

## How Should I Handle Pushy Parents?

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## **Examples of the “pushy parent”:**

- “If you only knew my daughter like I do! It would make all the difference,”
- “My daughter had an IEP in high school. And you need to know how to teach her to get through to her.”
- “You don’t understand the family circumstances. We’ve had some emergencies. My son can’t be expected to write a paper with all we have going on.”

## **How to approach the “pushy” parent:**

- Understanding **why** parents are upset is the first step. Parents worry. They may be concerned about the student’s relationships, academic standing, or living arrangements.
- Understand that this behavior probably worked for them before. Previously, parents may have helped students by talking/advocating with their teachers.
- Here is the new information: That behavior is no longer appropriate in college. You need to show them another approach to advocating for their student.
- When a parent pulls you aside, see this as a teachable moment for the parent. As a faculty member, you can apply your skills as a teacher to create better results.
- It is important to realize “the message behind the message.” Understand the content and process of the conversation. A parent may be concerned about a test grade the student received in your class. The student may have always done well in your type of class and the parent is now concerned and confused about why this is no longer the case. Perhaps there are even other concerns (like a student drinking or spending too much time with friends and not enough time studying) that are **really** the things the parent wants to address.
- During the first class, outline your expectations in your syllabus and clearly describe your approach to working with parents.

- Collecting your ideas and sharing your philosophy early will prevent you from being caught off guard.
- When talking with a frustrated parent, consider referral options to help redirect the frustration:
  1. “Can we schedule a time to sit down with you and your daughter to discuss this?”
  2. “Has your son explored peer tutoring at Academic Affairs as an option?”
  3. “Perhaps it would help if our dean talked to you about our attendance policy.”
- Consider other ways to communicate and offer solutions. The parent is already upset, so try to make a referral in a way that is seen as helping. Your referral, redirection, or advice should not make things worse.
- Professors willing to handle difficult conversations with grace, patience, and equanimity will benefit from these conversations. Don’t underestimate the power of your position and the impact a few minutes of understanding can have.
- Clarifying questions and listening to parents’ concerns will help them feel you are on their side and willing to work with them toward a common solution. Take the extra time to let them know you understand their concerns. Clarify what they are asking.
- Too often we try to solve their problems. We forget the simple art of listening. This will make you seem wise, patient, and graceful. Try listening to parents’ concerns without trying to make your own points or offering a solution too quickly. Repeat the concerns back to them to let them know you understand.

## Common Questions from Pushy Parents...

Parent's Question	Poor Response	Better Response
<p>My daughter failed your midterm because you told her to study the wrong material.</p>	<p>I don't talk to my student's parents. If your child is having trouble in my class, she needs to talk to me, not have her mother come running to me trying to do her work for her.</p>	<p>Well, let's see what we can do. I usually like to talk to the students first to find out what kind of problem they had with the test. Sometime they don't look at the right material, other times they don't come to my study sessions. Can you use your relationship with your daughter to encourage her to talk to me after our next class? Then we'll try to work out the problem.</p>
<p>My son tells me you canceled class again, and you are always having a graduate student teach your class. I pay a lot of money for him to learn, and I want to know why you weren't there.</p>	<p>Your son isn't doing the work he needs to be in my class, and he is falling behind. That's not my problem, it's his. I'm involved in many research projects, and I often have my grad students teach. That's just the way it is. If you have a problem with it, tell your son to study harder or take it up with my Dean. I'm done talking to you about this.</p>	<p>It is true that I canceled class last week, but whenever I cancel a class, I always have the material uploaded online for the student along with a makeup assignment. While it is frustrating to have me out, I was actually at a professional conference that included some material that I bring back to the students---so in the end, they end up getting something positive out of it as well.</p> <p>I use a graduate student to help with my classes. We review the lecture materials together and most students find another perspective on the material helpful. This also is common practice at our university.</p>

<p>My daughter needs help understanding the material. She tells me you offer them no help or support on these assignments. Aren't there supposed to be tutors or something?</p>	<p>Your daughter is wrong. There are many ways to get help on campus---she is just too lazy to get the help she needs.</p>	<p>I'd be happy to help her. I'm sorry that she gave you that impression. I have office hours that I would be able to meet with her. The campus also offers tutoring services during a wide range of hours for students to have papers reviewed or receive help in specific subjects. I'd be happy to give you their number and website so your daughter can get the help she needs to improve in my class.</p>
<p>My daughter says you won't put your notes on-line for them to review because too many students download them instead of coming to class. She has a learning disability and needs access to these notes!</p>	<p>That is exactly why I don't put my notes online. Your daughter can take them in class like the rest of them. If she has some learning disability, she should have talked to the ADA office and gotten an accommodation at the start of the semester...not waiting until the last few weeks of class.</p>	<p>She is right. I've had some problems with students taking the notes and not coming to class. I'd be happy to give your daughter access to the notes in class if that would help her organize her own notes as I lecture. I'd also suggest that she look into talking to someone at the ADA office to see if she could have access to a note taker in class. This is something the university can provide for her, but she does need to meet with the ADA office first and discuss accommodations.</p>
<p>My son needs a recommendation from you to get into a useful internship. I need you to write one for his job interview next week.</p>	<p>That's not something I can do. This is the busiest time of the year. He should have planned better.</p>	<p>I'm happy to write recommendations for students, but I do get this request several times a semester, and I have to be fair to students who asked earlier. It takes me about two weeks to write one, but I'd be happy to be listed as a phone reference so they could call me.</p>

<p>My daughter is spending four hours a night trying to keep up with the work you require in class. This is way too much work for her. This isn't the only class she has, you know!</p>	<p>Well, that's the work I require. Other students are able to do it. Maybe you daughter isn't ready for college yet. College isn't supposed to be easy...that's the whole point.</p>	<p>Wow, that is much more than she should be spending studying for my class. Can you encourage your daughter to come by during my office hours to talk about her study habits? I'd be happy to give her some suggestions and even a referral to the academic affairs tutoring if she needs it.</p>
<p>I need a copy of you syllabus to keep my son on track with the assignments. He has ADD and often forgets to come to class and keep up with the assignments.</p>	<p>I don't give out that material to people who aren't in my class. If your son can't do the assignments, I don't see where you babying him is going to help matters any.</p>	<p>Hmmm...I haven't actually had that request from a parent before. My initial thought is your son needs to be able to do this on his own---but I hear what you are saying, that he is having trouble keeping track of assignments. Are you available to come in and meet with me and your son during my office hours?</p>