

CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE

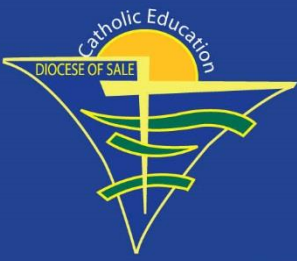
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Practical Advice about Concerns and Complaints

The following guides, adapted from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's document *Addressing parents' concerns and complaints effectively: policy and guides* provide a range of practical information to assist when dealing with concerns and complaints.

There are 14 areas:

1. Building positive relationships
2. Dealing with a complainant
3. Improving your listening skills
4. Saying 'yes' and 'no' with confidence
5. Understanding the blame cycle
6. Managing a request for an apology
7. Moving beyond a stalemate
8. Encouraging fair play in negotiations
9. Managing aggressive reactions
10. Unreasonable complainant conduct
11. Responding to strong emotions
12. Managing confrontation
13. Managing your anger
14. Being calm in a high-stress situation



1. Building positive relationships

The following tips will help you build positive relationships with parents and the school community, in which power and decision making are shared.

Seek mutual respect

The unique relationship that a parent or teacher has with a child might at times lead to differences of opinion as to what is best for the child. Both parties need to appreciate and respect the special skills and insights that each brings to their relationships with a child.

Understand and appreciate each other's perspective

If a child is hurt in the playground, or isn't provided with correct information to make career choices, it is natural for a parent to protect and defend their child. Teachers need to appreciate the parent's perspective and parents need to appreciate that the teacher wants to protect the child too.

Use two-way communication

Tension in the parent/teacher relationship can arise when both parties are strongly motivated to do the best for the child. The ability to voice differences of opinion, respectfully and with understanding, indicates that the school community is working well together.

Set common goals

Most parents and teachers would agree that they want the best for the child. However, in practice, either may sometimes find themselves promoting a particular solution to the exclusion of all else. A skilled facilitator can help bring both parties back to focusing on common goals.

Have realistic expectations

If a teacher's or the parents' expectations are unrealistic, they will be dissatisfied with the best efforts that the other party is able to make. Positive relationships are built when each party is able to meet each other's expectations.

Clarify responsibilities

Each staff member needs the knowledge and encouragement to:

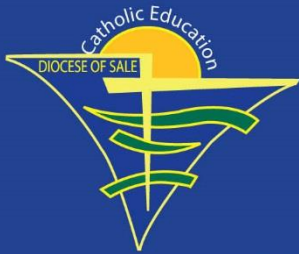
- identify what parents need
- identify if what the school provides is meeting parents' needs
- help parents find out more about what the school has to offer their children.

Be positive

Principals can inspire positive talk about the school, from within the school, by:

- repeatedly emphasising to staff that they are influential members of the community and ambassadors for their profession (people often judge the whole education profession by the comments of just one teacher they know)
- highlighting the positive things being done at the school (teaching and support staff often have little idea about the fine work going on in other parts of the school)
- organising staff seminars on public relations (good public relations are everybody's business).

Reward those who talk positively. School leaders set the tone by giving compliments, passing on the appreciation of others, commending ideas and acknowledging extra time freely given. A major reason for job dissatisfaction is that staff don't feel appreciated for what they do.



2. Dealing with a complainant

The following tips will help you negotiate an outcome with the complainant that meets all needs.

Value complaints

Complaints are an important way for the community to provide information and feedback to a school.

Complaints —as well as praise — provide valuable feedback about how well you and the school are meeting parents' needs. The complainant is inviting the school to enter into a problem-solving process to find a solution. Often, if the complainant's emotional investment is high, the complaint can come across as a demand.

Make the first contact count

The complainant's first contact with the school can be the most important. They will be more satisfied if their concerns are dealt with by the first person they talk to, without having to re-explain their situation over and over.

On the first contact:

- listen to the complainant carefully and with an open mind
- treat them with respect and courtesy, take them seriously and let them have their say
- make it clear that the complaint will be taken seriously
- explain the procedures for resolving complaints
- state what you can do, not what you cannot do
- find out the nature of the complaint
- take notes
- if the complaint involves complex issues which are difficult for you to understand on first hearing, ask the complainant to put the complaint in writing
- make a mutually convenient time to meet, if a meeting is required.

Summarise the first contact with the complainant.

For example: Thank you for the information. We have agreed that both you and the principal can meet on (the agreed date). Let me check that I've got the key issues you'd like to discuss. With your permission, I'll write them down so that you don't need to explain your position again.

The great majority of complaints are by nature concerned enquiry with no hostility intended. However, you should be prepared for the occasional instance of aggression. Area 12: Managing confrontation in this document has tips to help you take control of situations where the complainant is being confrontational.

Discuss the complaint with the complainant

When it comes to discussing the substance of the complaint with the complainant:

- give the complainant your name and refer to them by name
- let the complainant decide whether the matter is really an enquiry, a concern or a complaint
- keep the discussion to relevant issues
- check the facts to make sure they are clear and beyond doubt
- check any assumptions you might have made by asking questions
- don't form an opinion before hearing all sides of the story.

If you are unsure about what should have happened, refer to relevant policies and documented processes.

Work through a problem-solving process to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions based on meeting the needs of all parties. Be clear about what solutions you can actually offer. Sometimes an outcome might be non-negotiable. Explain what will happen next and what steps and support are available.

Follow-up

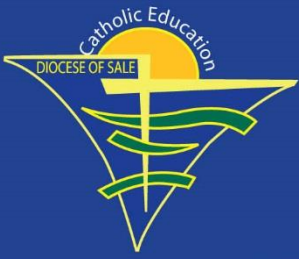
The complainant with a particularly complex complaint should be followed up. It is important to keep lines of communication open after the initial discussion. Discuss how actions that have been mutually agreed will be followed up by both parties, and how any changes will be maintained. Discussion needs to focus on learning rather than attributing blame.

Make sure written responses address all of the issues, contain correct information and use plain language.

Keep everyone who is involved informed of the progress and outcome of the complaint.

Follow the requirements of your school's procedure to fully record the details of concerns and complaints.

Adapted from material published by the Western Australia Department of Education and Training.



3. Improving listening Skills

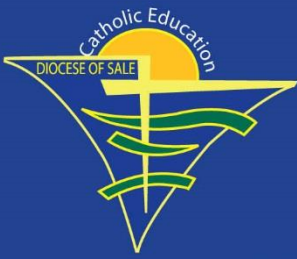
The following tips will help you improve your listening skills so that you better understand the complainant's issues, perspective and feelings and can also make them feel they are being heard.

Things to try

- Focus your attention totally on the person and concentrate fully on what they are saying.
- Repeat conversationally and tentatively, in your own words, your understanding of the person's meaning.
- Give feedback on feelings as well as content by asking questions (as appropriate), such as, 'How do you feel about that?' or 'How did that affect you?'
- Repeat information and give feedback to show that you understand and to enable the speaker to hear and understand their meaning.
- If your feedback is not well received, only try again if you can do so with tact and understanding.
- Be as accurate in your summary of their meaning as possible.
- Challenge feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness subtly. For example, if they say, 'It is hopeless', you might ask them, 'It seems hopeless to you right now?'. If they say, 'There's nothing I can do', you could question, 'You can't find anything that will help fix the problem?'
- Allow silences in the conversation.
- People will sometimes indicate a shift in their attitude by changing their body position. A good response to such a body shift is to wait, then suggest, 'How does it all seem to you now?'

Things to avoid

- Avoid talking about yourself.
- Don't respond with your own reactions or make well-intentioned comments.
- Don't ignore or dismiss the person's feelings.
- Avoid advising, diagnosing, baiting, reassuring, encouraging or criticising.
- Avoid thinking about what you will say next: think about what they are saying.
- Avoid parroting the person's words or only saying 'mmm' or 'ah hah'.
- Don't pretend that you have understood if you haven't (ask for clarification).
- Avoid letting the person drift to less significant topics because you haven't shown you have understood.
- Avoid fixing, changing or improving what the speaker has said.
- Don't change topics.
- Resist filling every space by talking.
- Don't neglect the non-verbal content of the conversation.



4. Saying 'yes' and 'no' with confidence

The following tips will help you say 'no', which is sometimes the most useful response but something that many people find hard to do.

Why we have difficulties saying 'no'

Our belief system:

We believe that saying 'no' is selfish and uncooperative so we tend to feel guilty when we do it.

Personal needs:

We enjoy the feeling of being wanted and needed that requests (even unreasonable ones) bring and answering 'yes' will usually get a response that satisfies our need to be liked.

Lack of skills and experience saying 'no':

We don't know how to say 'no' assertively. We weren't taught to say 'no' in ways that don't hurt the feelings of others. We weren't taught to value saying 'no'.

Our perception of our work role:

We have a belief that as we are paid to do our job, we should try and fix problems and satisfy parents, students and other stakeholders. 'The customer is always right' easily translates to, 'People might see me as incompetent if I can't provide the solution they want'.

To distract us from other tasks:

Time allocated to trying to meet unreasonable needs is time that can't be spent on something we can't or don't want to do.

To avoid potential confrontations:

Very few people enjoy a confrontation and the path of least resistance can be to avoid saying 'no'.

Good reasons for saying 'no'

A good role model:

You will be a good role model for other staff members. When you turn down a person you are indicating that it is acceptable for them to occasionally refuse you and that your relationship isn't based on saying 'yes' all the time.

Increased respect:

You will be respected more. So will others including, more often than not, the people you turn down.

Increases creativity:

When you say 'no', you encourage others to come up with their own creative solutions.

More control over your time:

You will have more control over your time and therefore your life. Until you have trained yourself away from the habit of saying 'yes' too often, other people will have more control over your time than you will. That leads to you feeling powerless, or at least less powerful.

Seven points to remember

- When you say 'no' you are refusing a request, not rejecting a person. Saying 'no' does not mean a rejection. Much depends on the way you refuse.
- When making a refusal, accept full responsibility for doing so. Don't blame or pass the buck. Unless it is outside your power or ability to say 'yes', don't say 'I can't' when you mean 'I don't won't to'.
- Saying 'no' does not need excessive apology or excuse, although you may choose to make some explanation. Ask yourself whether you are explaining because you are anxious or to provide information to support your refusal.
- You may be overestimating the difficulty the complainant will have in accepting your refusal. Very often if you express your feelings openly and honestly you allow other people to express themselves.
- If you said 'yes' but wanted to say 'no', it can show. Headaches, grimaces and muscle tension can all result from the stress caused by being over compliant.
- Acknowledge your feelings. A simple statement like 'I find this difficult' allows you to express your feelings honestly.
- If the complainant is having difficulty accepting your 'no', use the broken-record technique. Repeat your assertive refusal, couched in slightly different ways, each time the other person tries to persuade or evade you.

Setting limits

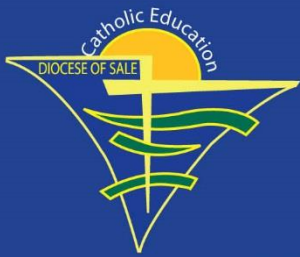
- If you are uncertain about how to respond to a request, saying 'let me get back to you' will give you time to consider whether:
 - the request is within the school's policy and priorities, and Departmental values
 - school personnel have the time and resources to accomplish what is being asked
 - the request risks the safety and wellbeing of staff or compromises their duty of care to students
 - the complainant can get help from a more appropriate source. For example the principal, regional office or central office

How to make saying 'no' easier

- Keep your reply short.
- Give a reason for refusing the request.
- Avoid 'I can't ...' phrases which sound like excuses.
- If you genuinely need it, ask for more time to decide on the request.
- Don't be abrupt in your refusal.
- Lead up to the 'no' with a preliminary statement such as, 'This may be difficult for you ...'.
- Explain the facts and the rationale for the decision.
- Provide an alternative course of action if possible.
- Allow the complainant to have some control, such as in the way the decision is announced or timed.
- Ask for immediate feedback about your refusal.
- Be prepared to listen to defending complaints.
- Offer soothing words such as, 'I know this seems harsh or sudden to you.'
- Suggest another meeting if necessary after the person has had time to digest the refusal.

When you have to say 'yes'

- Tell the complainant you can agree to their request this time, and ask how the two of you might plan things better if there was a next time.
- Tell them 'yes' and set limits about when you can reasonably deliver. • Put a condition on your agreement. For example, 'I can talk to you for an hour at two o'clock, but I have a class scheduled at three o'clock.'



5. Understanding the blame cycle

The following tips will help you understand the 'blame cycle' and focus on problems and how to solve them.

The blame cycle

Being under extreme pressure can make a person angry, judgemental, fearful, self-righteous or revengeful. They might find themselves believing that other people are badly intended or lack ability, and wanting to blame (and punish) anyone and everything. They might also try to cover their actual or perceived mistakes because they don't want to take the risk of being seen as performing inadequately. In the circumstances, things can quickly become personalised and blame and ill feeling develop into a self-perpetuating cycle. Blaming might appeal as a quick fix but it creates bad feelings, undermines everyone's willingness to work together and can perpetuate difficulties rather than address them.

What you can do

- Appreciate and remind yourself that others are acting rationally, as they see it.
- Remember: Most people act with the best intentions and their actions are reflective of the pressures they are under and the experience and the information they have.
- Realise that your behaviour may be influencing the complainant's behaviour and having unintended effects. It may be that in justifying your own actions you are discounting the action of others.
- Ask yourself questions rather than make judgements. You might ask yourself:
 - What information am I missing that would help me understand this person's behaviour?
 - How might this behaviour make sense?
 - What pressures are they under?
 - What structures or systems might be influencing their behaviour?
- Reflect on any anger you might feel and try and turn these destructive thoughts and feelings into constructive things. You might ask yourself:
 - What am I learning about myself in this situation?
 - What do my feelings remind me of?
 - What new behaviours or thoughts does this situation require that might be difficult for me?

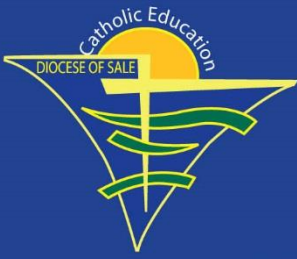
How a coach could help

- Enlist the support of a coach (such as a trusted friend or peer) who can help you to clarify your concerns by discussing with you questions such as:
 - What results do you want from the situation?
 - What is another way of explaining the complainant's actions?
 - How might the complainant describe the situation?
 - What was your role in creating the situation?
 - What requests or concerns do you need to bring to the complainant?
 - How will you state them to get the result you want?
 - What do you think you are learning as you work through this situation?
- Let your coach know what happened as a result of the coaching and work through what worked and what didn't.
- Don't make negative comments or gossip about the complainant. Your coach is the only person you should confide in.

Other resources

Better Health Channel, Assertiveness at:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Assertiveness



6. Managing a request for an apology

The following tips will help you manage a request for an apology. Parents who make a complaint may ask for an apology. If both parties recognise each other's rights and responsibilities and want a 'win-win' outcome, an apology alone may resolve the complaint. Where it does not, it can reduce tension and pave the way for maintaining and repairing relationships. However, if the apology is given in a way that results in the recipient seeing it as a defeat, the apology can backfire and escalate a conflict.

What to ask yourself

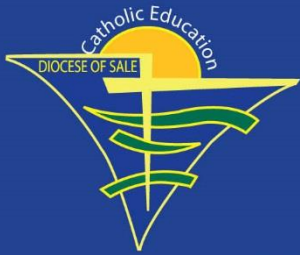
- What specifically is the parent seeking the apology for? For example, are they asking me to apologise for the actions of someone else or for something that I did?
- Is our relationship too adversarial or the differences too great for the person to accept my apology as sincere?
- Is the liability too great for me to offer an apology?
- Would an apology be more beneficial at some future time and after a process of dispute resolution?
- Would apologising at this stage be too personally humiliating for me?
- Will the other person accept the apology with good grace?
- Should I ask someone else to apologise on my behalf?
- Will the other person interpret the apology as a sign of weakness, defeat and admission of total responsibility and try to use it to win over me, rather than us winning together?

Features of an effective apology

- A specific statement of the action or inaction that both parties agree led to the request for an apology. For example, 'We agree that I didn't take into account the views of ...'.
- An acknowledgement by the person making the apology of their responsibility and accountability. For example, 'I now recognise that I should have...'
- An acknowledgement of the motivation of the person asking for the apology, which does not necessarily name the motivation nor imply that the motivation is typical, mature or appropriate. The acknowledgement can just state the fact that the motivation existed. For example, 'I now know that receiving a prompt reply is important to you'.
- A direct self-judgement. Saying things like, 'I was insensitive' or 'What I did was wrong' can help to establish common ground with the person receiving the apology.
- A statement of regret, such as 'I am sorry'. This indicates that the person making the apology takes responsibility for having acted wrongly or for hurting the other person.
- An explanation of why the person making the apology did what they did. The explanation must not intend to be (or sound) self-serving and must not blame another person. For example, 'I was very concerned about the student's welfare' presents a point of view that everyone can share.

Making the apology

- Match how the apology is communicated (for example, the body language and tone of voice used) in the message.
- If you are likely to interact with the other person in future, you both should discuss how to prevent conflict from arising in future and how any future conflict will be handled.



7. Moving beyond a stalemate

The following steps will help you recognise and address a stalemate.

Step 1: Recognise a situation that is not reaching resolution

Ask yourself the following questions about the situation. This will help you form a view on whether the situation is likely to be resolved in the short term.

- Time:
- Has the situation continued for longer than anyone would have reasonably expected?
 - Are meetings becoming long-winded and not leading to clear conclusions?

- Blaming and secrets:
- Is the focus on people's wrongdoings rather than on the problem?
 - Is information being withheld from any of the parties involved in the complaint?
 - Are sub-groups forming against others?
 - Is gossip increasing?

- Intense or uncomfortable emotions:
- Is the situation dominating your thoughts, time and energy?
 - Are feelings more intense or uncomfortable than you would normally expect from any of the parties involved in the complaint?
 - Are behaviours out-of-character?

- Resistance and motivation:
- Is there a marked lack of motivation on the part of particular stakeholders to reach goals or try anything different?
 - Does the complainant appear to persistently reject, ignore or oppose suggested remedies over a long period of time?
 - Does their advocate argue at length or dissuade them from accepting suggestions?

- Contradictory information:
- Do any of the parties involved in the complaint repeatedly suggest information or give opinions which are contrary to the suggested goals?

- Same solution tried repeatedly:
- Are the solutions asked for by the complainant repetitious?
 - Has the same kind of solution been tried more than once?

Step 2: Evaluate your part in the conflict

If the situation is moving towards a stalemate, the following questions will help you honestly examine whether you are doing your utmost to resolve it.

- Are you using your power appropriately? For example, does the situation require 'power over' the person (by enforcing Departmental requirements) or 'power with' the person (by helping them have more of a say, and by listening to what they say)?
- Have you tried building empathy with the complainant? For example, have you tried seeing the situation from the complainant's point of view?
- Have you communicated your perspective, needs and concerns clearly? For example, are you talking in generalities or are you providing specific and objective information?

- Are you dictating solutions? Or are you exploring the person's needs, using words such as 'could' rather than 'should', and together arriving at solutions?
- Have you considered your language and how the person might be interpreting it? For example, do you start your sentences with 'You should' or 'I feel'? One is demanding behaviour change, the other is offering a preferred action and explaining its impact on you and others. Do you say what you can't do, rather than focusing on what you can do?
- Are you adding to options by using words like 'and' or are you appearing to dismiss possibilities by using words like 'but'?
- Do you hold beliefs that lead to a brick wall or to a resolution? For example, do you say to yourself:
 - 'I just can't get anywhere with some people' or 'I can get somewhere with almost anyone'?
 - 'This is just the way it is' or 'There are other ways'?
 - 'Life and its difficulties are just too complex to solve' or 'It's possible to solve problems. We can handle the complexities of life'?
 - 'Things don't work out' or 'Many things do work'?

Step 3: Explore barriers to further discussion

Consider whether the complainant has been backed into a corner. Is there something you can do to help them save face?

Identify areas of misinterpretation (for example, objectives, motives, points of view, values, feelings, requirements, outcomes, needs and concerns). How can these be clarified and any misinterpretation overcome?

Consider your relationship with the complainant. Can you develop a relationship of greater trust independent of solving the problem?

Step 4: Address emotions to move towards resolution

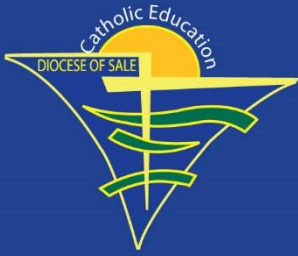
In some cases, the best solution for a persistently complaining parent might be no solution. Their personal and psychological needs might be better met by persistent complaining than by resolution. A need for power, for attention, for revenge, for belonging or for achievement might motivate a person to keep complaining. They might have a high investment in being right, in having the final say or in financial compensation. If this is the case, there has to be greater benefit for the person in changing than in not changing.

Despite your best efforts you may be powerless to make a difference without addressing what is motivating such a person to keep complaining.

A counsellor, senior staff member from the regional office or a peer could help you to identify their motivations and to resolve the situation. Or you might consider stepping back both physically and emotionally. You might ask a senior staff member from the regional office to chair meetings or act as a mediator. Or you might choose to use an external (outside the school system) and impartial review or mediation process to develop a way forward that both parties see as having no vested interest in the result.

Other resources

This section was adapted from R Gaspari's, *Dispute resolution one day program for South Australian leaders* prepared for the South Australian Centre for Leaders in Education Network community-based project 1999.



8. Encouraging fair play in negotiations

The following steps will help you negotiate a satisfactory resolution for all parties in cases where some people aren't playing fair.

Step 1: Respond, don't react

- Manage your emotions and buy time by using power breathing (as explained in areas 12 and 14)
- When confronted with accusations, attacks, threats or ultimatums, don't take the bait, let them pass.
- Don't let yourself become defensive. Remain flexible and open in your thinking.
- Instead of getting mad or even, focus on what you want to have happen.
- Make it possible for the other person to back down without feeling humiliated. For example, you could say, 'Well, it now looks like things aren't quite as they first seemed ...'.

Step 2: Step to one side

- If there is tension, try to disarm it by clearly appearing to listen.
- Agree with as much of what is being said as you feel genuinely able to do.
- Take a break, change location or seating arrangements in order to change the dynamic of a situation.
- Call for the meeting to end now and resume later, giving all parties the opportunity for reflection.

Step 3: Find options and move to the positive

- Rejecting the position of a person with a complaint usually only reinforces it. Instead, direct attention to meeting the needs of each party. For example, you could say, 'One view is that ... ; another view is that Both viewpoints have their merits. How can we work together to incorporate the best aspects of both views?'
- Ask open-ended questions which increase the options and move to the positive. For example, 'What would be happening in ... class if things were working better?'

Step 4: Identify unfair tactics

- Name the behaviour as a tactic. For example, 'Could calling the press about this be a way of indicating that you believe things could have been done differently?'
- Explain how the tactics have made you feel. For example, 'I felt frustrated that we hadn't had the chance to consider all possible ways of dealing with this issue before the press put their interpretation on it.'
- Address the motive for using the tactic. For example, 'Could it be that you hoped to embarrass the school into doing something different?'

Step 5: Refocus on the issue

- Maintain the relationship and try to resolve the issue. For example, 'We are all obviously concerned for ...'s welfare'.
- Summarise what you believe to be the common ground and what has been agreed. For example, 'We have agreed that ...'.
- Divide the issue into parts. For example, 'We have discussed the issues around homework and they seem to relate to three areas:
 - firstly, there are differing views about the importance of homework
 - secondly, there is confusion over the amount of homework the teacher expects
 - thirdly, you don't know if you can help your daughter with her maths homework'.
- Address the less difficult issues first. For example, 'Let's start by talking about the school's homework policy'.

- Introduce some bargaining such as ‘if you will, I will’ agreements. For example, ‘If you are able to send a note to the teacher each Friday with any questions you need answered about the week’s homework, I’ll ensure the teacher responds to you each Monday’.
- Try for agreement in principle. For example, ‘We have agreed that homework is an important part of the learning program and we will continue to work together on addressing the details’.

Other resources

Department of Education, Training and Employment, *Making positive choices: psychological health for worksites*, DETE South Australia, 1999

Hollier F, Murray K & Cornelius H, *Conflict resolution; Trainers Manual; 12 skills*, The Conflict Resolution Network, 1993 (PO Box 1016 Chatswood, NSW)



9. Managing aggressive reactions

The following tips will help you deal with complainants whose approach is aggressive. Use these tips before the level of emotional intensity has risen or after it has dropped. Often the complainant will indicate their readiness to start engaging in a more constructive dialogue by sighing or shifting position.

Persist

- Use the broken record technique. Repeat what you have said without adding further argument or reason. For example:
 - 'We need to discuss this away from the children. Please come with me to my office' or
 - 'We need to talk about this in my office away from the children' or
 - 'My office is this way. We can continue this conversation away from the children'.

Emphasise your feelings

- Emphasise the importance of the subject to you personally. For example, 'I am worried about this allegation and I'd like to start sorting it out now'.

Acknowledge and continue

- Acknowledge their concerns but don't let the discussion stop there: continue immediately towards a solution. For example, 'Yes, I know it is an unsatisfactory situation for you, and I would prefer...'.
 - As in the example above, use 'and' rather than 'but'. If you use 'but', the listener invariably hears only that part of the sentence that follows the 'but'. They might interpret what you are saying as a demand, increasing the likelihood of a defensive reaction.

Ask open questions to explore possibilities

- For example:
 - 'What would we need to do to improve the current situation?'
 - 'How do you think we could satisfy your son's needs?'
 - 'What would you like to see happen as a result of our discussion?'

Disagree if necessary

- Say if you don't agree with a point being made, but try to establish areas of agreement. For example:
 - 'I don't see the situation like that ... I think we both agree that ...'.

Reschedule

- Reschedule if necessary to ensure there is adequate time to discuss the issues. Rescheduling may also help to defuse the situation. For example:
 - 'There is a better time to discuss this issue in the detail required. When do you have an hour we can both set aside?'

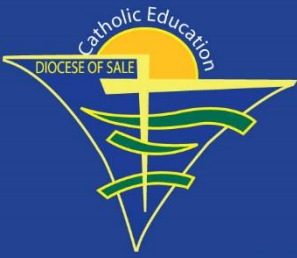
Follow-up

- After any situation marked by aggression, awkwardness or uncertainty, take the time to follow up with a letter, brief note or phone call. This is likely to make further interactions with the people involved smoother.

Other resources

Better Health Channel, Workplace conflict at:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Workplace_conflict



10. Unreasonable complainant conduct

The following tips will help you identify and deal with unreasonable conduct by a complainant. While the majority of parents have legitimate concerns and genuinely seek resolution, a small proportion of complainants demonstrate unreasonable concerns and unreasonable and uncooperative behaviour. A complainant with unreasonable conduct can be unusually persistent, pursue complaints for longer, supply more written material, telephone more often and for longer, and require more meetings. They are often still complaining after the complaint is closed. Such complainants sometimes want what a complaint handling system cannot provide – vindication, retribution and revenge.

There are five types of unreasonable conduct:

- unreasonable persistence
- unreasonable demands
- unreasonable lack of cooperation
- unreasonable arguments
- unreasonable behaviour.

Action to manage unreasonable complainant conduct must be based on the clear understanding that:

- unless there are extremely good reasons otherwise, all members of the school community have a right to make a complaint or raise a concern
- every complainant deserves to be treated with respect
- every complainant, regardless of how much time and effort is required to respond to their complaint, should have their complaint properly considered
- the complaint of a complainant whose conduct is unreasonable should be considered as legitimate until proved otherwise
- the substance of a complaint should dictate the level of resources allocated to it, not the complainant's wishes, demands or behaviour.

Unreasonable persistence

Unreasonable persistence is often characterised by the complainant:

- persisting even though the complaint has been comprehensively addressed
- reframing the complaint
- demanding a review of the complaint
- making an issue out of trivial things, repeatedly.

The following tips — based on saying 'no' — will help you deal with unreasonable persistence.

- Communicate clearly.
- If after investigating the complaint there is nothing further you can do, and no resolution has been reached, or mutually agreed remedy, escalate the complaint to the regional office in line with Departmental policy.
- Where appropriate, make it clear that there will be no further correspondence or contact with the school about the complaint.
- Do not allow the complainant to reframe the complaint to restart the process.
- End phone calls that are unproductive.
- Assert the school's position. For example, you might say, 'I acknowledge that your view is different; however, the school policy is ...'.

Unreasonable demands

Unreasonable demands are often characterised by the complainant:

- insisting on unattainable outcomes
- insisting on a moral outcome for example, justice in the community interest, when really a personal interest is at stake
- wanting revenge or retribution
- making demands about the way the complaint should be handled
- providing extraordinary detail which is not relevant to the complaint • wanting regular and lengthy phone contact
- moving the goal posts
- creating complexity when there is none.

The following tips — based on setting limits — will help you deal with unreasonable demands:

- Let the complainant know about the school's concerns and complaints procedures; that is, have a plan and stick to it.
- Make it clear that the school will decide how the complaint will be handled.
- Clarify the limitations of the concerns and complaints procedures.
- Avoid being drawn into unproductive arguments and personal attacks.
- Restrict contact to defined times and staff members where necessary.
- Respond only to emails and letters addressed to the school directly. Do not respond to mail where the school is copied in.
- Limit contact to writing only.
- Do not do things for an unreasonably demanding complainant just to appease them that the school would not normally do for any other complainant.
- As a last resort, inform the complainant that the school finds their approach unreasonable and set terms and conditions for further contact.

Unreasonable lack of cooperation

Unreasonable lack of cooperation is often characterised by the complainant:

- presenting a large quantity of information that is not organised
- presenting information in dribs and drabs, or withholding information
- refusing to define the issues underlying the complaint
- focusing on principles rather than issues
- changing the complaint.

The following tips — based on setting conditions — will help you deal with unreasonable lack of cooperation.

- Where they are capable of doing so, require complainants to organise or summarise their supporting information before you will consider the complaint. Make it clear that the school will not look at the complaint until they present all the required information.
- Require complainants to clearly define what their issues are.
- Terminate consideration of the complaint if it is established that the complainant has been misleading or untruthful.

Unreasonable arguments

Unreasonable arguments are characterised by the complainant:

- advancing irrational beliefs (such as seeing cause and effect links where there are clearly none)
- advancing and sticking to what is clearly a conspiracy theory unsupported by evidence
- insisting that a particular solution is the correct one
- insisting on the importance of an issue that is clearly trivial.

Unreasonable arguments are best countered by declining or discontinuing the school's involvement. A groundless complaint should be declined at the outset, or discontinued as soon as it becomes clear that it is groundless.

Where unreasonable and reasonable arguments are mixed together, the school should refuse to consider the unreasonable arguments.

Unreasonable behaviour

Unreasonable behaviour is when the complainant:

- is very rude or aggressive, makes threats or harasses others
- sends rude, confronting or threatening letters
- makes threats to harm themselves or others
- is very manipulative (such as overly ingratiating, cries as a tactic or makes veiled or implied threats).

Unreasonable behaviour requires the school to have risk management protocols to deal with aggression, anger and threats of harm that are made in writing, by telephone or in person; and to set limits and conditions.

The following tips will help you deal with unreasonable behaviour:

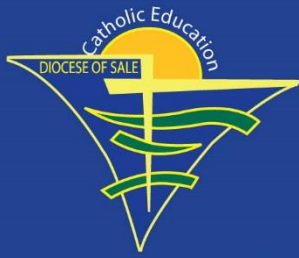
- Return letters that use rude or intemperate language and ask the complainant to restate their complaint in more moderate language.
- End a telephone call or interview if the complainant engages in unreasonable behaviour. If the complainant wants further contact, specify your expectations of reasonable behaviour.

When a complainant uses threatening or violent behaviour employees should follow the 'Occupational Violence Policy'

Other resources

Unreasonable complainant conduct: interim practice manual. A joint project of the Australian Parliamentary Ombudsman, Australian Parliamentary Ombudsman, August 2007 available under Complaint handling guide for the Victorian public sector at: www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au

The information in this section was adapted from Unreasonable complaint conduct: interim practice manual, Australian Parliamentary Ombudsman, August 2007.



11. Responding to strong emotions

The following tips will help you deal positively with the difficult emotions of complainants and avoid defensive responses.

- Receive:** Listen and say nothing for the moment. Give the complainant room to express their emotions. Respect the complainant's communication of their feelings.
- Notice:** Observe your own reaction to the person's expression of their emotions. • Centre: Tune into yourself. Breathe deeply.
- Listen again:** Ask yourself what you are picking up from what the person is saying. Separate their feelings from the content. Do not react emotionally to accusations aimed at you personally.
- Reflect back:** Summarise what you believe to be the person's main points of concern and how they are feeling.
- Clarify and explore:** Identify precisely what it is the person needs or is concerned about. Think about what is behind the words they are using. Ask questions that shift the focus from their anger to exploring the issues.
- Repeat the cycle:** Ensure that feelings and facts are mutually understood.

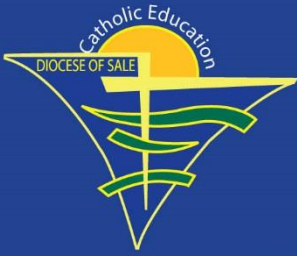
Other resources

Better Health Channel, Negative emotions – coping tips, at:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Negative_emotions_coping_tips

Better Health Channel, Assertiveness, at:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Assertiveness



12. Managing confrontation

The following tips will help you take control of a situation where the complainant is being confrontational.

Stay calm by practising S-T-O-P

Signal:

take note of your body's early warning signs of tension (such as shallow breathing and throat tightness).

Take control through power breathing:

- take a deep breath through your nostrils. Do this without exertion and without raising your shoulders or puffing out your cheeks
- hold the breath for a second
- push the breath into the extremities of your body (skull, hands and feet)
- slowly breathe out through your lips
- breathe in and out a few times, smoothing out the inhalation and exhalation to experience an unbroken inflow and outflow of air
- as you breathe out, feel the tension melting from your body into the floor through the soles of your feet.

Opposite:

a habitual response under tension is to tighten up our muscles and to negatively self-talk, 'Oh no!'. The opposite response is to breathe deeply and smoothly and to say to yourself, 'calm, in control'.

Practise:

a good time to practise is just before an appointment you think might be confrontational.

Let the complainant have their say

Actively listen:

let the complainant know you are listening by using appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues.

Don't interrupt:

an interruption will only lead to the complainant starting at the beginning again.

Listen for the sigh:

don't move to developing options until the complainant has indicated a readiness and willingness to engage. One way they might do this is with a sigh, and by dropping their shoulders.

Deal with the complainant's emotions

Acknowledge emotions: acknowledging the complainant's emotions helps make them feel valued, and helps develop a partnership with them.

Restate content and emotion:

let the complainant know you heard them by paraphrasing what they said and expressed.

Be empathetic:

show that you understand and are sensitive to the complainant's feelings, thoughts and experiences. This is not necessarily the same as sharing those feelings or agreeing with the complainant's position.

Identify underlying needs and concerns: clearly identify the real problem and make the problem — not the person — the problem.

Respond to criticism non-defensively

Acknowledge any truth in concern or complaint: accept that there may be some truth to criticism of you or the school.

Guard against absolute responses: such as, 'I can assure you I would never say something like that!'. Say things like, '... you might be right about that ... perhaps I could...'

Request specific feedback to criticism: for example, you could say things like, 'What specifically did I do that ...', 'If you were in my shoes, what would you do differently ...', 'I'm not sure I'm clear about your concerns ...', 'Can you give me some specific examples?'

Avoid negative triggers

To successfully resolve confrontation, you need to use language that expresses your desire to work in partnership with the complainant to find a solution.

Negative triggers have the effect of setting up roadblocks to, or shutting down, discussion. They make it harder, not easier, to find a solution.

The table below shows some negative triggers and some positive alternatives.

Negative Triggers	Positive Alternatives
It's our policy to	Here's what we can do
I can't	I can
No, I don't know	I can find out
But	And
You should have	I understand why you
Why didn't you	I can see why
The only thing we can do	The best option I think

Sound helpful

Address the complainant by name, use a tone of voice that sounds helpful and ask the complainant to help you. For example:

'Ms ..., I am not clear about the issue you are raising. Can you identify the precise issue you are concerned about and what you feel needs to happen, so I can investigate the issue on your behalf?'

Delay action to provide 'time out'

By not taking action immediately, you give yourself and the complainant 'time out'. For example, you can say things like, 'Ms..., I think we need some more information before we can move any further ...'.

Other resources

Better Health Channel, Stress in everyday life, at:

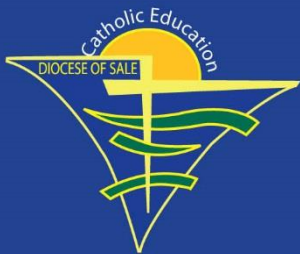
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Stress_in_everyday_life

Better Health Channel, Workplace conflict, at:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Workplace_conflict

Better Health Channel, Assertiveness, at:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Assertiveness



13. Managing your anger

The following tips will help you control your feelings of anger and use other more effective ways to respond.

The impact of anger on our bodies

While it is natural to feel angry when facing situations we believe are unfair, anger is seldom helpful. It can also become a bad habit and appear to others to be a way of trying to control a situation.

When you feel angry, your body releases adrenalin. Blood rushes to your legs, arms and head. You may begin to sweat and breathe quickly. Your heartbeat speeds up and you get urges to yell, scream, lash out or run. This is the 'fight or flight' reaction.

We tend to suppress anger at work because we are afraid of damaging relationships or hurting someone. This can quickly result in muscular tension in the shoulders, neck, back or any part of the body. Unreleased tension can build up until we can no longer suppress it and fly off the handle, perhaps at someone who had nothing to do with the original cause of the anger. Or, if it slowly builds and is unreleased over many years, tension can become chronic and possibly damage your immune system.

Releasing tension

While most of us cannot just tell our anger to go away and have it obey, you can do the following exercises when you feel tension and anger arising.

- If you can, excuse yourself from the situation as soon as you recognise that your emotions are beginning to overtake you. For example, take a brisk walk around the school oval.
- Go to the bathroom and splash your face with water.
- Slow down, don't speed up as a natural response to anger.
- Do the breathing and other calming exercises described in sections 12 and 14.

Principles of anger management

- Identify situations and types of behaviours that can make you angry.
- Learn to recognise your first signs of anger. Then watch out for them when they arise.
- Use these first signs of anger as a signal to focus on solving the problem and not on attacking the person.
- Anger can stem from doubt about your ability to face and solve problems. Use the first signs of anger to remind yourself that you are a worthy person with many strengths and good qualities.
- Ask yourself whether the other person's criticism is valid or justified. For example, ask yourself:
 - 'Have I made a mistake?'
 - 'Are the other person's standards known and reasonable?'
 - 'Do other people agree with the criticism of me?' – 'Is the criticism more about me or the other person?'
 - 'Am I being side tracked by personalising the situation?'
- Identify and anticipate situations where conflict can arise. For example, it is likely that complaints will arise after school reports are issued. Use past experiences to identify areas of concern and be prepared to respond to common concerns.

Responding when angry

Generally speaking, there are three forms of interaction with others — assertive, aggressive and passive. Assertive responses are usually best when resolving a complaint.

With assertive responses, you:

- clarify your own needs directly, openly and appropriately
- are aware of your own rights and the rights of others
- ask confidently and without undue anxiety (often expressing yourself with an 'I' statement, as explained below).

With aggressive responses, you:

- try to get what you want in any way possible
- often give rise to uncomfortable feelings in others
- threaten, cajole, manipulate or use sarcasm
- say: 'you should ...', 'you must ...', 'you'd better ...', 'never', 'always', 'impossible', 'won't' or 'can't'.

With passive responses, you:

- hope that you get what you want
- sit on your feelings
- rely on others to guess what you want. Expressed as: 'maybe', 'I guess ...', 'I can't ...', 'you know ...', 'they don't listen' or 'they're obnoxious'.

'I' statements

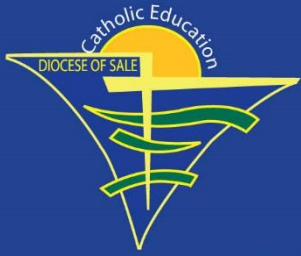
By using an 'I' statement, you tell other people how you feel about something while clarifying your needs. An 'I' statement:

- does not blame someone or require them to change
- helps to identify a concern and open a discussion (but does not resolve the situation)
- addresses 'I' and 'we', rather than 'you'
- is informal and simply states how you feel and what your concerns are.

An 'I' statement has three parts:

- a statement of your feelings (such as, 'I feel attacked ...')
- a description of the behaviour that brings forward the feelings (such as, '... when people raise their voice to make a point ...')
- a statement of the consequences of the behaviour (such as '... because it invariably makes others angry and leads to more aggression').

You might like to add a fourth component — what you would like to see happen (such as, 'I suggest we try to remain calm so that we can discuss the concerns you want to raise and develop a timeline to try to resolve them').



14. Being calm in high-stress situations

The following tips will help you be calm before, during and after a high-stress situation. The most effective way to overcome the stress and anxiety of a high-stress situation is usually to be realistic about how much of the situation you can change. You may not be able to control the situation but you can control the effect it has on you.

In these hectic times, the ability to become calm is one of the most important life skills. It enables you to restore your sense of wellbeing when things go wrong. It helps you to feel better when normally you would feel awful. It helps you address with equanimity the stressful things that happen.

Breathing to become calm

The usefulness of any technique to become calm depends on whether you believe it will be useful. If you have successfully practised the technique in the past, it is more likely to work in the future. Therefore, the best time to practise calming techniques is not in a crisis, just like the best time to practise swimming is not when the boat is sinking. The best time to practise calming techniques is when life is relatively calm.

Breathing techniques have proved effective in bringing about calm. Deep and focused breathing causes your body to release endorphins, which are tranquillising hormones.

By practising these calming exercises regularly, you can equip yourself to better handle the stresses of daily life. The following simple breathing exercise is a good place to start.

- Find a warm, quiet place and a straight-backed chair. Loosen your clothes, take off your shoes and sit down. When you do the following breathing exercises, try to focus on the experience of breathing and not on what is happening around you or on yesterday's, today's or tomorrow's problems.
- Take a deep breath in through your nostrils. Do this without exertion, neither raising your shoulders nor puffing out your chest.
- Hold the breath for a second or two. Imagine the breath flowing through your body into the extremities — your hands, feet and skull.
- Slowly breathe out through your lips.
- As you breathe out, feel the tension melting from your body into the floor. As you continue to practise, you may notice that the tension is passing from your body through the soles of your feet.
- Repeat the exercise.
- Try to do this exercise for at least 10 breaths without losing concentration too much. • Try to do the exercise every day or second day.
- If you find the exercise helpful, make it part of your routine (at the same place and same time) and slowly extend the time. Even five minutes, four days a week, should result in a very pleasurable sense of calm that gradually extends well beyond the time of your practice.

Other calming exercises

By practising these calming exercises regularly, you can equip yourself to better handle the stresses of daily life.

- Sigh (with a big out breath), drop your shoulders, close your eyes and form your lips into a half smile.
- Physically change your position by sitting down, opening a window, getting up from your desk or getting a cup of tea. Simple changes in position can dramatically alter the amount of tension you feel.
- Meditation, yoga and massage are proven calming strategies.

- The fitter you are, the better able you are to cope. Many fitness activities (such as bicycling, walking, jogging or swimming) involve repetitious movements. Approached in a relaxed frame of mind, such repetitious movement also has a powerful meditative effect.

Calm during a crisis

- Do the breathing exercise that you have practised.
- Slow down your actions.
- Remove yourself and others from the situation if necessary.
- Apply the school's crisis plan.

Calm after a crisis

- Remove your shoes, make yourself comfortable and stay warm.
- Don't use cigarettes, coffee or alcohol — they are stimulants.
- Continue your breathing exercise. Listen to each breath and concentrate on your breathing, just as you have practised.
- Seek support.

Support

One of the biggest mistakes people make when trying to deal with a crisis is to try to handle it alone. Seeking support is not a sign of weakness. Seek it from a friend, a personal counsellor or a colleague.

There are enormous — sometimes even lifesaving — benefits to be had from an intimate discussion with another person. Whether that discussion yields useful advice or not is seldom the issue. The real benefit comes from sharing your experience and in receiving encouragement to continue.