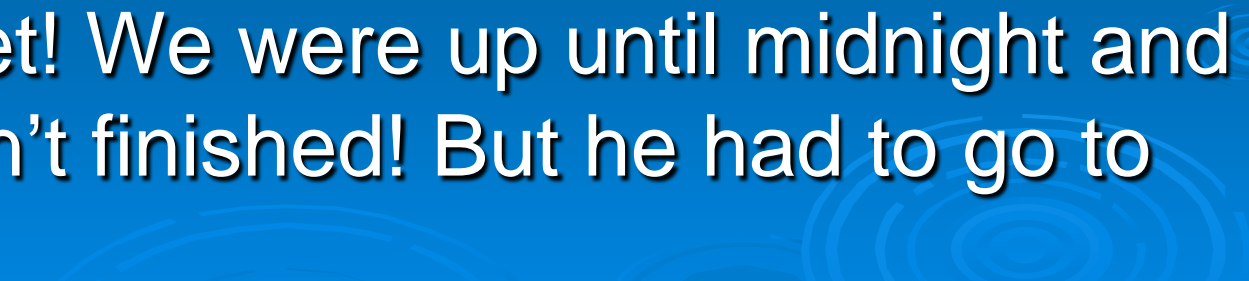
- **Listen:** Actively listen & try to fully understand the concern  
Be quiet!
- **Understand:** Try to understand other person's goal.  
Often just being heard will be enough.
- **Clarify:** Reflect both content and emotion.  
Validate concerns by showing you heard their message.
- **Do NOT defend yourself**  
Concentrate on listening and understanding.  
Give yourself time to think.  
**STOP** if you find yourself becoming angry.



# An Angry Parent

“I need to talk to you about the bad grade you gave Fred on his science paper. It is ridiculous to expect a 4<sup>th</sup> grader to complete such a huge assignment in such a short time. One day!

And we had to go to the library and search on the internet! We were up until midnight and it still wasn't finished! But he had to go to bed!”





# An Angry Parent Continued...

Teacher:

*I'm so glad you came in to talk about this.*

[Optimism]

*You're angry because the assignment was unfair and Fred did poorly. Is that right?*

[Empathic response]





# An Angry Parent Continued...

**Parent:** *Yes and I want to know what you are going to do about it.*

**Teacher:** *It makes sense that you are angry about an assignment that seemed unfair.*

**[Validation]**

*There is one thing I'd like to understand. You said Fred told you that I gave the assignment with only one day to finish it?*

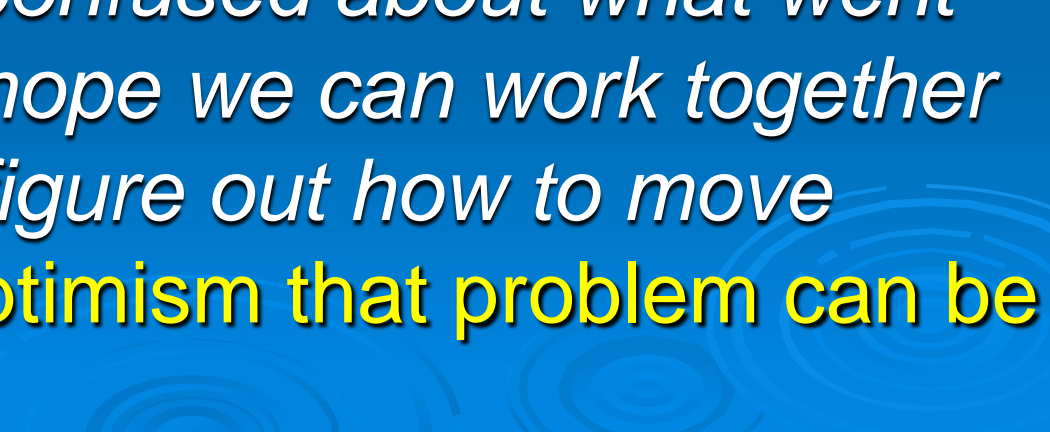
**[Non-defensive restatement]**



# An Angry Parent Continued...

**Teacher:** *I'm not sure what happened, but the students had all of this semester to work on this project. I checked with the students each Monday and Fred said that his project was coming along fine. [Brief, tentative, clear description from your point of view]*


*So, I'm a little confused about what went wrong, but I hope we can work together with Fred to figure out how to move forward. [Optimism that problem can be solved]*





# **An angry practitioner...**


**I simply can no longer tolerate having Amanda in my class. She's rude, loud, and keeps everyone else from learning. I keep trying to find a way to connect with her but she pushes me away at every turn. Something has got to change!**






## **An angry practitioner...**

**Thank you for telling me about this. I know Amanda's behaviors can be very frustrating! I appreciate that you are still trying to figure out how to help her be more successful in your class. Tell me more about what is happening in class.**





Things that are done, it is  
needless to speak about...things  
that are past, it is needless to  
blame.

Confucius

To err is human, to blame the  
next guy even more so.

Unknown



# Skill #7

## *Blocking Blame*



- Ø **Validate** each person's position
- Ø **Refocus** the discussion on solutions
- Ø **Reframe** negative attributions
- Ø **Probe** for details using reframes
- Ø **Summarize** to convey understanding of problem
- Ø **Stop** the process and instruct participants, then **move the discussion FORWARD.**

- Adapted from Weiss, H.M.; Ackerman Institute for the Family





# Blocking Blame

Parents complain to you about their son's behavior. Each night when they attempt to help him with his reading and homework, he constantly interrupts with questions and resists their efforts to help.

*“Bob is so rigid and won't let us help him. He is SO stubborn! Of course, his teacher is stubborn, too, and that makes things worse!”*





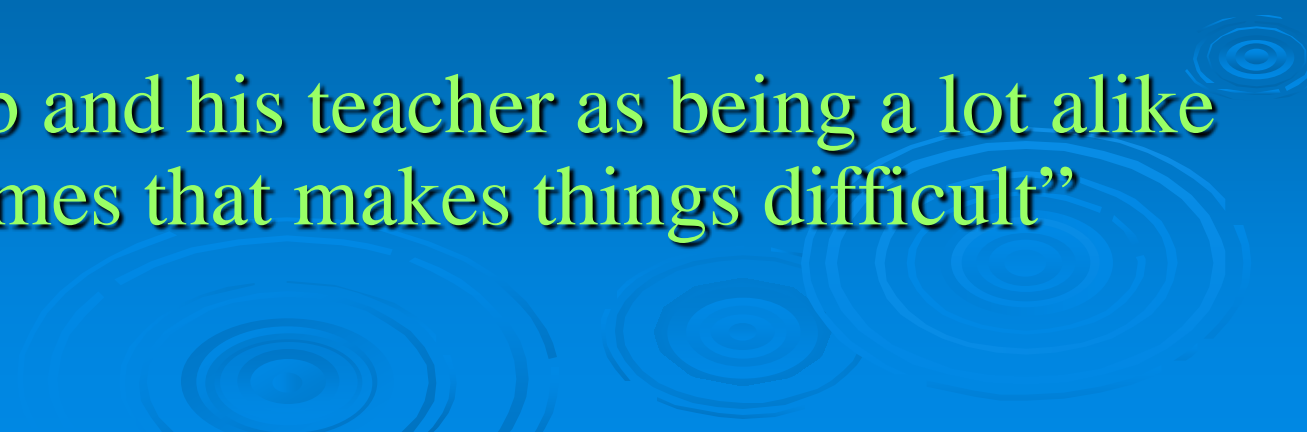
# Blocking Blame

Ø **Validate** each person's position by recognizing each point of view

“Clearly you’ve been working very hard on this problem.” Or

“I can see where his constant questioning would distract you from your other responsibilities.”  
Or

“You see Bob and his teacher as being a lot alike and sometimes that makes things difficult”





# Blocking Blame

- Ø **Validate** each person's position by recognizing each point of view
  - Sometimes can include agreeing with the person

“It certainly makes sense that you find this frustrating! How have you managed to keep on trying?”

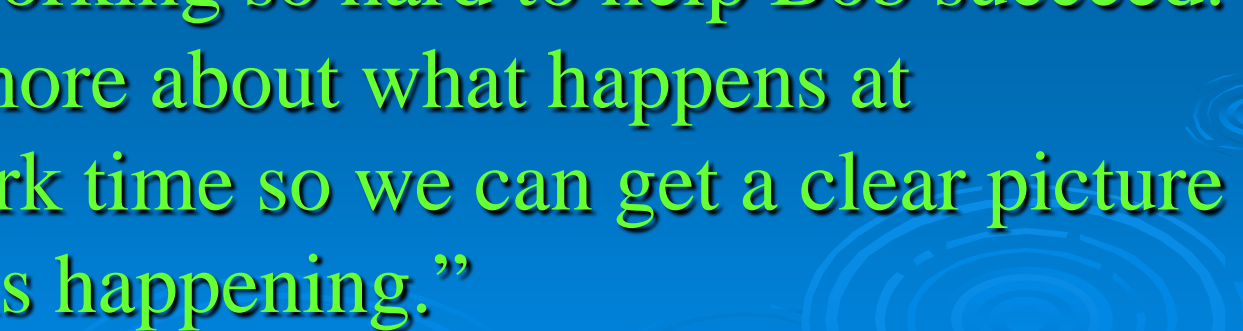




# Blocking Blame

- Ø **Refocus** the discussion on solutions
  - Move away from blaming and toward more relevant areas
  - Includes seeking more details (can use “Ambassador” probes)

“You’re working so hard to help Bob succeed. Tell us more about what happens at homework time so we can get a clear picture of what is happening.”



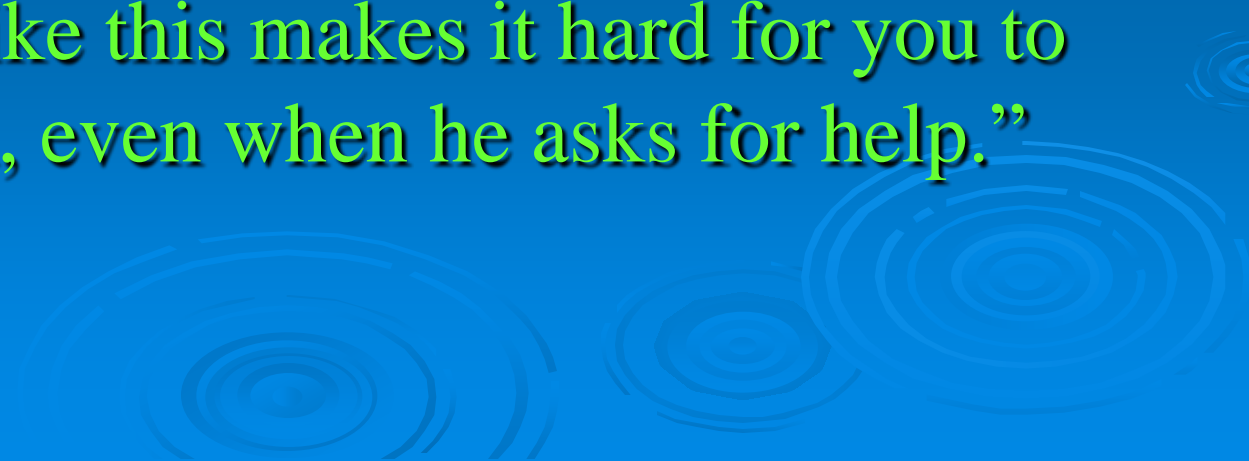


# Blocking Blame

## Ø **Reframe** negative attributions

- Provide an alternative point of view about a set of facts that gives the facts a more positive meaning

“Bob is strong-willed and really dedicated to doing things the way he thinks is right. It sounds like this makes it hard for you to help him, even when he asks for help.”






# Blocking Blame

Ø **Probe** for details using reframes

- Elicit more information to clarify the situation that leads to blaming
- Again, use “Ambassador” probes

“Help us understand how Bob’s need for structure when completing assignments interferes with his getting the work done.”





# Blocking Blame

Ø **Summarize** to convey understanding of problem

“It sounds like everyone is in agreement that getting homework done is a big problem. Is that right?”



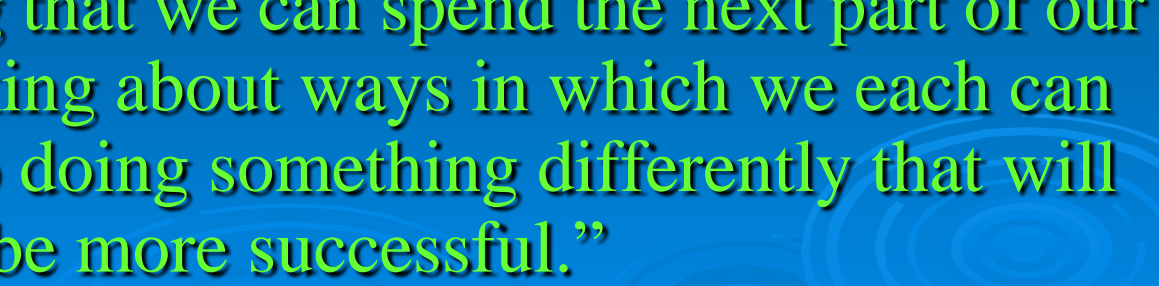


# Blocking Blame

Ø **Stop** the process and instruct participants, then **move the discussion FORWARD.**

“It’s tempting to spend a lot of our time blaming each other for the current situation, but even if we could figure out who is to blame for each part of the problem, we would be no closer to a solution.

“I’m hoping that we can spend the next part of our time thinking about ways in which we each can commit to doing something differently that will help Bob be more successful.”





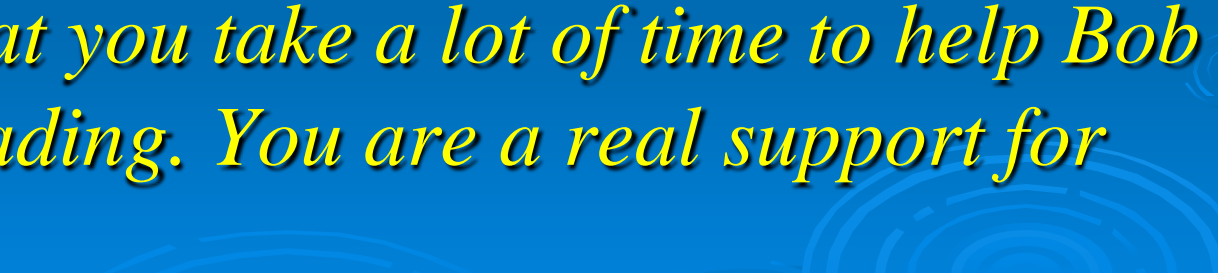


# Skill #7: Blocking Blame

Ø One good use for blame!


Blame people for success  
as often as possible.

*“I can see that you take a lot of time to help Bob with his reading. You are a real support for him.”*





# Activity 5: Dialogues

- Ø On your handout, in the **first column**, are several brief dialogues between teachers and parents. The provided responses do not reflect the skills we have been discussing.
  - Ø The **second column** is for improved responses.
  - Ø The **third column** is for the rationale underlying the preferred response.
- 



# Putting It All Together

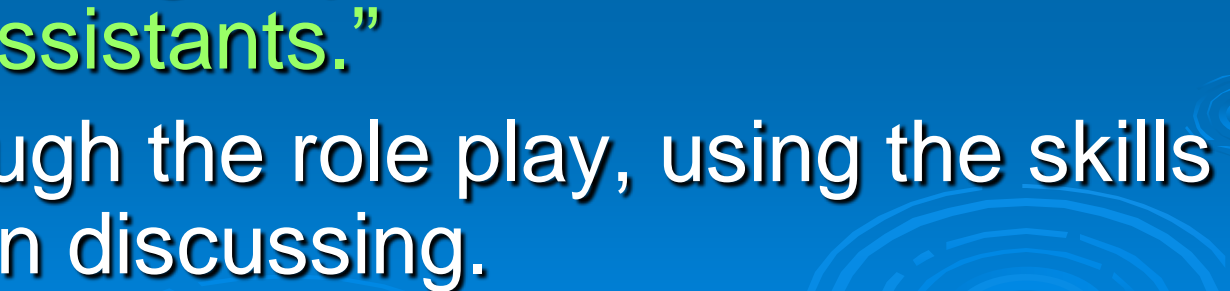
- Ø Observe the interaction between the “parent” and “teacher.”
- Ø What skills are being demonstrated?





# Activity 6:

## Small Group Role Play

- Ø Work in your **groups of four**.
  - Ø One volunteer to play the **“parent.”**
  - Ø One volunteer to create responses for the **“teacher.”**
  - Ø Remainder of group: observers and teacher **“assistants.”**
  - Ø Work through the role play, using the skills we’ve been discussing.
- 



# Activity 6:

## Small Group Role Play

### Ø GOALS:

- Understand the parent's message
  - Convey that understanding using good communication skills
  - Develop some kind of “next step” (Hint: you probably won't resolve the situation, especially since Danny is not participating; you may want to schedule a follow up meeting)
- Ø Try to bring the interaction to a conclusion satisfying to both participants.

# Things Our Generation Did Not Have to Worry About...

