DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS

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I. Introduction

A. Status, financial and credential differences between parents and teachers that make for difficult parent-teacher relationships

B. Defensiveness on both sides: the natural fear that infects the teacher-parent encounter

II. Typology of Difficult Parents

A. The Aggressive-Threatening-Abusive Parent

1. The parent accustomed to power, for whom parenting and its inherent loss of control is a wounding experience

2. The intellectually arrogant and competitive parent

3. The parent with something to cover up, often a personal disturbance or family trouble

For all of these parents, the habitual way of dealing with helpless-making situations or narcissistically wounding situations is to attack first; the best defense is a good offense.

B. The Anxious and/or Incompetent Parent

1. The overwhelmed and incompetent parent -- single mother with multiple troubles

2. The chronically dependent parent

3. The chronically anxious parent -- anxious child dyad

4. Parents with separation difficulties
   a. the over-involved parent
   b. the "ejected" parent who cannot tolerate being left by the child
C. The Denying or Unresponsive Parent
   1. The disturbed or depressed family
   2. The overly busy or disengaged parents

III. Role-Playing Teacher-Parent Encounters

IV. Some Practical Suggestions for Dealing with Parents
DIFFICULT PARENTS: CASES

A. The Threatening-Abusive-Aggressive Parent

Case #1

An obviously troubled boy in the school, after a series of minor incidents, comes to the attention of the teachers because of his remarks about suicide. A fellow student brings a written sarcastic suicide pledge to the attention of the school psychologist. The parents are notified, but the father dismisses the school's concerns with a gruff, "He's got a great sense of humor." A follow-up meeting is scheduled in which a large number of school representatives are present. Father and mother enter together, but she never says a word. The father takes over the meeting from the start; though he is superficially civil, he treats the issue as if it is a legal proceeding at the end of which blame is going to be assessed and punishment handed out. He creates an adversarial atmosphere without making clear whom the adversaries are. The school personnel are unfailingly polite and nonconfrontational, though they do insist that the son is in serious trouble. The father insists on having "evidence." He is finally presented with the "suicide note" which has a large quantity of filthy, disparaging comments about the parents in it. The father pledges to keep it confidential and transmit it only to the son's psychiatrist. He later reneges on all his pledges and uses it both to intimidate his son and his son's friend who turned it over to the school.

Case #2

A highly intellectual and arrogant family have a son who subtly provokes his teacher into an irrational blow-up in the classroom. The teacher is humiliated and ashamed by the incident and takes responsibility for his part in it. However, neither the boy nor the family will acknowledge that the boy had any responsibility whatsoever in the matter. The family insists on a series of meetings with the teacher and the administration. They request that the boy be switched out of that particular teacher's class and that the teacher be censored in some public way. Even after repeated meetings the parents uniformly refuse to acknowledge that their son could have had any role whatsoever in what happened. Their contention is that the fault lies exclusively in the teacher's character.
B. The Anxious and/or Incompetent Parent

Case #1

A family with an only child goes through a bad divorce, which leaves the mother in more or less sole custody of the son. The father is involved from time to time but takes little real responsibility for the raising of the son. The boy is enormously able. As his adolescence progresses, however, he becomes angry and socially isolated. Over the years he talks less and less to his mother. In the absence of any husband with whom to speak, she begins to call teachers to solicit their help in dealing with their son. Her suffering is obvious; everything that happens to him she takes deeply to heart. His loneliness is her loneliness. Yet the more she cares the more distant and contemptuous he is of her. She begins to ask teachers, "Would you speak to him about this, he no longer listens to me?"

C. The Denying or Unresponsive Parent

Case #1

A family has had several children go through the same school. All have manifested small difficulties. The last child, sadly, is in obvious psychological trouble from the start of her career. Her teachers hold meetings with the parents in which her difficulties are discussed. Her parents always maintain that they are temporary and that they will pass, or that they are better than they were. Every year her teachers have to rediscover her difficulties and every year the wheel is reinvented. Over time her advisor and the administration come to recognize that more serious action needs to be taken to aid this girl. The parents listen, pay lip service to the recommendations and do nothing.

Case #2

A family goes through a difficult divorce, leaving the mother taking care of the children for all of their high school years. The father is extraordinarily busy, often traveling very far away and for long periods of time. At the beginning of the senior year of the last child in this family, the mother abruptly takes a job in another city, citing her need for personal growth. The daughter is sent to live with the father in Cambridge, which translates into her living alone in a large house because he is so rarely there. The daughter expresses considerable distress in school and the parents are contacted. It is very difficult to reach them and almost impossible to find a convenient time to schedule a meeting. At the beginning of the meeting the father turns to one of the representatives of the school and says, "I want you to understand that I am a very important international entrepreneur."

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