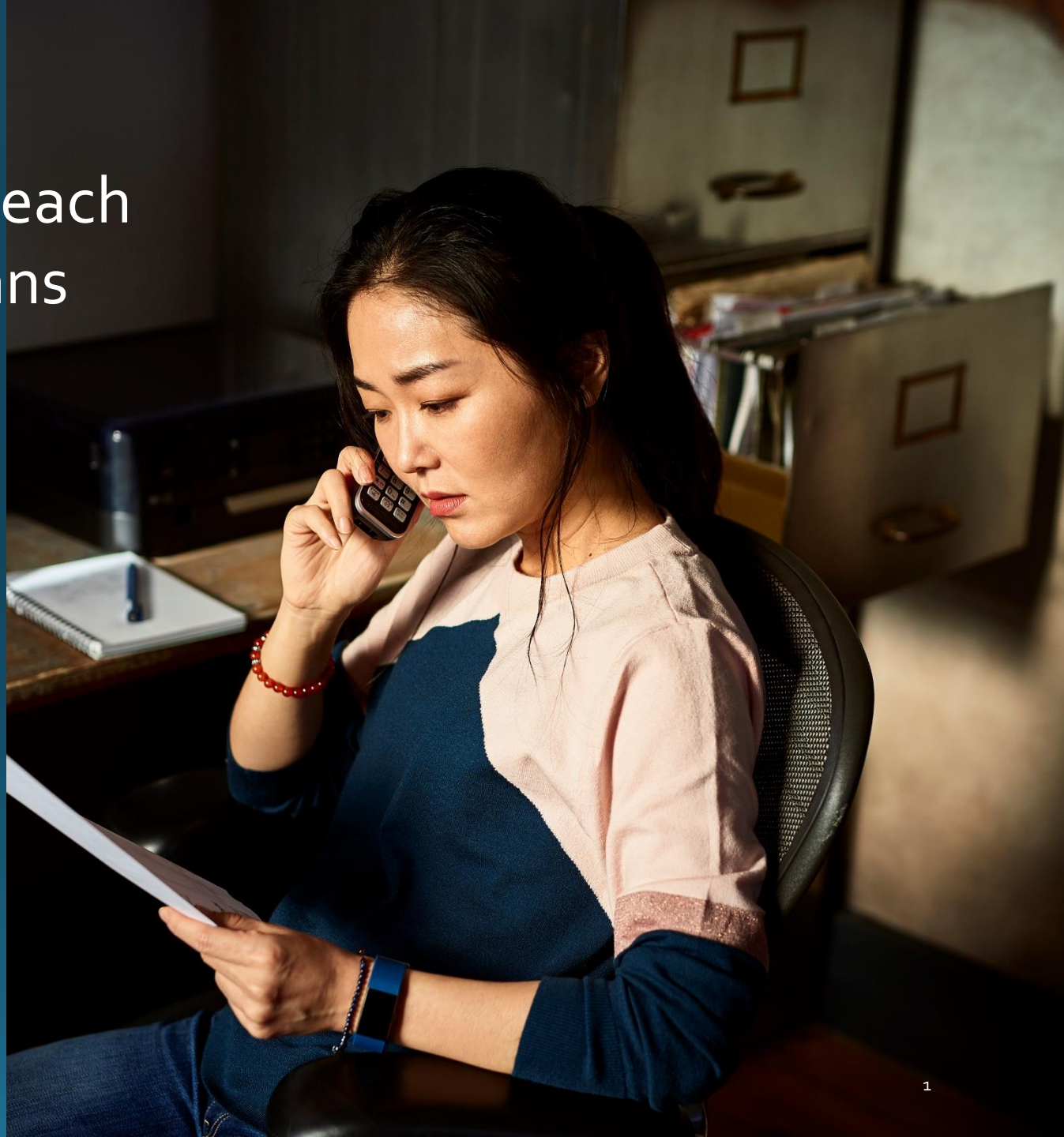


# Engaging Hard-to-Reach Parents and Guardians Through Effective Communications

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No conflicts to disclose.



# Our goal today is

To help educators and others communicate effectively with parents and guardians who are

- Telling them what to do
- Anxious
- Angry
- Uncommunicative



Beck & Clark, 1997; Mathews & Mackintosh, 2000

Centers for Disease  
Control and  
Prevention. (2018).  
*Crisis & Emergency  
Risk Communication  
(CERC).*

## *The* **Six Principles** *of CERC*

Throughout these chapters, six principles of effective emergency and risk communications are emphasized:

- 1**  **Be First:**  
Crises are time-sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. For members of the public, the first source of information often becomes the preferred source.
- 2**  **Be Right:**  
Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps.
- 3**  **Be Credible:**  
Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.
- 4**  **Express Empathy:**  
Crises create harm, and the suffering should be acknowledged in words. Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.
- 5**  **Promote Action:**  
Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes some sense of control.<sup>3</sup>
- 6**  **Show Respect:**  
Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation and rapport.

Let's apply all this to our  
current  
communications  
with parents/guardians.



Instead of **telling**, try  
opening with a **question**:  
“Can you tell me about your  
child?. ”  
“What’s on your mind?.”



# Try asking:

- “What do you want me to call you?”
- “What kind of communication works best for you?”
- “What’s the best time to reach you?”



## **Express Empathy:**

Crises create harm, and the suffering should be acknowledged in words. Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.



## **Promote Action:**

Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes some sense of control.<sup>3</sup>



## **Show Respect:**

Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation and rapport.



Always end  
with a  
question  
and an  
affirmation.

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“How are we doing so far?”

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“Was this helpful to you?”

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“Thank you for talking with me. I know you are busy.”

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“It means a lot to me that you would take my call. Thanks for giving me your time.”

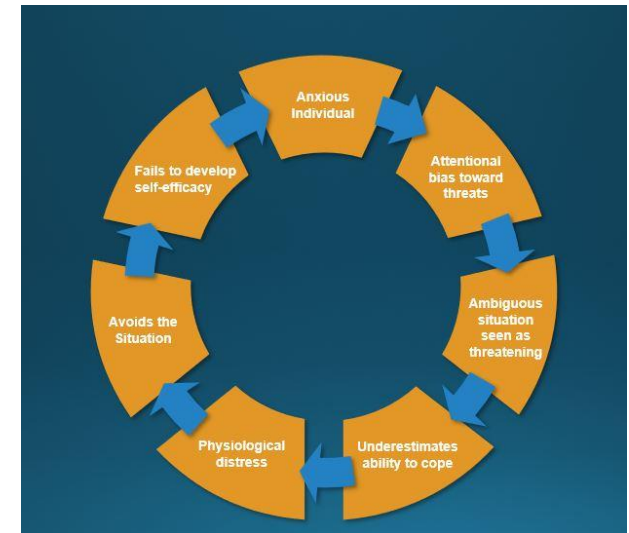
# “Worried”... Do’s

- Listen.
- Be sure your communications are clear, so they are not distorted.
- Repeat the information in different communications.
- Do a Q and A for problems you anticipate or begin to hear.
- Give examples: “Let me walk you through our procedures. Stop me when you have a question.”
- “Normalize” when you can. “Young children usually complain at the beginning of a school year, because they are not used to going to work all day! And they can’t tell time, so an hour can seem like an eternity to them. But they adapt, and you will see that happen in a few weeks as we do.”
- Reassure whenever possible.
- Focus on strengths. “What have you tried so far?”

# “Worried”... Don'ts

- Withhold information
- Communicate only over the phone or in conversation
- Rush or interrupt
- Minimize
- React to the emotions. . .listen for the real message.
- Forget to compliment the parent for their efforts.

The case of Grace  
Let's see how  
this works.



“We are having kids wear masks at all times. They will sit and stand six feet apart. Everyone has to wear a mask, teachers, janitor—everyone,” said Mr. Antonio, the elementary principal.

“I still don’t think that guarantees my kids not getting sick,” contends Grace.

“We can’t guarantee you that, Ms. Thomas. None of us can. We can only take safety precautions, and that’s what we are trying to do.”

“I have to work, I’m a single mother, and I can’t have my kids do school online because I won’t be home to help them. The only solution is to send them to school!”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ms. Thomas. We will do our best to keep your kids and other kids safe as well,” claims Mr. Antonio.

“This is pathetic. You guys have no empathy for us single parents. Have you ever thought about us?” asks Grace.

“We have, and that’s why we are doing everything we can to keep your children safe at our school,” states Mr. Antonio.

# “Let me tell you” Do’s

- Let the parent know you are listening.
- Try to affirm or use their information.
- Find the link from their values or “advice” to what you are doing or what you believe is good for the student. “Wow, it seems like you really value \_\_\_\_\_. I’m not sure your child told you but that’s something I value, too.”
- Uncover their vulnerabilities. “I notice you’ve mentioned other students several times. Are you worried about your son’s peer relations?”
- Try to focus and prioritize: “You’ve listed nine concerns. Which two are the most important or urgent? Let’s tackle those today.” Or, “I see three concerns about safety and five about instruction. Does that sound about right?”

# “Let me tell you” Don’ts

- Compete: “Well, that study is pretty old. We now prefer\_\_\_\_\_.”
- Interrupt: “Let me stop you right there.”
- Argue: “Well, that’s not exactly what the announcement said.”
- Dismiss: “I didn’t have time to read your entire email.” “Your child is not the only student who’s having problems.”



# “Talk to the hand” Do’s

- Work extra hard at the introductory steps, to show respect and build trust.
- Try to listen for the possible barriers or threats.
- Keep trying to find common ground. “I know you don’t know me yet, but I can tell you that we both want your daughter to graduate on time.”
- Involve and showcase the student. “I am enjoying your son’s sense of humor. Does he get that from you?” “Did your daughter tell you she has become our tech expert? She really has helped other kids.”
- Involve a trusted adult.

# “Talk to the hand” Don’ts

- Do anything that will undermine trust.
- Get defensive.
- Blame.
- Use imposing body language.
- Use jargon or difficult written language.
- Believe what others tell you about how impossible this parent is.
- Forget that you may be cracking the door for another conversation in future, even if you don’t succeed now.

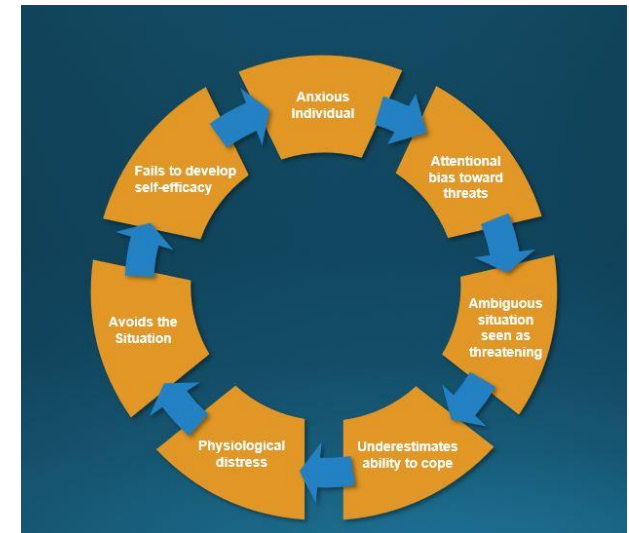
# “Angry” ... Do’s

- Expect conflict. Tell yourself it’s not your fault and may be about something in the past or something outside of school.
- Listen. Keep listening.
- Analyze the anger to figure out the underlying threat. “Tell me what upset you about that situation. I want to understand your point of view.”
- Identify and control your reactions. Remember: “ People in crisis evoke the same feelings and/or behavior in us.” – Nicholas Long
- Invite the parent’s opinions, especially about their child.

# “Angry”... Don't forget

- They need reassurance, too.
- Low-self efficacy (helplessness, feeling “boxed in”) can fuel rage.
- The brain under stress may not be the “Thinking Brain.”
- The person may just need to vent. You don't always have to fix things.

The case of Eddie  
Let's see how  
this works.



“This is Ms. Emerson, Eddie’s teacher. I’m calling to talk to you about your son, Eddie. He has not turned his homework assigned to him two days ago, and he is falling behind. Eddie’s grades are now below average,” claims Ms. Emerson.

“My son has not completed his homework because one, he does not understand what the teacher is asking him to do. Two, I don’t know how to help him. I don’t even understand what you are supposed to do. And three, if you haven’t noticed, there is a pandemic going on. I’m very close to losing my job. The Wi-Fi is down because I’m behind on bills, and all you can say is that he is FALLING BEHIND?!” shouts Eddie’s mother.

“I understand times are tough, Mrs. Martinez. But your son is not the only child struggling to finish his homework. Please let us know how we can help your son finish his homework on time,” Ms. Emerson replies.

“I’m not going to tell you how to do *your* job. I didn’t plan to have my son do school from home!” Ms. Martinez hangs up the phone.

And when  
you close  
your laptop  
each night...

Finish each day and be  
done with it. You have  
done what you could.  
Some blunders and  
absurdities no doubt  
crept in; forget them as  
soon as you can.

Tomorrow is a new day.

-Emerson

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