

Copyright © Dimensions Educational Research Foundation  
All rights reserved. A single copy of these materials may be  
reprinted for noncommercial personal use only.  
Visit us at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or  
call (800) 221-2864.

# Handling Difficult Moments with Demanding Families

by William Mosier and Ross Glen Chandler Nunamaker

In early care and education, we make a conscious effort to encourage full family engagement. It is important to see parents as equal partners in providing the best of care for their child. A child, and the family that he or she is part of, are a two-for-one package deal. We need to provide positive supports for families, just as we do for children. Developing positive relationships with family members is vital for being able to provide optimal care for every child in an early care and education program (Koralek, Nemeth, & Ramsey, 2019).

There are very few things that are more nerve-racking to the administrator of a child care center than an encounter with

an angry parent. There is no question about it, dealing with a disgruntled family member can be frustrating. You have many meetings with parents. Most of them are pleasant. However, a handful are not. Aggressive parents can be irritating. In fact, research suggests that administrators find dealing with an angry and demanding parent as challenging as dealing with a disruptive child. Some administrators go so far as to say that it is the most difficult part of their job (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012). Knowing how to deal with difficult family members should be part of every center director's skill-set.

Parents are rightfully protective of their children, and as early care and education professionals we need to be sensitive to the parent's perspective. Parents often feel overwhelmed, anxious, vulnerable and perhaps even guilty for not being able to provide "stay at home" care for their child. Even when your relationship with a parent is positive, sharing the care of a young child can stir up strong feelings. It is not uncommon for a parent to feel threatened when their child has grown fond of their caregiver. The parent might even worry that their child's caregiver is better at parenting than they are (Kohn, 2018).

When parents feel a loss of control over other aspects of their personal lives, they feel helpless and sometimes take it out on the people who are caring for their children. All kinds of factors play into how a parent will feel on any given day. There is no question about it, sometimes parents get angry over trivial matters. However, the best thing we can do is to listen to the parent and not respond to anger with anger. Sadly, some parents wait until a problem occurs before they get involved in what is happening at the child care center. The aggression that you might be observing is not about you, as a person. Parents just get caught-up in the stress of a situation they are not sure how to resolve. So, do not take it personally! It is not about you. It is about the parent feeling helpless (Harman et al., 2016).



William Mosier  
Exchange Leadership Initiative  
[ExchangePress.com/leadership](http://ExchangePress.com/leadership)



Dr. William Mosier is a child development specialist, licensed independent marriage and family therapist, director of research at the Lynda A. Cohen Center for the Study of Child Development and professor of child development in the School of Health Sciences at Istanbul Gelisim University in Istanbul, Turkey. Mosier is a professor emeritus with the American College of Disability Analysts and a distinguished educator with Phi Delta Kappa. He is a retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Colonel who served in the Bio-Medical Science Corps as an

international health specialist participating in medical humanitarian and disaster relief missions throughout Latin America and Africa.



Ross Glen Chandler Nunamaker  
Exchange Leadership Initiative  
[ExchangePress.com/leadership](http://ExchangePress.com/leadership)



Ross Glen Chandler Nunamaker, who goes by Chad, is an Ohio-licensed teacher, holds bachelor's and master's degrees in early childhood, and is a doctoral candidate with a concentration in early childhood education. He has served as a member of the Young Professionals Advisory Council at the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Nunamaker is director of curriculum and kindergarten program lead for a high-quality early childhood

program; executive director, director of training and mental health at the Lynda A. Cohen Center for the Study of Child Development; communications manager for Southwest Ohio AEYC; and an adjunct faculty member at Wright State University. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on developmentally appropriate assessment, classroom management and positive child guidance, and child development.

It would be nice if parents and child care staff could always be on the same page and work together, cooperatively. However, occasionally, we are confronted with a parent who is making unreasonable demands. Just remember that beneath the angry facade is a family member who feels overwhelmed and is not sure how to handle their frustration. You can often avoid conflicts with parents if you address the issue from the parent's point of view. Respect is contagious. Demonstrate unconditional respect to each family member and it will find its way back to you (Saunders, 2017).

## Communicating with Angry Parents

So, how can we effectively communicate with family members who are acting aggressively? When tensions are high, it is valuable to take a deep breath and consider how to best diffuse a tense situation. Here are a few tips you might want to keep in mind when dealing with parents who are upset:

**1. Meet with the parent face-to-face.** Do not address the complaint long-distance. Parents may expect instant responses to email complaints. However, when you are attempting to resolve a parent's concern, avoid addressing the concern by email or phone. Invite the parent to meet with you at the center. Eye contact is very powerful. Eye contact and a warm smile will help defuse an angry parent better than interaction over the phone, via texting or by email (Donohue, 2016).

**2. Be open and hospitable with the parent.** You can overcome a lot of communication obstacles by helping parents to feel welcome. Be proactive. Anticipate the problems that you think the parent will want to address. Do not patronize. Be authentic. Do not worry about trying to hold your ground. Problem-solving with a disgruntled parent is not a contest. It might be difficult to get a parent to slow down from their rushed schedule and that can hinder effective problem-solving. When you invite a parent to meet with you to address their concern, let them know they can bring their child with them to the meeting. Focus on the positive. Find things you can agree on. You are, truly, on the same team. Start the meeting by sharing something positive that you or other staff have noted about their child. Keep your focus on trying to do what is best for the child and her or his family (Edwards, 2018).

**3. Listen attentively to the parent's concern.** Parents want to feel like they are being heard. They want to know how you are going to "fix" the problem they are bringing to you. Ask the parent to explain what they are unhappy about and do not interrupt! After they have expressed their complaint fully, ask questions, as needed, to get more clarity about the parent's concern. Keep the focus on the family member's feelings behind the words that are being expressed. Reflect, back to

the parent, what you think you are hearing him or her feel, behind the words. This will help diffuse the situation. When the family member feels listened to, they will tend to stop posturing in anger. Only once the emotional charge has been resolved, you can start to problem-solve the issue with the parent, not before (Mosier, 2009). Here is an example of how communicating empathic understanding can help you tackle a tense situation.

**Parent:** I got home with my child and saw that she had this terrible bruise on her leg. It looks like a bite! (Parent shows you, on her phone, a picture of the bruise.)

**You:** That is quite a bruise! It sounds like you were shocked to find that your child had this mark.

**Parent:** Yes! I could not believe it! Why was I not told about this?

**You:** You are frustrated that you were not told about the bruise. When an incident occurs that can cause this type of mark or bruise, you always want to know about it.

**Parent:** Yes, usually they tell me, so I am not sure what happened this time.

**You:** So, you want to try and figure out what the issue was.

**Parent:** Right.

**You:** (At this point, you can start problem-solving. However, remember to re-engage empathic responses, if you see the parent's anger reemerging.)

**4. Throughout the process, pay attention to your own feelings.** Staying in touch with your own feelings is vital when you are dealing with a parent who might be expressing a lot of anger. When you are not actively focused on your own feelings, you are at risk of being less able to help the angry parent calm down. Using three-part "I" statements can help you describe your own feelings. This will help you not add to the problem by responding to anger with anger. Use "I" messages when the parent is beginning to become aggressive or abusive towards you. The template to use when forming an "I" statement is: "When I see you... or hear you say..." (identify the behavior that is bothering you); "I feel..." (describe your feeling in response to the behavior that is bothering you); "so I..." (explain the action you are going to take because of the unacceptable behavior)" (Mosier, 2009). Here is an example.

**Parent:** You people just seem to not have any clue what you are doing. I cannot believe how idiotic you all are. You are just a bunch of morons!

**You:** When I hear you talking to me in an abusive way (unacceptable behavior), I feel so disrespected (your feelings about the other person's behavior), I am going to have to ask you to leave, if you do not stop shouting, right now (the action you will take in response to the behavior).

**5. Once the parent has finished expressing his or her frustration, you can move on to finding a workable solution to their concern.** Ask for the parent's perspective. Stay open to the parent continuing to express his or her feelings and beliefs about the situation. Ask questions to learn more about their frustration. Don't pass judgment. Look for compromise. Develop a plan for solving the problem, as partners instead of competitors. Together with the parent, lay out specific steps to tackle the parent's concern. Create a written action statement for solving the problem that includes objectives and expectations. What can the two of you agree on? What can you both work on, together? Consider asking the parent to take a more active role in the center. Give them a voice and an opportunity to show leadership. They may not have had a good experience in school when they were younger. So, they might be defensive about an educational setting. It is important to remember that mutually respectful relationships are far more effective at garnering cooperation than rigid rules (Koralek, Nemeth, & Ramsey, 2019).

**6. It is understandable that, occasionally, parents will get angry, but it is not okay for them to be abusive with you or any staff member.** Do not allow yourself to be pressured into agreeing with something that you cannot accept. Have a copy of your program policies and procedures related to how to handle disputes available for the parent to review and sign. This can help avoid future conflict and confusion. If a parent threatens you or becomes abusive, simply end the meeting. Do not tolerate abuse. There is no reason to allow a parent to bully you (Lally & Mangione, 2017).

If despite your best efforts, the conversation deteriorates without a satisfactory resolution, do not take it personally. This is easier said than done. However, after the parent has left, do not hold on to your pain and frustration. Talk it out with someone you trust—maybe your spouse or a colleague. Even cry about it, if you need to. Then, let it go. Remember the Serenity Prayer: Seek the inner peace to accept the things you cannot change in life, the courage to change the things you can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Difficult moments with demanding families are going to occur occasionally, whether we like it or not. It is a fact of life when you dedicate yourself to working with young children and their families. The key strategies for handling difficult moments with demanding families are to build positive rela-

tionships, listen and empathize, problem-solve once charged emotions have been addressed, and not take the difficult moments personally. Luckily, these approaches are skills that can be developed and refined over time. While you may initially feel like those moments are overwhelming, as you develop skill at handling difficult moments, you will begin to feel more confident with being able to handle these types of stress-inducing encounters with ease (Edwards, 2018).

## References

- Bulotsky-Shearer, R., Wen, X., Faria, A., Hahs-Vaughn, D., & Korfmacher, J. (2012). National profiles of classroom quality and family involvement: A multilevel examination of proximal influences on Head Start children's school readiness. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(1), 627-639.
- Donohue, C., ed. (2016). *Family engagement in the digital age: Early childhood educators as media mentors*. New York: Routledge.
- Edwards, N. (2018). Family feedback and programmatic decision-making: Responsiveness of early childhood administrators. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(4), 397-407.
- Harman, J.J., Biringen, Z., Ratajack, E. M., Outland, P. L., & Kraus, A. (2016). Parents behaving badly: Gender biases in the perception of parental alienating behaviors. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(7), 866-874.
- Kohn, A. (2018). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes* (3rd Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Koralek, D., Nemeth, K., & Ramsey, K. (2019). *Families & educators together: Building great relationships that support young children*. Washington, D.C.: NAEYC.
- Lally, J., & Mangione, P. (2017). Caring relationships: The heart of early brain development. *Young Children*, 72(2), 17-24.
- Mosier, W. (2009). Developmentally appropriate child guidance: Helping children gain self-control. *Texas Child Care Quarterly*, 32(4), 2-7.
- Saunders, J. (2017). March DaDness: Engaging fathers. *Teaching Young Children*, 10(3), 29-30.

