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**Dealing with Angry,  
Hostile Parents**

**By**

**Steven A. Kaatz, Ph.D.**



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## Introduction

Parent involvement is one of the great strengths of Lutheran schools. Involved parents volunteer in the classroom, coach, raise funds, and do so much more. Positive parental involvement also is important for the children. Because we are human, one encounter with a hostile parent can blot out dozens of positive, helpful meetings we've had.

There will always be the parent who, despite everything we may have done to be positive, helpful and involve them in the educational process, turns into a hostile person who meets you with all guns blazing. (Mamchak & Mamchak, 1980, p. 77).

Inevitably, teachers, principals, DCEs, and pastors must deal with "parents who are angry, troubled, afraid, or just plain crazy" (Mc Ewan, 1998). The purpose of this monograph is to give practical advice to those who must deal with such parents. Progress with hostile parents may be slow: "Parent involvement, like all human relations evolves; it cannot be decreed, and it does not happen all at once" (Henderson, Marburger & Ooms, 1986, p. 46).

Having to deal with angry parents is not an event unique to Lutheran schools or even the U. S. For example, several schools districts in Japan added staff to deal with "monster parents." The Rodel Foundation of Delaware offers 60 hours of training each fall to help support parents who want to positively impact schools (Kenny, 2007).

Charles Jaksec III reported on research he conducted in Florida in 2003 (Jaksec, 2005, p. 6). He sent 669 surveys to school administrators in the state's 67 school districts. He discovered that

- 60 percent of the administrators had profanity or shouting directed at them by parents on at least two occasions during the school year
- 70 percent of the administrators had false accusations leveled against them by parents during the school year
- 79 percent of the school administrators—on three or more occasions— reported receiving parental threats to contact *other authorities*, i.e., attorneys, school board, and so on. (p. 6)

## Overview

This monograph begins by offering an answer to the question, Who are these parents and why do they act this way? Next, general pointers are given for encounters with hostile and angry parents and parents who may be mentally ill. The next two sections are lists of things to do and not to do. Four approaches that can be used when conferencing are briefly described: SODAS, RAID, LEAP, and STRIDE. Finally, a number of proactive suggestions are made, which may help to reduce, if not eliminate, the problem of angry or hostile parents.

A disclaimer: for practical and legal reasons, this monograph does not discuss how to deal with the physically aggressive parent. Those interested in how to manage such parents may consult publications such as the book by Ouelette (1993) listed in the reference section.

Most references used for this monograph were written for teachers and others in the public sector. Many of the general principles, however, apply to Lutheran endeavors as well. All references are listed at the end of the monograph.

An elemental question that must be answered by any church or school dealing with parents is What role(s) are parents expected to play in the life of the institution? Only after this question is answered will there be a standard against which to measure parents' behavior—both positive and negative.

Henderson, Marburger, and Ooms (1986) suggest five roles for parents. Lutheran schools will doubtless want to add one more role focusing on spirituality.

1. **Partners.** Parents meet basic education and social obligations for their children.
2. **Collaborators and problem solvers.** Parents reinforce the school and help to solve problems.
3. **Audience.** Parents attend various school performances and activities.
4. **Supporters.** Parents volunteer assistance to teachers, the parent organization, and to other parents.
5. **Advisors and/or co-decision makers.** Parents provide input on school policy and procedures on permanent or ad-hoc committees. (p. 3)

### **Who are these parents and why do they act this way ?**

There is no one answer to this question, nor are there any easy answers. Each angry, hostile, or out-of-control parent has his or her own reasons. If there were just a few well-defined reasons, an effective long-term response would be easy. This is not the case. These parents may be long-standing members of the church and school community, who attended the school themselves. On the other hand, they may be new to parenting, to the church, and/or to the local community. Or they can be peripatetic parents taking their children and their hostility from one school to another, never satisfied.

Seligman (2000) classifies difficult parents by characteristics and then gives possible explanations and tips for working with each group. The groups include hostile parents, uncooperative parents, excessively worried parents, professional parents, dependent parents, overly helpful parents, neglectful parents, and parents as clients. More about the latter group at the end of this section.

It is also possible that a family, usually at least outwardly stable, may experience a series of stressors that make for angry, hostile, or even mentally unstable parents. "It is sometimes difficult to determine whether a parent's angry behavior and remarks can be taken at face value or whether they are manifestations of unconscious feelings related to factors unknown to the parents" (Seligman, 2000, p. 227).

The feelings of anger may stem from the parent's profession, as a physician, counselor, or social worker, for example, and be quite unrelated to the school. That said, there are several primary factors that can make parents become hostile and aggressive. These factors include financial stress, patterns of family violence, unstable family environments, previous negative school experiences, school personnel attitudes, a parent's mental instability, or even a feeling that he or she is actually losing control of his or her child (Jaksec, 2005, p. 19).

In addition to the factors given above, Jaksec (2005) in his role as a school social worker, lists other causes about which the professional church worker should know. One reason that some parents become hostile is that they are not familiar with the school.

In a sense, these parents have alienated themselves from the from the school and remain unfamiliar with school personnel. When a problem or issue inevitably arises, the parent has little familiarity with these staff members. This lack of familiarity could become problematic because a highly emotional issue could be, in the eyes of the parent, addressed by a "stranger" (pp. 19, 20).

A second reason for parents' anger is that they have a perception of school personnel that is inaccurate. A special danger in Lutheran schools is that some parents seem to expect perfect children in perfect rows behaving perfectly. There may be an honest disconnect between what the parent expects of school personnel and what school personnel **think** the parent expects. Teachers and administrators believe that parents want them to act professionally. On the other hand, parents complain of teachers and administrators being patronizing or condescending. What parents really want is an educator who has a personal touch. Parents desire that teachers and others be "real." In her research, Jane Lindle (1989) found that an "an educator's attitude and personal characteristics were also considered paramount" (Jaksec, 2000, p. 21).

Henderson, et al. (1986) give the following reminder:

For the truly unreasonable parent, there is no easy answer. It is helpful to remember that what might be perceived as unreasonableness, may actually be fear and lack of trust in school people, or in institutions in general. Non-defensiveness and calm on your part can go a long way in calming that parent down (p. 62).

What about the parents who are not just angry or hostile, but "just plain crazy" (having a mental illness is a more accurate descriptor)? Milton Seligman (2000) describes parental characteristics that may require professional psychological care:

deep and unrelenting depression and/or anxiety may be accompanied by insomnia, lack of concentration, nightmares; suicidal thoughts might be expressed.

indications that the family unit is threatened; comments about continuous significant arguments, discussion of possible divorce or separation, family violence, substance abuse.

comments suggesting severe neglect of the child or physical abuse (p. 243).

While state and local regulations may vary, teachers and others who work with children usually are mandated reporters, who must report suspicion of child abuse, such as that noted in the last bullet above, to the proper social agency. Similarly, should a parent become clearly out of control and a danger to him/herself or others, 911 should be called; first responders are trained in mental as well as medical emergencies.

In the event that a parent communicates any of the characteristics listed above to a teacher, principal, DCE, or others, Seligman (2000) suggests the following response:

I get the feeling that you are asking me to help you with a problem for which I am not trained. I am really flattered that you trust me enough to confide in me, but because I can't really be of help to you, I'd like to suggest a few possibilities where you can get assistance from a trained professional. In any event, I'd like us to continue to schedule our parent conferences to discuss Joan's progress (pg. 244).

“Suggesting a few possibilities” means that the school/church employee is prepared with a list of references, names of contacts, and telephone numbers to help such parents, including Lutheran social agencies.

In each case, the parents’ attitudes and actions reviewed above are not just a call for school and church staff to “circle the wagons” or to experiment with a new formula for problem solving; also, it is an opportunity to minister to families in obvious pain and to include these people in the prayer life of the school and the church.

### **General ideas when dealing with difficult parents**

According to the literature, when dealing with angry and sometimes unreasonable parents, the most important thing is to listen well. Listening does not equate with agreeing. Karen Mink, a public school principal in Aurora, Illinois, says:

I listen and then I listen some more... I have learned that many parents just want me to hear them all the way through. If you stop a parent before he has had a chance to say everything he came in to say it might appear that you don't really care to get to the bottom of the situation. It will appear that you want to defend yourself, your teacher or your school (*Education World*, n.d., pp. 2,3).

Who does the angry parent encounter first when entering the building? It might well be the secretary, whether full- or part-time, a volunteer or salaried. It is essential that this person be trained to listen sympathetically and to protect the principal and teacher from “attack.” The secretary is in an ideal situation to determine what fueled the parents’ anger and what the parents want from the school. It is entirely possible that parents want “the school” or an employee to “just do something.” By listening, not judging, and asking some general questions, the secretary can find out a great deal of helpful information. These insights should be passed on to the affected parties. A good secretary can also put off the parent who wants to see someone “right now.”

The secretary should be well versed in the school’s policies and procedures per the handbook or other published material. Sharing these may help diffuse parental anger. Naturally, all such encounters must be documented.

Hopefully, the staff person has a day or two before meeting with a parent to gather information from all those involved with the child at school: teacher, custodian, bus driver, coaches, etc. It is vital to document any unacceptable behavior and the results of that behavior. Saying to any parent, especially one who is upset, “Your child is very disruptive in the classroom” is not adequate. The employee under attack must give dates, times, and a brief description of each episode.

The staff member involved should come to the meeting with an agenda and share it with the parents. He or she can then write in any changes the parents wish to make on the agenda. This will help to keep everyone on track. After the meeting the notes can be shared with parents, if they request. Within a day or two of the meeting, a memorandum of understanding should be sent to the parents, stating the purpose of the meeting, a list of any interventions agreed upon, the conclusions, and an invitation to meet again in a specified time to evaluate the situation.

Parents should be greeted with a smile, eye contact, and a firm handshake. Principal McNeely, of a middle school in Louisiana says, "I let them know I want to hear them out but that there are rules in my office. I expect them to behave like an adult, and, if they don't, I will end the meeting immediately" (*Education World*, n.d. p. 3). No principal should allow any parent to verbally abuse any staff. Similarly, no school staff should ever stoop to sarcasm.

The key to working with an angry parent is to avoid responding in a hostile or defensive way. Such responses contribute to a spiraling negative encounter in which both parties accuse each other of negligence and neither person listens to the other (Seligman, 2000, p. 228).

The parents should always be allowed to go first. Waiting until the parent is verbally exhausted can be effective. The faster and louder the parent speaks, the more slowly and softer the staff should speak. Staff need to focus on issues, not emotions or personalities. Trying to put oneself in the parents' shoes can help.

Questions and statements should be of the clarifying, not accusing type, e.g., "Tell me more about that," "As I understand it, you feel our teachers give too much homework," "Am I correct in saying that you would like more staff on the playground?"

Should the parents show obvious signs of agitation, suggest that all involved take a walk or the staff member(s) may excuse themselves to allow the parents to compose themselves.

A set time limit for the meeting is usually a good idea. It encourages participants to reach closure, puts an end to endless, nonproductive, ever-circling conversation, and gives all attending time to process what did happen and to make plans to reconvene, if necessary.

At the end of the meeting the leader needs to summarize. The summary includes the basic issues, the positions of participants, and action steps (if any). The leader should thank the parents for their interest in their child, and in the school and its programs. A closing prayer is usually appropriate but the prayer should not be turned into a vindication of one's position.

As noted in the paragraphs above, a memorandum of understanding should be circulated to all participants. To save time, a template can be developed for this stating date, time of meeting, participants, issues, conclusions, etc.

Thus far, the assumption has been made that the confrontation happens in person. Of course, angry, hostile parents can also use e-mail and/or the phone. The same general principles outlined above apply to the phone call. It is not necessary to take a call "right now;" a savvy, well-trained receptionist can point the parent to a relevant part of the handbook, empathize with the parent, and mention positive aspects of the school in response to a parent's negative rant.

No administrator should ever talk to a parent about a complaint regarding a teacher until that parent has approached the teacher; three-way conferences are fine. Verbal abuse of staff or students or other parents is not to be tolerated and will result in the call being terminated. As in person, just listening goes a long way. Trying to help the parent pinpoint the exact nature of their complaint can be extremely difficult but extremely helpful. Para-

phrasing the parent's words is helpful, as is checking your understanding (examples appeared above).

Whitaker and Fiore (2001) suggest having a structure and consistent approach to use on the phone, even a script. Here is one opening they suggest when an administrator must deliver negative news:

Hi, Mrs. Johnson, this is Tom Walker, assistant principal up at Smith Junior High. I am sorry to bother you at work (or home, depending on where I called) but today Kenny tripped a girl in the hallway and as a result he will receive two hours detention (p. 113).

Tom Walker has made several *posi-calls* already to Mrs. Johnson so that their first encounter is not negative. (See the last section of this monograph for more information about *posi-calls*). A script also helps to keep the school person on task.

What happens when parents maintain that their child would never lie and that an incident never happened or was not nearly as serious as the teacher maintains? Whitaker and Fiore (2001) provide another possible script—to be used without sarcasm, of course:

It sounds like you all have a very rare and special relationship. The fact he never, ever lies to you is a tribute to both of you. Mrs. Smith, what did you think when Jimmy shared with you that he had to have his seat changed in the classroom *last Monday* because of throwing paper? (p. 114).

If done in a consistently calm and professional manner, this speech can help refocus the parent on the matter at hand.

All conferences, in person or electronically, should end with a “we” statement about a better future.

“Mrs. Jones what do you think we can do to help avoid this type of situation in the future?” or “Mr. Smith would you please visit with Jennifer tonight and discuss alternative behaviors that she could choose in the future” (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001, p. 115).

During or immediately after the conversation, document it. The memo method was suggested above.

Dealing with angry, hostile, and possibly mentally ill parents can be mentally and physically exhausting. Forgetting basic communication truths is easy. The words of Dorothy Rich (1987) definitely apply to Lutheran schools.

Teachers play a significant leadership role in helping families move through difficult times. The school is a constant, a source of continuing support in a changing world. Teachers need not change the world in order to make positive changes in the lives of many families (p. 60).

### **Things to Do**

A number of helpful ideas to use when dealing with hostile, angry parents can be reduced to a few short reminders. This is the “do” list.

- Thank the parents for coming.

- Begin with prayer. An extemporaneous prayer is not recommended; this can turn into warring petitions. One from the *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* is probably best.
- Provide adult-size chairs for all adults, especially if meeting in a classroom.
- Listen, and listen some more (see above section for an expansion on this idea).
- Focus on the problem, not personality.
- Ask how the situation can be improved; apologize if in the wrong.
- Make only those promises you can keep.
- Use practical suggestions from parents as a springboard for action.
- Remember that parental anger may be due to *interaction* with a specific staff member, not due to either the parent or the teacher.
- Suggest a neutral place to meet if you feel the parent is hostile to “everything” about the church and/or school; neutral locations include a coffee shop, the public library, a food court, or a community center.
- Emphasize the “we” in the situation: “We all want what’s best for Pat.” “What do you think we can do to deal with this problem?”
- Document, document, document; if an incident is not documented, it didn’t happen.
- Many angry, hostile parents want a listening ear as much as, if not more than, they want answers, so listen.
- Whether in person or on the phone, all encounters with parents who are angry or hostile should be handled with prayer, remembering that we are all children of the same heavenly Father (not always easy, to be sure).

### **Things Not to Do**

Just as there are helpful behaviors to use when confronting hostile parents, there are a number things to avoid. Do not ...

- Take the parent’s anger personally; the parent is probably upset about other events.
- Attribute motives to the parents. Undoubtedly there are factors you know nothing about.
- Defend yourself before the parents are finished speaking. It is counter-productive. Indeed, the very act of becoming defensive impedes communication.
- Believe that you have to meet “right away” at the parent’s insistence. Delaying the meeting will give you time to collect information and perhaps let the parent’s anger cool.
- Meet with the parents by yourself if you are afraid of them or if you want administrative backing, moral support, or someone to take notes; having another person or persons attend the meeting is perfectly acceptable.
- Be afraid to terminate the conference if the parents become verbally abusive or appear to be on the verge of a physical attack.
- Arrange the seating so that the parent is between you and the door.
- Have a meeting in an isolated area of the building.
- Meet alone with parents when everyone else has left the building.
- Be afraid to show the parents any notes you have taken about the meeting.

- Get sidetracked. The parent may attempt to steer the conversation to negative comments about co-workers or other parents. Don't take the bait. Keep on the subject.
- Forget the words of Addie Gaines, an administrator of a public school in Kirbyville, MO, "... most people get glad in the same pants they were mad in" (*Education World*, n.d.).
- Be afraid to apologize if you made a mistake that might make a parent justifiably angry.

### **Methods to Use When Dealing with Hostile, Angry Parents**

The following are four possible methods to use when dealing with upset parents. They are based on easy to remember acronyms. All have been used successfully. At first glance, they may seem "artificial" or "strained" or too "cookbook-like." But having a plan is better than sputtering and spinning through 90 minutes or more of a high intensity meeting, with no solution in sight. Using the following can also have the enviable result of making the teacher, principal, DCE, or others appear more professional and in control. The approaches are: SODAS, LEAP, STRIDE, and RAID.

#### **SODAS**

The letters of SODAS represent: **S**tate the problem, list the possible **O**ptions to deal with the problem; for each option discuss the **D**isadvantages and the **A**dvantages, and then **S**elect one or more of the options. Although not represented in the acronym, the team should also select a date to review the success of the option(s) selected.

**State the problem.** This is probably the most difficult part of the SODA approach. For example, the parents are incensed about the amount of homework Chris, their sixth grader, has. Now, it is possible that the sixth-grade teacher gives an unreasonable amount of homework. It is also possible that the parents have over-scheduled Chris with activities, so there is no time for homework. Perhaps the family is chaotic and unorganized, so Chris has no after-school expectations, no consistent bedtime, no one checks the assignment book, etc. Could it be that Chris's cognitive ability is not sufficient to do sixth-grade work ?

The rest of the steps are self-explanatory. It is best to move through them carefully, but not laboriously—no "paralysis by analysis." Having a rough idea for each letter before the meeting, especially the first one, is a timesaving device and an example of prepared professionalism.

#### **LEAP**

Deborah Harbin, a public elementary school principal in Houston, recommends the LEAP method. (*Education World*, n.d.) Many of the recommendations within this approach have already been noted in the monograph.

**L** - Listen actively

**E** - Empathize. You may think that the hostile parents are absolutely wrong, or at least misguided. Still, you must acknowledge their feelings and make the parents feel that their

complaint is being heard. Harbin recommends phrases like, " I am sorry this happened," or " I can see you're very upset."

**A** – Ask questions. This also helps the parent feel that her complaints are being taken seriously. Questions help you understand the parent's viewpoint and can diffuse the parent's anger. Harbin suggests questions such as, "What is bothering you the most?" "What else would you like me to know about the situation?"

**P** – Problem solve. Here one asks such questions as "What do you think we can do about the situation?" "What would you like me to do?" "What are your ideas about a plan we can work out together?" The parent, in his anger, may not have an answer to the situation that incensed him. This is an important fact. If the parent does have a suggestion, you may be able to work it into an action plan. Finally, "As I end the conference I go back over what I am promising to do, and, if appropriate, share a plan for how I will report back to them" (Education World, n.d., pp. 7, 8).

### **STRIDE**

The next acronym, *STRIDE*, represents an approach to solving problems found in *VolunteerToday* (n.d.).

**Status.** Begin with the situation as it exists; what exactly is the current **Status**? Are the hallways really breeding grounds for the "bullying bacteria" as parents claim? Or is a parent's child a "professional martyr" who willfully and knowingly brings bullying upon himself, and the angry parent is unaware of the this. The status of bullying may be that it occurs primarily when children from all grades are hanging around together for up to 40 minutes waiting for transportation home.

Another way to find the current Status is to make statements such as:

What is happening now that we would like to change ?

Give a tangible example of the problem.

Who owns the problem? (p.1).

**Target of the change.** Finding the target can include inquiries such as:

What will the hallways be like if we fix this?

Who will benefit from reducing the amount of bullying ?

How can those who benefit be involved in hitting the target ? (p.2)

**Restraining forces.**

Why does the problem [with bullying] continue ?

Is there a reason this has not been addressed before ?

What is working *for* and what is working *against* solving the problem? (p.2)

**Identify the issues that are restraining movement to solve the problem.**

Which of the restraints are significant and fixable? (Too much "wait time" for the bus, not enough adult monitoring in the hallways.) What needs to happen to solve the problem? (p. 2)

**Decision time.** What do the members of the group agree to do? (Check to see if buses can come earlier, call parents who are angry about bullying, discuss the problems of bullying in chapel services, offer a "course" about bullying at the "parent university" – see last section of the monograph.) Write a plan of action with timelines; include who is responsible for what and when the action is to be finished (p. 2).

**Evaluation.** How will the group measure success? For example, there will be a measurable decrease in calls from parents about bullying after school. Make a celebration plan (p. 2).

### **RAID**

RAID is an approach to difficult parents explained in depth in *"The difficult parent; An educator's guide to handling aggressive behavior"* (Jaksec, 2005). The author devotes an entire chapter to each part and also includes a facilitator's guide for professional workshops. The interested reader can easily access these resources. Therefore, only an overview of RAID will be presented. As the author notes, this approach "... does not address or reduce parental hostility after formal meetings or conferences have begun. This approach is meant as an option to be used prior to formal meeting ... (Jaksec, 2005, p.37).

**Recognize the potential for a violent encounter.**

**Assess your ability to handle the situation.**

**Identify your advantages.** Advantages might include; your professional skills, the availability of back-up staff, the ability of the reception staff to diffuse parental anger, meeting on your "turf," the advantage of setting up the room and stating the meeting's parameters ("My ice, my rules" as we say in Minnesota).

**Diffuse the parent's anger during the initial approach and greeting.** This includes always saying, "hello," making eye contact, and offering a handshake. If the eye contact is not returned and the handshake refused, then you already have some important information. It may have been their idea (demand) to come to a meeting, but it is still necessary to thank them for coming, "Hello, Mrs. Schmidt. Thanks for coming in." or "Welcome, Mr. Schmidt. Thanks for taking the time to come to school today" (Jaksec, 2005, p. 83).

### **Be Proactive**

Acting on the athlete's axiom that the best defense is a good offense, the final section of the monograph presents proactive steps schools and churches can take to avoid having an encounter with an angry, hostile parent. Some of these you already do. Others may be completely new. Still others just won't fit or may need modification to be useful in your situation. But all are worth examining. The following are presented in no particular order. ( When warranted, a reference is provided).

The parents' role relative to the school must be explicitly stated in the school handbook. The handbook must contain policies to use with parents who become verbally or physically abusive. It must also have a policy for the parents who arrive on campus under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The handbook is distributed to all parents. The handbook includes a form that states that the parents have read the handbook and agree to the policies and

procedures stated therein; the form must be signed and returned to the school. The form can also be made available for "signing" on the school's Web site with other forms. The complete handbook is also posted on the Web site.

The above is especially useful when dealing with tuition-paying parents, who see the teacher and others as their "employees," bound to do the parents' bidding. "One can hardly blame parents for wanting the best for their children, yet excessive and unrealistic demands should not be tolerated" (Seligman, 2000, p. 234).

Arguing with such parents is counter-productive. In any conference, on the phone, via e-mail, or in person,

... the teacher also has the right to assert her perception that the conference is to be used for making plans to help the child and not as a forum for constant criticism of the educational program. Although the parents' observations are welcome, the central focus of the conference is the child (Seligman, 2000, p. 235).

Co-opting the parents is often effective. When the angry, hostile, parent does have a particular skill useful in church and/or school, then the parent can be asked to share the skill (within strictly defined parameters). Inviting a parent to be involved in some capacity in a chapel service or a career day can help bond the parent to the school. Seeing the operation from the inside is often enlightening for the parent.

When parents have a legitimate issue, then an action group (not a committee), should be formed involving representatives from all the stakeholders. The group is given a measurable goal. It is also given a time limit within which to finish its activity. Being part of the solution to a complex issue can sometimes diffuse an angry parent. "Some interfering parents are appeased when given some small responsibilities to carry out; others become worse" (Seligman, 2000, p. 234). Warning; recommendations from this action group must be taken seriously or school credibility will be lost.

*Posi-calls* were mentioned earlier. The concept is simple. Every week, the teacher makes one or two brief phone calls to parents with some positive news. In lieu of a phone call, an e-mail will do (as long as the parents have exclusive access). Especially early in the year, the principal also can make a couple of such calls per week (being careful not to overlap names with the teachers). As the school year progresses, it is important to make posi-calls about poorer students giving an outstanding performance in athletics, academics, or in social situations. The point is simple: Posi-calls allow parent and teacher or principal to get acquainted, hopefully before any negative calls need to be made. Naturally, all these calls will be documented.

A variation on the above is to have students, especially in the elementary grades, address picture postcards (perhaps of the church and/or school). On a regular basis, all students can write a short paragraph to the parents about something positive happening. (There are a number of language arts lessons in the above as well.)

During in-service days use role-plays or demonstrations to illustrate positive parent conferences, include some of the approaches (STRIDE, LEAP, SODAS, RAID) described in an earlier section. Of course, role-plays of conferences with angry, hostile parents will be included.

If you don't want to resort to a formal "memorandum of understanding" as described above, then at least have parents leave with a 3" x 5" note card to help them remember the main points of the conference. Alternatively, write on carbonless forms so that both you and parents have a copy of the important points and any action plan. (Remember if it is not documented, it "didn't happen.")

Evening "office hours" with the principal once a month may be appealing to some parents. Although by appointment, these are more informal than other scheduled conferences. Similarly, once a month, the principal may host an "afternoon tea" where the conversation is strictly informal about general topics related to the school. Several of the ideas listed above are modifications of suggestions included in *Conference time for teachers and parents; A teacher's guide to successful conference reporting* (National Education Association of the United States, 1965).

Providing parents with positive school experiences can begin as soon as the child is initially enrolled. Each new family can be connected with another more experienced family to give them hints, support, and advice about the school and its staff.

Adults and students may read the same book together or watch the same movie (or DVD) and then discuss it. Mothers' teas (even if held in the evening) can be offered where students prepare simple foods and provide entertainment. Fathers' breakfast is another example. One of the author's favorite memories of his children's Lutheran school education is such an early breakfast in a fourth grade. Dressed in suits and ties before they went to the office, the fathers sat in small chairs nibbling croissants and fruit kabobs as their offspring showcased their knowledge of small appliances and machines.

Cross-generational Bible study, especially between parents and children of the same gender can be true bonding experiences. Any cross-events such as these are important for all concerned and can yield positive results for the school and/or church.

Other approaches to make the school parent-friendly include the following:

- Sponsor parent-child, or parent-faculty kickball or softball games or other sporting events.
- Open the gym at least one night a week for family recreation night.
- In elementary school, invite parents to read a favorite book or chapter to the students.
- Create a "Parent University" that might use staff and parent expertise to teach classes about computers, gardening, physical fitness, the basics of Lutheranism, or offer parenting classes on issues like normal teenage development, drug prevention, bullying, spirituality in children, etc. Parents can be invited to be the "professors" in this "university."
- Have a "Parent Talent Night" during the school year to allow parents to showcase their talent.
- Allow students to invite parents or other family members into their classroom for part of the day. Hold several "Bring an Adult to School Days."

Suggestions made above are modified from *Building Parent Partnerships* (Gutloff, 1966).

Finally, evaluate activities involving parents and then report the results to all the stakeholders in the school. Not only do you want to improve your conferences and other contacts with parents, you also want to make sure that parents actually have a voice, and that improvements are made based on their input.

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