

Wolfgang Ehinger: Talks with parents: From confrontation to cooperation

1. Introduction

Undisturbed and professional communication between home and school is essential, not only for children with special needs.

2. Useful basic attitudes that increase parents' willingness to cooperate

There are two very central forms of behavior that result from the role as a teacher:

1. I have to understand my counterpart, e.g. by active listening or by asking open Wh-questions
2. I must provide feedback and information

Ideally, the unstable triangle of basic attitude, listening (understanding) and conveying information must be kept in a balanced state.



The central aim of a successful conversation is to get the parents to cooperate. Cooperation means that - within the framework of a trusting cooperation with the teacher - parents take appropriate steps contributing to the solution or reduction (de-escalation) of the difficulties on their own responsibility in a targeted manner.

The basic attitudes symbolized in the zodiacs, which are interrelated and cannot be viewed in isolation, are the basis for very specific behavior, methods and techniques of the teacher.

These basic attitudes and perspectives are the foundation of communicative activities. They determine the concrete methods and techniques. The discussion methodology

must fit this basic attitude, otherwise it will appear fake, incongruent, artificial and will negatively influence the discussion process.

a) Empathy

This is the teacher's empathy with the subjective world view of the parents, which determines their thinking, feeling and acting.

Empathic behavior is not only expressed in words, but mostly also in non-verbal "language" such as nodding in agreement, facial expressions and gestures.

b) The consideration of the life context

where the parents live. Attempted solutions, which are construed without the current life-context, will inevitably fail. The goals and the individual solution steps to achieve these goals must be examined for their feasibility.

c) The emphasis on the personal responsibility of the interlocutors

This basic attitude is about respecting and treating parents as equal communication and cooperation partners at the adult level.

For the learning process, each participant (teachers, parents, pupils) has his/her specific share of responsibility. These shares have to be named, sorted and agreed upon in joint discussions.

d) Resource orientation

Behind this basic attitude of the teachers is the conviction that, in addition to all the problems, deficits and weaknesses, each interlocutor also has strengths, resources and positive sides.

As a central task of the parent-teacher conversation, it is therefore necessary to draw attention to these resources, to the exceptions of the problem, to the strengths, so that they can be used again spontaneously and effortlessly by those concerned.

e) Solution Focus

Solution focus means to spend only as much time and attention on the problem as is absolutely necessary to construct solution steps - but no longer. This also includes emphasizing the interest of those concerned in finding a solution and appreciating as well as positively evaluating their previous attempts to find a solution.

3. Conversation methods

In the parent-teacher conversation, the first thing to do is to understand the person(s) you are talking to and to get to know his or her view of things, e.g. by (non-verbal or active) listening, by asking appropriate questions, by reporting back what you have heard and understood. On the other hand, it is about leading the conversation by structuring and steering, by leading towards goals and solutions, by making clear statements and sometimes by clarifying the relationship with the interlocutor.

Which conversation method is used on the basis of the basic attitudes described above depends on several factors, e.g.

- the relationship between the interlocutors
- the topic and content of the conversation
- the objectives of the interlocutors
- the phase in which the conversation is taking place

a) non-verbal listening

Eye contact, nod your head, smile, facing posture. The non-verbal signals show the conversation partner that the willingness and attention is there to listen and understand.

b) Active listening

- The teacher reproduces (rewrites) what the other person says in his or her own words, e.g.: "Do I understand you correctly that ...", "It is important to you that ...", etc.
- The teacher helps the interlocutor to express his or her unclearly expressed feelings, wishes, fears etc. more clearly: "You have the feeling that ...?" "You are (e.g. angry, sad, happy, disappointed, etc.) ...?" etc.

Active listening serves to clarify the meaning of a statement, e.g. if irritation has arisen due to ambiguous or unclear statements. The teacher can then check whether his or her perception and interpretation of the parent's statement is correct.

c) Ask open and constructive Wh-questions

In the parental conversation, questions are not only used to obtain information, but are one of the most effective ways to

- direct the parents' attention in certain directions considered useful by the teacher (for example, resources and/or solutions).
- Encourage or trigger constructive search processes among parents.
- To convey information.

Constructive "Wh-questions" encourage these inner search processes. They are called that way because they begin with a "Wh" - Where, Who, How, What, Where, What, What, etc., - only the question word "Why" should be avoided, since it usually does not provide any information and often triggers feelings of guilt.

d) Making suggestions, giving advice and instructions

Advice usually contains clear instructions about "right" or "wrong".

The parents are symbolically taken by the hand and guided, the teacher clearly indicates the direction and the solutions. This method is usually out of place in the normal cooperative parental conversation.

At best it makes sense when talking to small children or when parents are clearly not able to take responsibility themselves.

4. Giving and receiving feedback

Again and again it becomes important to give the parents feedback on the one hand about the child's developmental stage, performance or behavior, and on the other hand to get to know the parents' view and family factors in order to take them into account when dealing with the child and his or her difficulties. On the basis of these views, common goals and solution steps can then be formulated and agreements reached.

Some useful tips:

- Describe rather than attribute, i.e.: describe the difficulties that give cause for concern at the behavioural level. Do not judge! Base yourself on concrete observations, not on interpretations or speculations.
- Use I messages ("I am worried about Paul." "I am annoyed because)
- Actively involve parents and address their responsibilities
- Provide concrete examples and practical illustrative material (student work)
- Facts, not rumors
- Clear statements, taking a stand
- Speaking in the (everyday) language of parents and children

5. *Clarify expectations*

Parental home and school have an equal educational mission. This means that there are overlapping responsibilities. For the good of the child, it is therefore necessary that the parents and the school strive for the highest possible consensus and clarify mutual expectations.

6. *Handling and solving conflicts*

Due to the different perspectives, objectives and overlapping responsibilities, it is not unusual for parents and teachers to get into arguments and conflicts. In most cases, the conflict parties are eager to convince the "other side" of the correctness of their own viewpoint with arguments; there is an "**exchange of blows**" with mutual accusations and recriminations. It is a matter of **victory** or **defeat**, other points of view are perceived as offence or insult. Yielding and compromises are inevitably seen as negative, as defeat, as weakness. Fighting is the order of the day, up to and including complaints, slander, legal proceedings.

Parents as well as teachers sometimes react by avoiding conversations, by **withdrawing or fleeing**. Parents are insecure, afraid that the child will suffer if they bring certain things up. Teachers are insecure because they can no longer confront the child with an unbiased attitude, for fear of upsetting the parents again.

Thus the conflict is either hushed up or intensified in fights with excessive means, the victims are always the children who belong to both systems.

In contrast, the **cooperative conflict conversation** tries to find a solution accepted by all parties to the conflict or to work out a systematic solution together.

Of course, the basic attitudes already described also apply to the conduct of conflict talks, but we would like to refer in particular to the following cooperative behaviour strategies or suggestions:

- Willingness and readiness to cooperate
- Respect for the other and appreciation for the person
- argument in the matter
- Listening
- To bring up everything
- Striving for authenticity
- Take a clear position
- be prepared to compromise
- Dealing with one's own vulnerability
- Clarification of mutual expectations
- Efforts to reach agreement on issues of performance requirements, demarcation, responsibility and pedagogical goals

Preparation for conversations

<p>1. reason for discussion</p> <p>Who has what concern?</p> <p>Who has what level of suffering?</p> <p>How did the appointment come about?</p> <p>Relationship to interlocutor (motivational states)?</p>	
<p>2. Ideas about the origin of the difficulties</p> <p>Assumptions based on discussions that have already taken place</p> <p>Direct observation of the student in class</p> <p>Areas of influence</p>	
<p>3. Topics of discussion</p> <p>Topics I would like to address</p> <p>Topics that are likely to be addressed by parents</p> <p>I still lack information</p>	
<p>4. My goals for this parent-teacher conference</p>	
<p>5. Presumed goals and expectations of the parents</p> <p>to me</p> <p>to others</p>	
<p>6. my state of mind</p> <p>How I feel about what I'm going into the parental conversation.</p> <p>What do I have to watch out for myself?</p>	
<p>7. Selecting the discussion participants</p>	
<p>8. General conditions</p> <p>Room</p> <p>Time</p>	
<p>9. Miscellaneous</p>	

Phases and procedure of a parental conversation

After thorough preparation we can now start. The following structure serves as a useful red guide through the conversation, a framework that provides you with security and support

Checklist	Phases of the cooperative parental conversation
1. Greeting, Contact	warm-up phase, establish contact with interlocutors, build an invisible bridge, create a basis of trust
2. Opening, information about structure and proceedings	Clarification of reason and concern Clarification of the expectations and goal of the interview Definition of the time available. Formal aspects of the interview Ensure motivation, willingness to talk, securing willingness to cooperate Stressing parental responsibility
3. Understanding the problem	What is now seen as a problem by the parent? What does the teacher see as a problem? Dealing with the problem? Previous attempts to solve the problem? Time of origin of the problem? Explanation of the problem, accompanying feelings, reactions
4. Expand problem view	Related problems, people involved, positive aspects of the problem Function of problematic behavior, difficulty Leading into the future: What will be the consequences of the problem in one, two, three, five years?
5. Exceptions to the problem, querying resources	When did the problem not occur or was it coped with alone? How was the course of events in the last weeks? What has changed? What are the strengths of the student, the family? What works well? Leisure time behavior?
6. Define goals	Who wants to achieve what and how? Until when? Work out clear, precise descriptions of objectives Expectations of parents, teacher, students
7. Designing solutions	Collecting and working out solutions in a community, taking into account the norms and values, the feasibility, the resources of the people concerned
8. Contract, agreements, tasks	Summary of the results Formulate clear and concrete agreements as far as possible a) in terms of content: What will the parents do? Who will do what? Possibly arrange observation tasks and/or behavioral experiments for individual participants in the discussion b) Formally: When and with which parties will the next meeting take place?
9. Farewell	Positive conclusion

