

# When a Teacher and Child Don't Get Along

By MARIE HARTWELL-WALKER, ED.D.

September 24, 2008

Retrieved from: <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2008/when-a-teacher-and-child-dont-get-along?pp=1>

"I hate that school! I hate that teacher!"

Nick has come home from school in a fierce temper. He drops his backpack on the kitchen floor and kicks it across the room. "She's not fair! She's always picking on me!"

School has only been open for two weeks and some kids are already in conflict with their teachers. If your child, like Nick, is one of them, how you handle the situation can make it much, much better or much, much worse.

The kids take their cues from us. His mom's reaction to Nick's dramatic entrance is crucial. If she immediately gets angry on his behalf, there is every chance she will only fuel his anger. This will make it more difficult for him to take a step back and figure out how to get along. If, instead, his mom sympathizes but then engages him in some good problem-solving, she may be able to help him set a better tone for his year.

Nancy, Nick's mom, is smart and experienced. Nick is the youngest of four and not the first of her kids to get off on the wrong foot with a teacher. She's learned over the years what can be helpful and what often just isn't. "As much as I love my kids," says Nancy, "I know their first impression of a new teacher or classroom or school isn't always right. I think the most important thing I've been able to teach them is that it really does take two to tango (or tangle) most of the time."

As we talked, Nancy and I came up with the following list of dos and don'ts for other parents whose kids have had a hard first couple of weeks.

## Tips to Help Your Kids with Their Teachers

- **Don't immediately leap to support your child's negative view of the teacher.** As sensitive and observant as children can be, they often aren't good interpreters of other people's behavior. If a child complains that his teacher doesn't like him, he may be misinterpreting something the teacher does or says. At least allow for that possibility. Ask your child for details without agreeing or disagreeing. Your job at this point is to just see the situation as your child sees it. Once the child calms down, you can introduce another point of view.
- **Don't criticize the teacher in front of your child.** That will only increase your child's anxiety and make him less open to working on the relationship. Instead, let your child know that of course you are concerned but that you think things will probably get better. Invite your child to let you know how it's going in a day or two.
- **Do wait a few days.** Sometimes it just takes awhile for people to adjust to each other. Make sure you are up-to-date with your child's reactions. I've seen more than one situation where the kids have moved on but the parents are acting as though the complaints of the first week still stand.
- **Do help your child understand that the teacher doesn't have to be his best friend for him to learn from her.** This is an important skill. There will be many times in life where your child will need to work with someone who isn't necessarily his favorite person in the world. As long as the situation isn't abusive, as long as it's merely a matter of personality differences or preferences,

the year may be an opportunity for your child to learn how to make the best of a situation. Help your child find things to admire about the teacher even if he can't love her.

- **Do help your child understand that it takes two to make a relationship and that he or she can have impact.** Does your child greet the teacher with a smile? Does she come to school with homework done and a couple of good questions about the assignment? Does he ever offer to help the teacher out? One year one of my sons and I made a game of "taming the teacher." We talked about ways he could act more generously toward her. Over time, the relationship with his teacher improved.
- **Do be fair.** If your child has some challenging behaviors, it's important to be honest about them and to work on them at home. Ask your child to think about what he does that gets the teacher upset and what he can do instead.

If things still don't seem to be getting better after a week or two, it's time to meet with the teacher. Don't involve administration without giving a more low-key and personal one-on-one discussion with the teacher a chance. Nancy and I have both found that keeping the problem at the level of parent and teacher is much more likely to foster a give-and-take relationship that lasts the whole year.

- **Do remember that most teachers really do want to be at their professional best.** The vast majority are committed to their jobs and really care about children. When their commitment is acknowledged and they feel respected by a parent, most will go to great lengths to work with you.
- **Do meet with the teacher with an open mind and heart.** The relationship with the child is a problem to be solved, not a fight to be won or lost. Express your concern and ask for the teacher's point of view. You may learn a great deal about your child.
- **Don't withhold any information that will help the teacher understand your child and be more effective with her.** If your child is being affected by problems at home or had a negative experience with school last year, for example, he may be acting out at school. It's important for a teacher to know something about your child's past experience with school and his attitude toward learning.
- **Do try to leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what you and what the teacher will each do to try to improve the situation.** Arrange for a follow-up check-in.
- **Do thank the teacher for her time and attention.** Everyone likes to feel appreciated.

It's a last resort to appeal to a higher authority but sometimes it's necessary. Sometimes administration will offer extra supports or will have some good ideas for resolving the problem without changing the child's classroom. In that case, give it an honest try.

But sometimes a student just gets under a teacher's skin and, maybe to her embarrassment, she can't get beyond it. Sometimes a child's learning style is so out of sync with the teacher's method of teaching that no amount of goodwill is going to make the year a successful one for the child. And, yes, teachers are people too and sometimes they have problems of their own that make it difficult to manage a particularly challenging child. In such cases, the wisest decision is to talk to the principal about moving the child out of the class.

If you must transfer your child to another class, take care how you present the decision to him. To help your child retain respect for school and for teachers, don't make negative comments about the teacher. Instead, emphasize the positive. Let your child know how lucky he is to be in a school that works hard to make the right teacher-student match.