How to Talk with Your Child's Team
Effective Communication during the PPT/504 Process
SPED*NET Wilton (9/22/21)

Introduction (What's at stake?)

- Parental involvement enhances academic performance. The more intensely the parent is involved, the greater chance of (academic) success.
- Parental involvement leads to better classroom behavior.
- A parent's interest/encouragement can affect a child's attitude towards school, classroom conduct, self-esteem, and motivation. ([Effective Communication Between Parents and Teachers](#); *Center for Assessment and Intervention Fischler School of Education and Human services Nova Southeastern University*)

Topics to be covered

- **Improved Self-awareness** and **Avoiding Pitfalls** when faced with a difficult conversation
- **Strategies for Effective Communication** in an effort to build collaboration *despite* disagreements

Definition of a Difficult Conversation

- The conversation can be confrontational.
- We tend to dread it and may avoid this type of conversation.
- The experience can be very unpleasant
- We may fear the consequences: Things might not improve or even get worse as a result of the conversation.

Self-awareness and Avoiding Pitfalls

- Because Parents love their children, they will do **a n y t h i n g** to protect and raise them. When Parents feel that they don't have **control** over their child's wellbeing, **anxiety** often sets in. Heightened
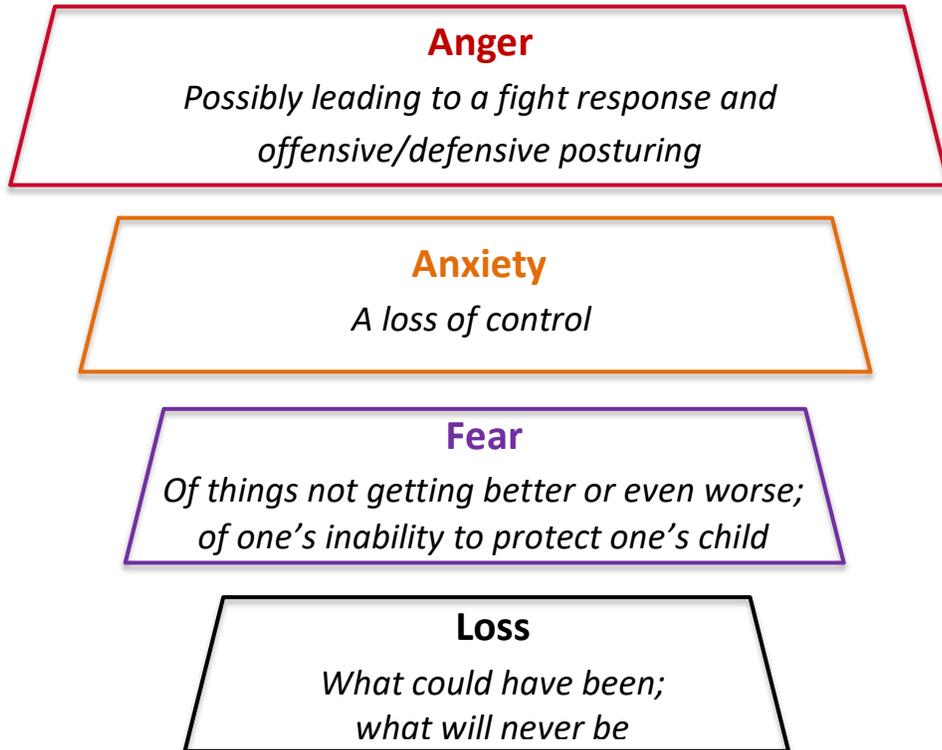
anxiety can lead to a **Fight**/*Flight* response, but when it involves one's children, the **Fight** response is the more likely outcome.

The *layers* of **Anxiety**:

Anger
Possibly leading to a fight response and offensive/defensive posturing

Anxiety
A loss of control

Fear
Of things not getting better or even worse; of one's inability to protect one's child

Loss
What could have been; what will never be

The process of **Triangulation** is a conscious or subconscious effort to *reduce* anxiety

- Theory: The smallest stable unit/relationship is a unit of three. In order for a relationship to achieve stability over time, it must consist of at least three members.

Think of a three legged table as an analogy of triangulation. The table needs at least three legs to be stable.

- o The involvement of a third person decreases anxiety within the twosome by spreading it through three relationships

- o Triangulation *can* set the stage for difficult conversations during the PPT/504 process. (To learn more about how triangulation can be a predictor of aversive communication patterns; Refer to *Bowen Family Systems Theory*)

Understand that there are **3 levels** within a difficult conversation:

Level 1: Each person's account of what is happening (or happened)

Level 2: Each person's emotional state during the conversation

Level 3: Each person's self-image or identity that gets challenged

The pitfalls of **Level 1:** What is happening? / What just happened?

- o The **Truth Assumption**: My understanding of events is more accurate or complete than your understanding.

3

- **Our belief that we know the other person's intentions**: We misunderstand each other's intentions and believe that they are bad or harmful.
    - WHY does this happen? Because we typically decipher one's intention by how their behavior *impacts us*.
    - Example: *We feel that we can't trust them; therefore they must be hiding something.*
    - Example: *We feel mistrusted; therefore they do not trust us or think we are being untruthful.*
    - Conclusion: We [might even] connect their (presumably) bad intention to also having a dose of bad character.
    - But the FACT is: Truly bad intentions are rarer than we think.

- The pitfalls of **Level 2:** Everyone's emotions get played out throughout the conversation.
    - Common emotions during a difficult conversation: *Hurt, Anger, Misunderstood, Anxious, Not in Control, Hopeless*
    - Indirect Verbal: Tone of voice can be sarcastic, aggressive, inpatient, etc.
    - Indirect Nonverbal: If emotions don't come out verbally, they will come out nonverbally (body language, facial expressions, detachment)
    - Conclusion: When we do not directly communicate our emotions, we are **NOT** able to listen and be curious (two characteristics that are needed to more effectively communicate).

- The pitfalls of **Level 3:** The difficult conversation can touch on our understanding of who we are as a person and our self-worth.
    - Leading to an internal debate about whether we are competent/incompetent, a good person/bad person, etc.
    - The answers to these questions will have us either be "balanced" during the conversation, or off-centered and foster anxiety.

o When we perceive that we are under attack our energy goes into defending ourselves and fighting back.

o Conclusion: What gets farther away or more difficult to see are the issues that are actually causing the child's problems along with the number of possible solutions

Strategies for effective communication (by and among *all* parties)

Level 1 Strategies

1. To address the **Truth Assumption**: *S h i f t* our focus from proving we are right (and therefore they are wrong) to **understanding** the other person's perceptions, interpretations, and priorities.

    a. *Be curious* – *"I wonder what information they have that I don't?"*

    b. **Active Listening** technique: Ask School Personnel to paraphrase information back to you. *Model this approach too* by doing the same when potentially complex and/or decisive information is verbally shared with you during a meeting.

    c. **Be ready** for the people to have **differences** of opinion. It is only human that even after seeing the same thing, people can often have a different conclusion due to individualized learning histories that result in perspective taking. *** **Don't pretend** or feel like you have to accept their story, just try to **understand** it.

    d. **Ask more open-ended questions** while avoid using questions to cross-examine.

        i. *"Can you say a little more about how you see things?"*

        ii. *"What information might you have that I don't?"*

        iii. *"Are you reacting to something I did or say?"*

        iv. *"How do you feel about all of this?"*

        v. *"Please say more as to why this is important to you."*

    e. **Ask about obstacles**: What does everyone think or feel is getting in the way of the child succeeding in specific areas. **Get concrete!**

     i. *Jake comes in and he seems so tired. He has very little energy.* **[Not concrete enough]**

    ii. *During morning meeting Jake will put his head on his desk and not look toward the Teacher. Sometimes he also fidgets with items in his desk, which may further keep him from understanding what the upcoming transition/expectations will be about.* **[Concrete]**

    iii. *Sally has a hard time settling down. She does not stay focused long enough to complete her work. .* **[Not concrete enough]**

    iv. *Sally periodically tries to engage her classmates during independent work by showing them items or materials that do not pertain to the work at hand. Sally will get up multiple times to sharpen her pencil or ask to use the bathroom.* **[Concrete]**

f. Get **organized**

    i. List your concerns and ideas on **possible solutions**

    ii. For the Parent to **bring data** - In *any* format, such as grades, work product, a log of homework behaviors, etc.

g. Work with the team to craft a **meaningful communication system** so that the Parent stays informed. The process of developing *Good Communication* requires a continuous flow of high quality information. ([How Strong Communication Contributes to Student and School Success: Parent and Family Involvement](#); *National School Public Relations Association;* 2006)

    i. Daily log or checklist

    ii. **Copies of lessons** or at least a list of **key language** that are used within Social Skills Groups, Speech Sessions, Prompts for Reading Skills, Emotional Management Techniques, etc.

    iii. Generalization Strategies for Home and the Community

    iv. ***The Communication System is meant to be two-way with daily input from both School and Home.

2. Our Beliefs vs. Their Intentions

   a. Try to **disentangle** the impact of their behavior on you and what you believe their intentions may be.

   b. The *more* we relieve the other person of the need of having to defend themselves, the *easier* it is for them to hear what we are saying.

   c. **Build understanding** by **demonstrating** *empathy*

      i. Strengthens the working relationship between Teacher and Parent

      ii. Deescalates the possibility of Anger/Fight Response

   d. There is a strong likelihood that we all have the same overall and true intention to **do good**.

   e. Reaffirm everyone's intention to **do good** by **refocusing on possible solutions**.

   f. Try to have and communicate the following outlook:

      We all share in some responsibility with things not going as well as we would like. And [not 'but'] we can all share in finding and starting up solutions.

   g. **Look for** and **instill Hope**! **The Parent has the power to lift morale and to motivate the team**. Remaining hopeful (even cautiously optimistic) can be very uplifting (Nolan, C. and Stitzlein, S.M., [Meaningful Hope for Teachers in Times of High Anxiety and Low Morale,](#) *Democracy & Education,* 19, n1, pp. 1-10, 2011).   Hope spurs…

      i. Reflection

      ii. Intelligent action

      iii. Imagination

      iv. Courage

      v. Gratitude

The opposite of hope, **Doubt** and **Despair** bring about negative cognitive and behavior patterns

    vi. Anxiety

    vii. Self-doubt

    viii. Fatalism

    ix. Passivity

    x. Indifference

Level 2 Strategies

1. Objective: To **be aware of** when **our own emotions** actually inhibit us from managing a difficult conversation.
2. Accept that having **strong feelings** about our children's success and quality of education is both **normal and natural**.
3. The best way to express our emotions is **to be direct** by **identifying** the **feeling and the events** behind such feeling.
   a. Use the *I statement* but with **"because"** to force yourself to process what is behind the emotion while offering clarification for other.
   b. *"I feel _____, because _____."*
   c. Use the **SOLER** technique

SOLER Listening

✓ **S** - Square up to the person you are listening to.

✓ **O** - Open your posture

✓ **L** - Lean in

✓ **E** - Eye contact

✓ **R** - Relax and Respond

To listen effectively to another person, you must *"listen with your ears, eyes, and heart...with your **undivided** attention"*

Level 3 Strategies

1. Objective: To **be aware** of when our identity is at stake.
2. We cannot **effectively communicate** until we are aware of what is going on and how it is affecting us.
   a. Become aware of our **identity issues**
   b. Know where we are at **risk** / what makes us **vulnerable**.
   c. How would it feel if what we fear comes true?

Conclusion

- In learning to effectively communicate within a difficult conversation,

  we move *from*
    - Wanting to prove a point
    - Getting them to do what we want
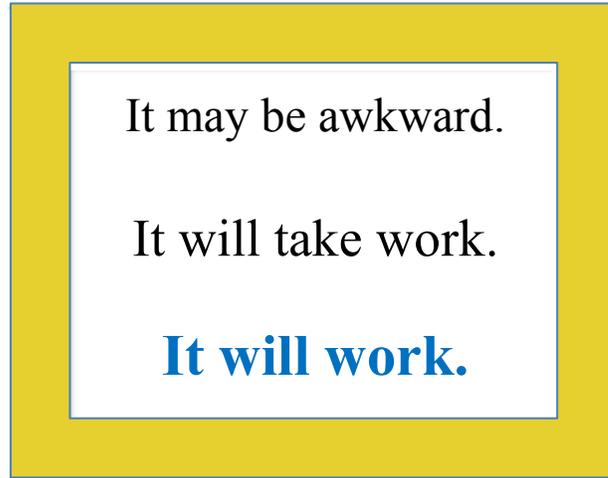   - Delivering a message

    To
      - Sharing information and asking questions
      - Expressing your emotions and understanding
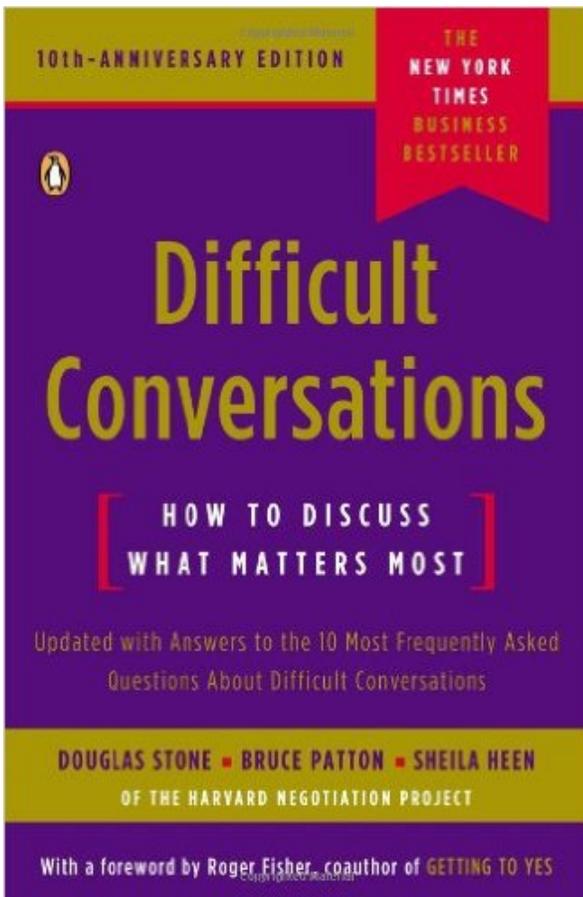   - Developing a group solution.

- The Difficult Conversation can become a *Learning Conversation*.

- This process of changing how we converse is not easy.
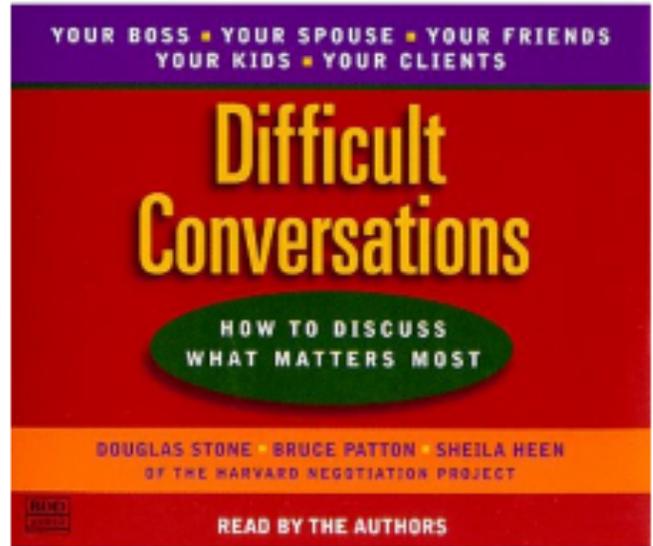 It requires us to take an honest look at how we do things.

It may be awkward.

It will take work.

It will work.

Thank You

Book

Kindle