

Information Sheet No.37

Raising concerns constructively

As a parent you have a vested interest in what happens in your school. Parents sometimes need to raise concerns about their children's schooling. This can be difficult but it is important to discuss with your child's classroom teacher any problems or concerns you may have about the learning program. This gives the teacher a chance to respond and, if necessary, work with you to resolve it. Doing nothing in the hope that the problem will go away may work on occasion, but you run the risk of the situation becoming more complex and more difficult to resolve.

Teachers will be more prepared to listen and to act upon problems and concerns if they know that they feel supported. (This means you have a responsibility to give credit when it's due.)

Concerns about your child's schooling

Step 1: Get a good grasp of the problem

Before you visit the school, work out what it is that is really bothering you. Concentrate on describing the problem clearly. This will help you to decide whether or not approaching the teacher is warranted. The teacher will respond most readily when your facts are correct and you show your willingness to be part of the solution. "Shooting from the hip" only encourages defensiveness.

Step 2: Arrange an interview with the class (or subject) teacher

Any problems deserve more than a few hurried words before the bell goes, so make an appointment. Mentioning the reason for the appointment is not only courteous but also promotes efficient use of valuable time by giving the teacher an opportunity to prepare for the meeting in the same way that you have.

Step 3: Discuss what's bothering you

- Don't leave the teacher guessing. Observe the social niceties by all means but remember the real purpose of your visit. A friendly, relaxed but businesslike manner will work best.
- State your problem calmly and clearly.
- Show that you want to be part of the solution by expressing your concern and asking what can be done.
- Avoid intimidating behaviour such as shouting, aggressive body language, sexist or racist language, making threats, etc. Work at staying calm and objective. This can be hard to do where the welfare of your child is concerned.
- Listen at least as much as you talk. You might learn something new.
- Keep an open mind.
- Expect to compromise. Summarise agreed actions so that you and the teacher understand the important points in the same way.
- Arrange a follow-up meeting if necessary.

Step 4: Carry out the action you agreed to take

Depending on what was discussed, the sooner you start on an agreed course of action the better. Be patient with your child and the classroom teacher—changes don't happen overnight.

Most meetings with the teacher result in satisfactory outcomes.

Continued →

Information Sheet No.37

Raising concerns constructively (cont.)

School-based concerns

Occasionally you may want to address your problem or concern to someone other than the classroom teacher. This may be the case when:

- You have already approached the classroom or subject teacher but no satisfactory resolution could be arrived at
- You believe that it is a school rather than classroom matter or your problem or concern is not about a member of the school's teaching staff.

The steps recommended for meetings with class teachers apply in each of these situations. Some additional suggestions are:

- Try to get the problem resolved at the lowest possible level of authority.
- Involve as few people as possible but having support can be helpful.
- Use existing lines of authority if you need to take your problem or concern beyond the school principal.
- Avoid discussing the issue with others while your child is present.
- Aim for a co-operative, problem-solving approach. This does not mean that you should minimise the importance of your problem or concern or be less tenacious in your efforts to do something about it. You can be determined and reasonable at the same time.

Using these avenues will help you to resolve most of your school-based problems and concerns in a satisfactory way. These steps do not apply, however, if you wish to make a formal complaint about a teacher. This is a complex process which is not taken lightly.

Note: In secondary schools, there are other staff members you might contact such as the pastoral care teacher, the year co-ordinator, the teacher responsible for student welfare, the subject area co-ordinator, etc. ★