

2. Dealing with a complainant

The following times school tips will help staff negotiate an outcome with the complainant that meets all needs.

Value complaints

Complaints are an important way for the community to provide information and feedback to a school.

Complaints —as well as praise — provide valuable feedback about how well you and the school are meeting parents' needs. The complainant is inviting the school to enter into a problem-solving process to find a solution. Often, if the complainant's emotional investment is high, the complaint can come across as a demand.

Make the first contact count

The complainant's first contact with the school can be the most important. They will be more satisfied if their concerns are dealt with by the first person they talk to, without having to re-explain their situation over and over.

On the first contact:

- listen to the complainant carefully and with an open mind
- treat them with respect and courtesy, take them seriously and let them have their say
- make it clear that the complaint will be taken seriously
- explain the procedures for resolving complaints
- state what you can do, not what you cannot do
- find out the nature of the complaint
- take notes
- if the complaint involves complex issues which are difficult for you to understand on first hearing, ask the complainant to put the complaint in writing
- make a mutually convenient time to meet, if a meeting is required.

Summarise the first contact with the complainant. For example:

Thank you for the information. We have agreed that both you and the principal can meet on (the agreed date). Let me check that I've got the key issues you'd like to discuss. With your permission, I'll write them down so that you don't need to explain your position again.

The great majority of complaints are by nature concerned enquiry with no hostility intended. However, you should be prepared for the occasional instance of aggression. Guide 12: Managing confrontation in this document has tips to help you take control of situations where the complainant is being confrontational.

Discuss the complaint with the complainant

When it comes to discussing the substance of the complaint with the complainant:

- give the complainant your name and refer to them by name
- let the complainant decide whether the matter is really an enquiry, a concern or a complaint
- keep the discussion to relevant issues
- check the facts to make sure they are clear and beyond doubt
- check any assumptions you might have made by asking questions
- don't form an opinion before hearing all sides of the story.

If you are unsure about what should have happened, refer to relevant policies and documented processes.

Work through a problem-solving process to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions based on meeting the needs of all parties. Be clear about what solutions you can actually offer. Sometimes an outcome might be non-negotiable.

Explain what will happen next and what steps and support are available.

Follow-up

The complainant with a particularly complex complaint should be followed up. It is important to keep lines of communication open after the initial discussion. Discuss how actions that have been mutually agreed will be followed up by both parties, and how any changes will be maintained. Discussion needs to focus on learning rather than attributing blame.

Make sure written responses address all of the issues, contain correct information and use plain language.

Keep everyone who is involved informed of the progress and outcome of the complaint.

Follow the requirements of your school's procedure to fully record the details of concerns and complaints.