



5 tips for knowing when it's time to approach your school

Hi, I'm Linda McNeil and I have worked with parents in schools for almost 2 decades, I provide workshops for parents, pre-service and in-service teachers and careers advisers on how to deal with difficult conversations, parent engagement and communication strategies.

My two children have left school now, but I will never forget the intense feelings it brought up in me when they came home upset about something that happened at school. Logic flew out the window and I instantly turned into mama bear.

You can guess how that worked out. No one wants to front an angry bear and I found out that's not the way to get the best for my child or build a good relationship with school staff!

So how *do* you get to the core of the issue quickly and approach the school without losing your head? I know that parents today are even more time-pressed than ever before, so here are some quick tips to help you when your child comes home upset.

1. Is this a one-off?

Even if it is bullying or an upset in the playground, if it is a one-off incident then you can trust your child to get over it in a normal way by giving them the right tools which are:

- a sympathetic ear and big hug to let them know that they are loved,
- assuring them that home is their safe place, that tomorrow is a new day and they will feel much better,
- helping them understand that sometimes things happen and we don't even know the reason why,
- and that other children make mistakes sometimes just like we do.

With your support they will learn that they can survive such minor infractions and will build up their own resilience.

2. Can they handle it themselves?

If we go in early to solve every one of our children's spats or squabbles we are not teaching them how to resolve their own issues. Help them to build their own problem-solving skills by asking them:

- did you tell the other child to stop it?
- who else saw it?
- did you tell the teacher?
- where is the safe space at school?
- is there a buddy bench or time-out space?
- do you know who is on playground duty or bus duty?

This will help your child think about ways they can solve their own problems and deal with things before they escalate into something more serious.

3. Is it a sign of something deeper?

If your child starts to exhibit unusual behaviour that is inconsistent with their personality, then it is time to ask more probing questions, using simple emotional cues they will understand.

- Why are you feeling sad?
- Who is making you feel sick in the tummy?
- When do these feelings get worse?

Depending on their response, this may be the time to make an appointment with the teacher to discuss your child's emotional state to find ways of dealing with the issue. Work with the teacher and remember that in the case of bullying, both children (the bully and the recipient) need care since they are both in a bad place. If you don't feel comfortable speaking with the teacher then ask to speak to someone else who can help you at the school.

4. Is it worth pursuing?

One of the best lessons we can teach our children is that of discernment. So, talk through the problem with them to judge if it is something that needs to be followed up or something they can live with.

For example, when there is an issue with the child's teacher, whether it is a personality clash or something else and it is making their school life difficult, serious consideration needs to be given about whether it is worth pursuing or not. Students, especially in high school have many teachers so it is inevitable they will come across a teacher they don't

get along with for any number of reasons. What we need to remember is this may happen in their workplaces or social settings once they have left school, so it is important to show your child how to navigate difficult situations. You and your child are faced with a decision to 'rock the boat' or not.

- ***When to rock***

If it is having a serious impact on your child's wellbeing or academic results, then it is something that needs to be pursued. It is always best to start with the teacher if they feel comfortable doing this (it could be a simple misunderstanding) otherwise find out who is the best person to speak to. Remember that it is the role of the principal to support their staff member, so you may not always be met with the reception you had hoped for, but it is your role to advocate for your child, so don't be discouraged. Ask to take along a support person if you need to. If you can present your case in a factual and unemotional way, you are more likely to get a fair hearing. So, take the time to:

- compose yourself,
- compose what you want to say and
- be open to hearing the other side of the story too.

- ***Not to rock***

Be led by your child, often older students would rather put up with adverse situations than have their parents intervene, once again this requires serious thought and discussion with your child to help them determine how best to proceed. Perhaps you can brainstorm some different approaches with your child like adopting a new attitude with the teacher to see if that makes a difference. This develops social and emotional intelligence in students and encourages lateral problem-solving skills.

5. When is the right time to step in?

When we think about self-esteem and self-confidence in our children, we can't expect it to materialise out of thin air. Confidence comes from

- a) knowing they have the social and emotional skills they need and
- b) that there are safety nets around them to catch them when they falter.

It is important to remember that regardless of the age of our children, as their parents it is our role to step in and take control of a situation when they are unable to handle it. This could be:

- their overuse of social media,
- their choice of friends,
- their social pursuits,
- even their obsessive study habits.

Children and adolescents go through many changes over the course of their development and as their parents, it is our job to watch them and guide them when we see them veering off course. This might be imposing a

- 'no devices after 8pm rule' if their sleep is adversely affected or
- '½ hour exercise between study sessions' caveat if their mental health is at risk.

This fosters self-regulation and encourages balance which are both attributes that will serve them well later on in life.

Engage with the school where you can for support in imposing such measures or find out how they think you should proceed.

Remember that approaching your school with *respect and courtesy* will open more doors than taking out your anger or frustration on them. Believe me, I know how hard it is especially when you feel like you aren't being taken seriously. Just *persist politely* and you will have a lot more success.

For more tips on how to engage positively with your school and downloadable resources or to book me for a workshop visit my website at www.lindamcneil.com.au