

PREFACE

I entered my classroom one morning to find an envelope on my desk containing a copy of a letter from a parent—to the principal—about me. The parent, a mother who volunteered in my classroom on a weekly basis, had filed a three-page complaint about me. I was shocked. And angry. And devastated. This was the first time I had ever heard about any of her concerns. I wondered why she had not talked with me about what was troubling her and worried that her accusations might have some merit. I also feared the principal's reaction and how it would affect my employment at the school.

This all occurred during my first year as an elementary school teacher, when I was consumed with ideas and responsibilities common to novice teachers. These issues ran the gamut from developing creative lesson plans, to how to effectively teach students with limited English proficiency, to trying not to lose any students on our field trip to the science museum. They did not, however, include how to work collaboratively with parents.

Other than this one instance, my interactions with parents that year were generally brief, cordial, and superficial. Over time (and with experience), I became increasingly convinced of the importance of home-school collaboration. The occasions in which I developed a solid alliance with a parent made a huge difference in my work with the child and my attitude in general. As many have noted, parents are children's first teachers and continue to teach them throughout the life span. Yet collaboration between teachers and parents is often overlooked, perhaps because it seems so challenging.

In talking with other teachers, I know that many teachers share my experiences. Many teachers stated that they generally have little *meaningful* interaction with parents. This was even true of those who teach elementary school, where parents are generally more involved in comparison to middle and secondary school. Teachers who had memorable experiences tended to recount unpleasant ones, often because they generated the

deepest emotions. Most, however, wanted deeper, more productive relationships with parents, but felt that it was out of their control.

Teacher preparation programs (including my own) generally devote little attention to working with parents, so most teachers enter the profession with inadequate preparation to collaborate with parents and other caregivers. When faced with difficult situations, such as parents who complain or accuse or threaten, most teachers have no training to fall back upon. Instead, teachers find themselves coping by the seat of their pants. Even those who have taken courses about families of children with special needs may feel at a loss when confronted with parental denial and dissatisfaction. Indeed, dealing with parents of students with special needs presents unique challenges and requires sensitivity and skill.

It is my hope that this book will fill this gap and provide a resource for educators confronted with challenging parents of students with special needs. This book is grounded in research and, just as important, grounded in real life experiences. While many of the examples are drawn from the experiences of elementary school teachers, the principles and techniques discussed are applicable across all grade levels.

This book provides tools to deal with common struggles with parents of students with special needs. Whether you encounter parents who are dis-

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engaged, parents who openly defy your teaching methods, or parents somewhere in between, this book presents information that will help you deal with parents' challenging responses. By understanding their perspectives and arming yourself with methods to address their concerns, you can move beyond conflict to true collaboration.

Although this book is written from the perspective of what you as a teacher can do when faced with challenging parents, I do not mean to imply that you should bear this responsibility alone. When working with students with special needs, you are by definition part of a team of professionals and should respond as such. Communicate with your peers, enlist their support, formulate action plans together, and share responsibilities. Nevertheless, whether your particular school or team functions cohesively or does not function well at all, know that actions you take alone can produce significant results.

The first chapter, "Generating Alliances, Not Lawsuits," outlines foundational concepts, such as empathy, communication, and risk management, that underlie all parent-teacher relationships. Some of these topics will be expanded upon in greater detail in the final chapter of the book.

Chapters 2 through 6 each highlight a specific problem, such as dealing with parents who are angry or parents who are nonparticipatory. The

first part of each chapter presents research and discussion to illuminate the reasons behind these problems. Several main strategies for handling parents who display these problems follow this discussion. Other approaches are also presented, and actions to avoid are clearly delineated. In keeping with the dual focus of this book—dealing with specific problems and cultivating strong relationships with parents—each of the first six chapters has a section on getting past the struggles and going beyond.

Chapter 7 focuses on working with groups that have unique concerns—grandparents, foster parents, noncustodial parents, and homeless families. In addition, child abuse reporting is discussed in the context of maintaining strong home–school relationships. Chapter 8, “Cultivating Collaborative Relationships,” is devoted to an in-depth look at how to forge and maintain collaborative relationships with parents.

Throughout the book, main strategies for working with challenging parents are presented in boldface. Other approaches are highlighted by a lightbulb icon in the margin. Each chapter closes with a summary and questions for your consideration to provide an opportunity for you to examine your own professional life. Facilitators may want to use these questions and activities for group discussion. Additional resources, including sample forms and letters, can be found in the Resources section.

It is my hope that once equipped with the intervention principles and strategies presented in this book, you will find working with challenging parents of students with special needs less frustrating, less intimidating, and ultimately, more gratifying.

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