

**Managing Difficult Parent Conversations:
Practical Strategies for Navigating
Challenging Interactions with Confidence**

JOHN BURNS PhD
HICES
CENTRAL COAST GRAMMAR SCHOOL
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LIFEBASE HEALTH AND WELLBEING RESEARCH CENTRE

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Alice Springs (Mparntwe)
Education Declaration
artwork

"Parents, carers and families are the first and most important educational influence in a child's life. They have a critical role in early development, including social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical wellbeing. They instill attitudes and values that support young people to access and participate in education and training, and contribute to local and global communities. It is critical for the education community to work in partnership with parents, carers and families to support a child's progress through early learning and school".

p. 7



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2

Teacher's workload, turnover intentions and mental health



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Journal of School Psychology

Teacher workload, turnover intentions, and mental health perspectives of Australian teachers

Heather Cunningham^a, Rebecca J. Cobb^a, Anne Roberts^a, Sherry Carter^a, Catherine Gifford^a, Anna Drayton^a, Catherine Clark^a, Nicholas J. Gray^a, Alexander Kessler^a

^a Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

^b Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Teacher's work has long been recognized as a demanding profession. Despite growing acknowledgment of the stress and mental health implications for teachers, little research has explored how teachers' workload is perceived and how it is associated with turnover intentions. This study explored the relationship between teachers' workload and turnover intentions, using the current best practice measures, and also using workload measures that were specifically designed to assess workload in schools. The results showed that workload was associated with turnover intentions and turnover intentions were associated with mental health. The results also showed that workload was associated with turnover intentions and turnover intentions were associated with mental health. The results also showed that workload was associated with turnover intentions and turnover intentions were associated with mental health.

Keywords: Teacher workload; Turnover intentions; Mental health; Teacher's workload; Turnover intentions; Mental health

Survey of 9,959 Australian classroom teachers – primary and high school

“68% of teachers reported a largely unmanageable workload (51% unmanageable; 17.6% completely unmanageable” (p. 148)



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Teacher's workload, turnover intentions, and mental health



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	Australian norm	Teachers 2025
Depression	5.02	15.4
Anxiety	3.36	12.12
Stress	8.10	21.8

"Almost all teachers reported moderate-to extremely severe levels of stress (90.7%, n=4374)."

Keywords: Teacher workload, turnover intentions, mental health, burnout, stress, depression, anxiety, and well-being.

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Comments relating to managing the demands and expectations of parents (24%) were almost as frequently cited as those regarding managing student misbehaviour and engagement (28%). The "increased parental expectations" that added to teachers' stress included excessive communication with parents, and negotiation of their individual expectations in relation to their child's performance and experience within the school environment. As one teacher states, "over the top expectations from ... parents as to what is actually possible to achieve in four terms".

(p. 426-427)



Teachers also reported that a change in parents' perspectives of and attitudes towards teachers would be helpful in addressing stress, with teachers often speaking from a position of felt subservience.

(p. 429)



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Private school teachers identified parents, as opposed to pupils, as 'more of an issue at [private] schools. Interviewees from different schools considered that parents applied 'pressure' and were 'very hands on'. Teachers explained that parents expected high academic outcomes (sometimes regardless of the pupil's interest in academic work), and that they demanded instant replies to emails, meetings at short notice and were inclined to ask for 'investigations' into teachers' conduct if their child was aggrieved by any kind of school sanction.

(p. 213)

[illegible]

Teachers interpreted these 'unpleasant' interactions as a consequence of the 'business client' nature of the relationship which positioned teachers as 'more answerable to the parents' compared to state school teachers who were more accountable to government. Several interviewees made comments of the type that parents were paying 'large sums of money' and thus held high expectations for what one teacher termed the end 'product'.

(p. 213)



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Improving Schools

Comparing sources of stress for state and private school teachers in England

Jude Brady and Elaine Wilson
University of Cambridge UK

Abstract
Teaching is understood to be a highly stressful profession. In England, workload, high student accountability policies and pupil behaviour are often cited as stressors that contribute to teacher distress. However, in the equivalent sector, there are fewer teachers than state schools in the private sector, but very little is known about the stress of teachers' work in the private sector. The current evidence on the prevalence and sources of stress is based on a review of 10 studies in the state sector in England. The current study compares the experience of stress reported by 10 teachers in the state sector to those of 10 teachers in the private sector. The study is based on qualitative data from a single study. Findings show that, although in some ways private sector teachers and state teachers working in independent primary and secondary phase education in England. The results indicate that school teachers' work is often a source of stress, but not necessarily a source of stress. In comparison, private school teachers report less stress experience of work-related stress, but some directly demanding factors as a contrast. The research suggests that in the comparison between state and private sector, specific insights may help to focus school leaders' efforts to improve teaching conditions in both sectors.

Keywords:
English primary, private schools, stress, workload

In contrast to this experience, participants from the state sector rarely noted parents as a direct source of stress.

(p. 213)

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Teacher-directed violence within the current or past year

Prevalence of Parental Violence Toward Teachers: A Meta-Analysis

Authors: Roberto Rizzo, PhD
Department of Psychology and Behavioral Science, University of Kentucky, USA
Kathryn Hargrave, PhD
Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, USA
Loren A. J. van der Werf, PhD
Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, USA
Charles Longenecker, PhD
Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, USA

	Pooled prevalence
Offensive remark victimisations	14.9%
Intimidation	5.8%
Physical attacks	0.8%
Slander*	8.7%
Shouting*	4.2%
Insults*	3.8%
Public humiliation*	2.4%
Accusation of lack of effort*	1.7%

* 3 studies from Estonia

Keywords: school violence, bullying, cyberbullying, teacher violence, teacher safety

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THREE CORE ASSUMPTIONS

ONE

Parents are a key part of our community – most are supportive and fabulous

TWO

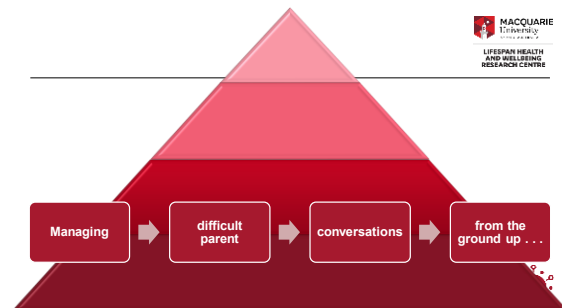
All parents deserve to be treated with basic human respect and decency.
We don't parent shame

THREE

No matter what I say, no matter what you do, there will *always* be tricky parents

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11



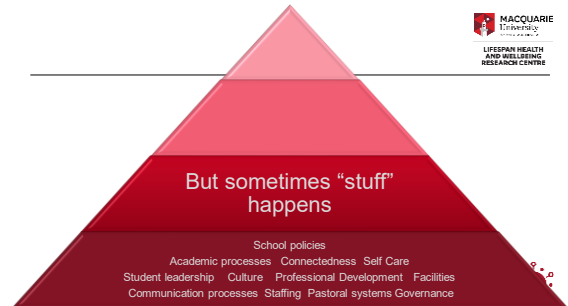
12

AND ONE MORE CORE ASSUMPTION



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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL



Based on the idea of two key dimensions to conflict. . .

1. **Assertiveness:** Actively seeking to get your own needs met, often at the expense of the other. This element determines how forcefully a person approaches the conflict
2. **Cooperativeness:** Actively seeking to work with others to find mutually beneficial solutions. This element determines the degree to which a person is willing to yield to the other in a conflict situation.

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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL



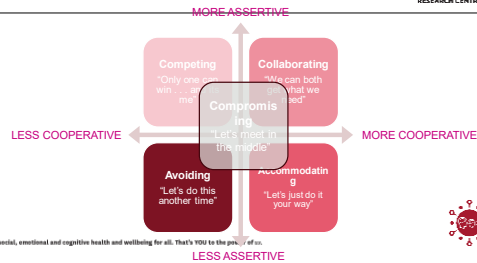
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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

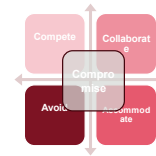
THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL



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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL



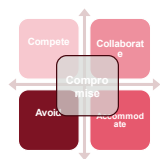
Question:
Which conflict mode do you think is the right one to develop for your work in schools . . . and why?

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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL



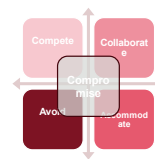
Answer:
It depends!
Effective conflict management happens when we match the conflict mode to the situation.

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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

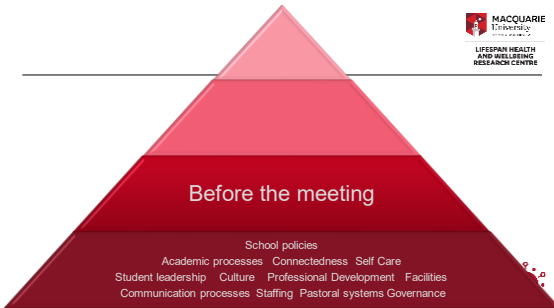
THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL



Likely approach	When . . .
Compete	Safety or legal issues at stake
Collaborate	Issue and relationship both important
Compromise	Both sides have reasonable positions but limited time
Avoid (temporarily)	Emotions are too high or issue is minor
Accommodate	Issue is more important to parent than the school

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'

I am seeking to
understand all sides
of the situation . . .

. . . rather than to
just tell people how
I see things.

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'

I am seeking to
work collaboratively
with parents . . .

. . . rather than to
do things
unilaterally.

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'

I am seeking to be
flexible and
accommodating
. . .

. . . rather than
being inflexible and
rigid.

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'



I am optimistic for a positive outcome. . .

. . . rather than pessimistic and fatalistic about the outcome.

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'



I am focusing on the solutions. . .

. . . rather than focusing on the problem.

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'



I am focusing on peoples' strengths. . .

. . . rather than focusing on their weaknesses.

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The mindset of successful 'meeters'



I am resolved to maintaining my positive values . . .

. . . rather than compromising in the heat of battle.

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Looking beneath the iceberg . . .



Being
empathetic
to
parent
'trickiness'

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29

Looking beneath the iceberg . . .



The **protective**
parent:

*Something bad could
happen to my child and
I need to protect them.*

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30

Looking beneath the iceberg . . .



The **threatened**
parent:

*Something bad could
happen to me (shamed,
exposed, loss of face?)
and I need to protect
myself.*

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Looking beneath the iceberg . . .



The **aggrieved**
parent:

*Me or my child has
been wronged and I
want justice done.*

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Looking beneath the iceberg . . .

The **stressed** parent:

Life is so overwhelming for me right now with everything (else) that is going on.

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Looking beneath the iceberg . . .

The **unwell** parent:

I have a mental illness (and maybe I don't even know I do!) that affects the way I act/react.

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Looking beneath the iceberg . . .

The **diverse** parent:

I see the world (including my child, this school, and this situation) in a very different way to you.

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My pre-meeting checklist

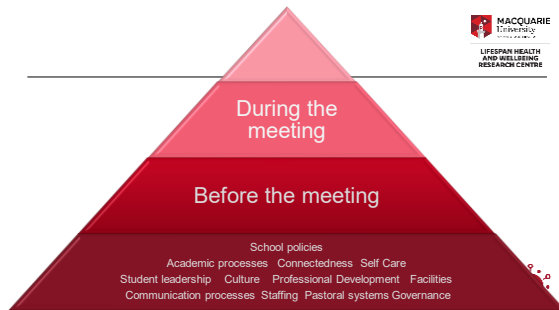


- Be very clear – for you and for the parents – about the purpose/agenda of your meeting. "Frame" your meeting in a positive and productive context.
- Do your homework – get all your "facts" straight/verify information
- Know and use your school policies
- Be intentional with your meeting invitees. Who needs to be there?
- Be intentional with your venue
- Be intentional with the time
- Consider how the parent may be feeling
- Develop some *preliminary* ideas about your desired outcome
- Tap into your own feelings. What do you need to monitor?

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During the meeting

- The merits of a 'joining' phase?
- (Re)establish the agenda for the meeting
 - Brief statement on the nature of concern that has prompted the meeting
 - The time available / end time
 - We'll let you know what we know, and we're keen to know what you know
 - And then we'll see what solutions we can come up with moving forward

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During the meeting

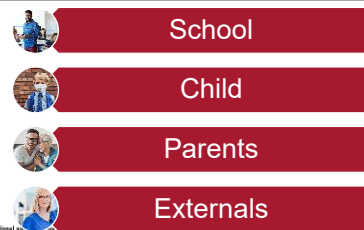
- The merits of a 'joining' phase?
- (Re)establish the agenda for the meeting
- Sharing what you know – factually
- Invite their views and input
- Exploring solutions

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Exploring solutions - Who can do what?



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During the meeting



- The merits of a 'joining' phase?
- (Re)establish the agenda for the meeting
- Sharing what you know – factually
- Invite their views and input
- Exploring solutions
- Dealing with unexpected diversions/new information
- When to next meet and confirm 'homework' for everyone



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How is the meeting's temperature?



Green (0-4)	The productive meeting zone	Make progress on your meeting goals
Orange (5-7)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
Red (8-10)	The febrile zone	Conclude the meeting



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Meeting in the green zone



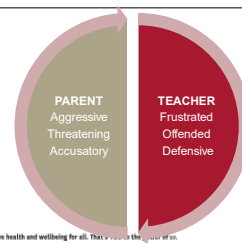
Green (0-4)	The productive meeting zone	Make progress on your meeting goals
• You know how to do this. This isn't our topic of interest today.		



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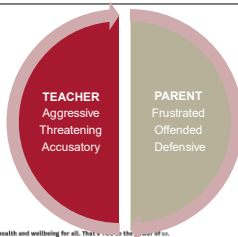
WHAT WE WANT TO AVOID . . .



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WHAT WE WANT TO AVOID . . .



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Meeting in the orange zone



Orange (5-7)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
1. Keep yourself calm ✓ Breathe ✓ Relax your muscles ✓ Mental reminders ("stay calm . . . I am the professional in charge here . . . I don't need to provoke or react to this")		

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Meeting in the orange zone



Orange (6-8)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
2. Keep your tone, language and body language neutral ✓ Tone is quiet and confident but not aggressive or condescending or sarcastic ✓ Keep hand and facial gestures neutral ✓ Rate of speech is slow		

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Meeting in the orange zone



Orange (6-8)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
3. Using validation to lower the temperature. Validation = the process of <u>expressing</u> to the other party that you can <u>understand</u> where they are coming from and <u>why</u> it is important to them. Validation ≠ agreeing with the other party or giving in to the other party.		

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Meeting in the orange zone



Orange (6-8)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
3. Using validation to lower the temperature Failure to validate as the emotion rises can come across as - o Dismissive - o Minimising - o Judging - o Denying		

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Meeting in the orange zone



Orange (6-8)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
3. Using validation to lower the temperature Examples of validating statement. "I can see that this is very upsetting for you" "I can see how much this matters to you" "I can better understand now how this has been building up for some time" "Let me make sure I understand your perspective"		

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Meeting in the orange zone



Orange (6-8)	The rising temperature zone	Take steps to bring the temperature down
4. Coming back to the shared concern – student wellbeing - o As the temperature rises it is easy to get stuck in micro-arguments or minor points of difference. - o As far as possible, seek to come back to the shared concern – student wellbeing		

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How is the meeting's temperature?



Red (8-10)	The febrile zone	Conclude the meeting
Signs your meeting has hit the red zone - o Someone has become threatening or abusive - o Someone has become distressed to the point of no longer being able to continue - o You feel you have lost control of the meeting process - o You have concerns for the physical and/or emotional safety of those present		

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In table groups . . .

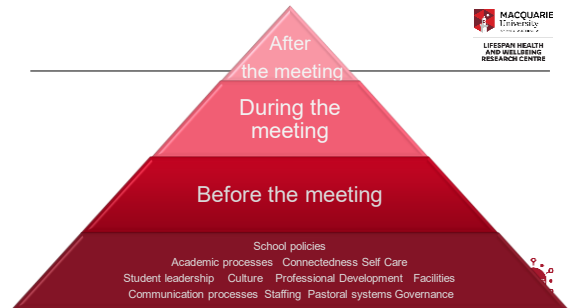


Imagine your meeting has just hit the RED zone.

Write a 'script'/short sentence for what you will say to the parent to bring the meeting to a close.

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After the meeting



- Yep, we put aside some additional **time to debrief** with staff **immediately after the meeting**
- RU OK? Let's check in with each other and ourselves
- What do we need to escalate to our manager?
- Write a (concise) summary to document the meeting
 - Restate reason for meeting
 - Who was present
 - Concise summary of key information shared
 - Concise summary of outcomes – who will do what?
 - Confirm time/date of follow-up meeting, if applicable

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55

After the meeting



- Yep, we put aside some additional time to debrief with staff **immediately after the meeting**
- RU OK? Let's check in with each other and ourselves
- What do we need to escalate to our manager?
- Write a (concise) summary to document the meeting
- File your summary
- Write/send a summary to the parent
 - Restate reason for meeting
 - Who was present
 - Concise summary of key information shared
 - Concise summary of outcomes – who will do what?
 - Confirm time/date of follow-up meeting, if applicable

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Today's take home messages

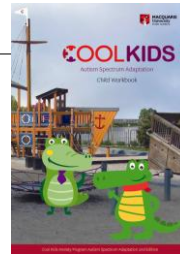


1. Don't be surprised that sometimes we need to have challenging conversations with parents.
2. Parents are valuable parts of our community and need to be treated with respect. We never 'parent shame', even with our most challenging parents.
3. The best approach to challenging parent conversations is to PREVENT them through our quality positive school policies, practices, processes and personnel.
4. The Thomas-Kilmann model is a helpful way to understand conflict and to guide how we approach challenging meetings. Effective conflict management happens when we match the conflict mode to the situation.
5. Prepare well for any meeting you expect will be challenging.
6. Use a traffic light system to guide your actions in the meeting.



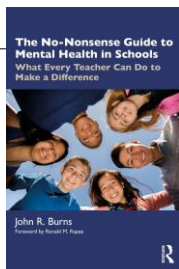
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