

stepping out of our comfort zone

Strategies for addressing conflicts with parents

by Madhavi Sudarsana

Monday morning

(Juliana) Teacher: "Good morning! Jack needs some extra clothes and diapers."

(Ana) Mother: "Okay. I'll bring them tomorrow."

Tuesday morning

Juliana: "Hi, Ana. We borrowed diapers for Jack yesterday . . ."

Ana: "Oh no, I forgot! I'll bring them tomorrow. I will also bring extra diapers so you can replenish the supply."

Wednesday morning

Ana: "I'm sorry, Juliana, but I totally forgot. When I pick him up tonight, I will give you some diapers."

Juliana: "But Ana, Jack doesn't have any extra clothes or diapers now."



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teacher. She is a certified PITC and Family Partnership trainer and is working on her license towards Educational Therapy.

Ana: "Can you please manage today somehow? I will bring clothes tomorrow."

During water play Jack got wet and needed a change of clothes. As it so happens, all of the donated extra clothes were girls' clothes.

Juliana picked up a pink glittery shirt with 'Sweet Princess' written on it. Jack was very excited to get this unique shirt. He ran around the playground showing it off to everyone.

"Jack! Come here now!" a loud voice boomed across the yard. Jack froze in his tracks. He turned around and saw his dad.

Jack's dad, Jerome, was a large man of 6'3" with a big voice to match his body. Visibly upset, he roared at Jack, "What are you wearing?"

"Dad, look at my sparkly shirt! Juliana gave it to me. Do you like it?" said Jack, still excited.

Without saying a word, Jerome grabbed Jack's hand and nearly dragged him to Juliana.

"Juliana, what were you thinking putting this shirt on him?" he demanded, towering over her. Juliana, feeling uncomfortable, backed off a little.

Jerome was fuming. His fists were clenched and his face was red. He was breathing very hard.

"Jerome, it looks like you need to talk to me. Let me call Melissa (the director) so that I can step out."

Juliana chose every word calmly and carefully. Although she was feeling intimidated by Jerome, she maintained eye contact.

As soon as Melissa arrived, Juliana stepped out of the room. She led Jerome to the break room and offered him water. Jerome refused. He was really upset.

Juliana pulled out a chair for Jerome and sat down in the chair beside it. Jerome would not sit down. He started pacing. "Jerome, you are really upset," said Juliana in a matter of fact voice.

Jerome just grunted. Juliana waited patiently. A few seconds later Jerome sat in the chair.

"Jack is a boy. Why did you put girl's shirt on him?"

"You are upset because I put a pink shirt on him," Juliana reflected.

"You are a teacher. You should know that if you dress a boy like a girl then he will behave like one. I don't like that. Why did you do that? Were you trying to insult him? Us?"

Juliana was taken back. She never thought that putting a pink shirt on a boy would cause so much trouble. "I am sorry, Jerome, but I would never insult any child or his family. We had no boys' shirts in the center."

"But what happened to his shirts?"

"He didn't have any."

"Then why didn't you tell my wife? You see her everyday."

"I told her on Monday. She forgot. Now we don't have any extra shirts or diapers for him. We have been borrowing diapers for the last two days. When he got wet playing at the water table we had to use what was available."

"Oh." There was nothing more to say. Jerome could see that this was not Juliana's fault. She had tried her best. Finally he got up and forced a smile, "I'm sorry for getting so angry. But don't you think that Jack will get confused because he is wearing girls' clothes?"

"At this age, children are . . ." Juliana and Jerome got into a conversation about young children's gender identity development with Juliana promising to get Jerome some literature on the subject.

The next morning Jack's mom came with a stack of clothes and diapers and apologized profusely.

Strategies for defusing tense situations

How did Juliana turn an angry parent into a cooperative one? Certainly it was not with magic. It looks like Juliana used a number of specific strategies to empower the parent and defuse a tense situation:

- **Recognizing and acknowledging the problem:** Juliana recognized the problem and sought to resolve it immediately. In this case, however, Jerome was too upset to go unnoticed. Often, we tend to ignore problems until they reach a crisis point. For example, when a parent gets into the habit of picking up their child late from child care, we need to address it before it crosses our comfort zone; otherwise we might handle the situation rashly or unprofessionally.
 - **Seeking space:** Juliana stepped out of the classroom. She avoided arguing in front of the children. By going to the break room she also had a safer environment. Had Jerome become aggressive, she could get help immediately. When the parent is intimidating or potentially aggressive, it's a good idea to choose a space where teachers have a natural advantage; advantage comes from a familiar environment and/or the proximity of support available there. Another advantage of moving out of the classroom was that Juliana could focus on Jerome without being worried about keeping the children safe.
 - **Being professional:** Being professional has many faces to it, but the most important is being respectful. Juliana tried to make Jerome comfortable. She didn't raise her voice, but offered an explanation. Sometimes, a parent
- has a demand that you can't satisfy. For example, sometimes a parent has an issue with another child or family in the program and wants you to disenroll that child. In this case, you acknowledge their concerns and explain how decisions like this are made in your program. You can be respectful and firm about your policies at the same time.
- **Creating equality:** Unfortunately, parents often treat early childhood professionals disrespectfully and try to dominate the situation. Juliana chose to sit and offered Jerome a seat, too. In this way, she tried to remove his height as a means of physical intimidation. When you maintain eye contact and show respect and confidence, you are creating a feeling of equality, which the parent will come to recognize. This is a good strategy to use when working with parents who like to argue over myriad minor issues as a way of exerting control.
 - **Avoiding blame:** Juliana told Jerome about her conversation with his wife only when he was ready to listen. When dealing with parents who are upset, it's important to listen to them and acknowledge their feelings. This strategy helps teachers identify parents' fears, as well as their real concerns hidden under their angry outbursts. In this way, Juliana realized that Jerome was afraid of possible gender identity confusion for Jack. In listening to parents who are upset about their children getting bitten, I have discovered that their real concern was that their own child would start biting others. Once you figure out the problem, you can name it and then determine how to resolve it.
 - **Staying focused on the problem:** The willingness to solve the problem is very crucial. Sometimes, a parent is uncomfortable bringing up issues. But

teachers might be able to recognize those. I know that I am opening a can of worms when I ask a parent if they have any concerns about the program or classroom. But I also think that it's important for parents to express their concerns in order to build trust. Unaddressed concerns and issues, however minor they are, can result in real pain later.

Dealing with angry, upset, or dissatisfied parents can elicit a range of uncomfortable feelings in us. This has a physiological component as well. The angry parent might be interpreted as a threat. The center for emotions in our brain, the amygdala, then reacts either with fear or anger. Both of these emotions, if unchecked, hinder communication:

- When we try to flee a situation because we're scared, we become defensive.
- On the other hand, when we experience anger then we might attack, ending up accusing or blaming the parent.

Understanding these natural — albeit unhelpful — responses can help us to handle situations better.

As early childhood educators, we usually see ourselves as nurturing, kind people and generally don't like confrontations. To stay in our comfort zone, we might avoid situations that need to be addressed. Avoiding situations that demand our attention can make us less effective in our jobs and ultimately impacts the quality of our relationships with others and the quality of our program. Learning how to handle our emotions and address the needs of parents who come to us for help is one way that we demonstrate our professionalism and commitment to the children we serve.