

How Should I Handle Pushy Parents?

Presented by:

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Brian Van Brunt: Hello, my name is Dr. Brian Van Brunt and I'm going to be talking to you today about how to deal with pushy parents in a faculty setting.

I've been teaching for about 10 years, working with different students and their parents, both in faculty settings, as well as in the counseling director position that I've had, helping out with orientation. So I've had my fair share of parents coming up and demanding things for their students, often being pushy, sometimes violent, always demanding, wanting certain things to occur for their students. I've had some experience on how to approach these parents in ways that have both of our needs met, as opposed to pushing back firmly on them when they come and attack on these situations, helping them better understand why the school or my personal policy in the classroom is the way it is and how to better address that and to redirect some of that behavior.

Today's 20-minute mentor program will be focused on how to – well, identifying this behavior is easy, we have the parent charging at you with a set of demands – how to manage that is going to be the focus of our presentation today. We're going to talk about the introduction to the problem, where these pushy behaviors occur, how to define them, and then five key approaches on how to address these parents, address the behavior that they have, in a way that gracefully moves it away from the anger and frustration they have, and meeting those needs that they're expressing underneath that initial violence and anger in their approach.

Finally, we'll end with a creative role-play from a particular parent coming in and dealing with the professor and showing both a bad way of dealing with the parent and then based on some of these five approaches, we'll go over a more creative, helpful way of dealing with a parent who is coming in with a concern.

As I mentioned, it's rare to find a faculty member who has not had that phone call from a parent at one point or another in their office, met up with a parent during a faculty introduction at the beginning of the year, an orientation event, one of those summer get-together orientations where a parent has cornered them and either had questions about their teaching methods, their syllabi, what courses are required, how much their textbooks cost and, generally, how they're going to work with their students.

Faculty are faced with these frightened, worried, scared, sometimes belligerent parents who go right to the source trying to fix the problem for their student. This isn't really a new experience. Many times, parents go through their experience with their student during high school, where they're seen as advocates for their student. They've attended IEP meetings. They've gone to parent-teacher conferences where they're actually part of the academic process for the student to be successful. In

college, we know that this has shifted a bit. The parent doesn't have that same kind of requirement and they really need to take a bit more of a back seat, allowing for the student to move forward and achieve what they need to do to be academically successful.

Some examples here. We might have a parent who comes up to you and says, "If you only knew, it would make all the difference," this impassioned plea of, "Just listen to me. You better understand my daughter in school. She's going to be successful, but you need this information that I have." You might have a parent who comes in and says, "She has an existing IEP in high school and you need to know these kinds of accommodations that she needs. If you don't know these kinds of things, if you don't have this personal conversation with me, my daughter is not going to be successful."

There might be a parent who pleads during the semester. You might get that mid-semester phone call where a parent calls and says, "Listen, we're concerned. There has been a family death. I'm separating from my wife and you need to work with my student. He can't write this paper this week. There's been an emergency." Knowing how to deal with this situation, as a faculty member, is going to be very important to both deal with the parent who's coming in with these demands, and to do that in a graceful way. That's going to be a key aspect in this 20-minute mentor program – understanding how to apply grace to these situations, to have both of your needs met.

We know that taking a dismissive approach to these parents, while that's going to work to get them out of your office or off the phone – the problem is there is going to be a cost to that. Whether that cost is the parent then calling the university president and saying, "So and so is not doing well. He's not working with me. He was rude to me. He cursed at me." These problems tend to get bigger and extrapolate into larger things. So simply by dismissing the parent and talking their anger and then redirecting it or getting rid of them, that's going to come back to you tenfold, I would argue.

So we're going to talk about ways to redirect this parent, to understand the message beneath the message, and to be successful in helping them get those needs met and helping them understand where you're coming from – putting a human face to some of the frustrations they have.

These five approaches are developed basically on the work that I've done with students, talking with parents, and finding that successful mix between having their needs met, but also having my needs met, too. It's also no good to have a faculty member who, at any parent request, just says, "Oh, well. I guess I have to do whatever you want me to do." We

don't want the faculty to become over lenient or to turn around all their expectations in the syllabus. That's not going to be any good.

What we want is to have a faculty member who can balance those kinds of things. Often, that's based on this idea of understanding the question beneath the question, that when a parent comes and talks to you, originally, there's the question that they're asking or the concern that they're bringing forth, but there's often a hidden message there underneath, and if you can tune in and respond to that hidden message, you're going to be more successful in the interaction.

Let's start with understanding the motivation behind a parent coming to you and starting with these kinds of demanding conversations. Parents worry. That's the reality. They're worried about their kids. They often paid for college. They got them safely all the way through high school to this point, where they're at a college or university. They're concerned and worried. They're worried about how their students are going to do. They're worried about the relationships that they're in. They're worried about things outside of the classroom – are they drinking too much or have they picked the right major or are they getting along socially with the right people in the residence halls? They're concerned.

Parents think that by advocating, which is something that they've done a lot of in previous years, that by doing this kind of advocacy for their students, that they're being helpful. In some cases, they're right. They can be a helpful advocate. The advocacy approach, though, does need to change, that the things they did in high school no longer are as effective in college.

For example here, if you were approached by a parent who calls or comes into your office and says, "I need you to make sure that my student isn't falling behind in your class. I think he has the textbooks, but I need to make sure that he is reading them and taking notes. How are you going to help me?" Well, the temptation for a faculty member is just to respond to that as it comes. "I'm not in charge of making sure that your kid has their textbooks. They have to study themselves. This is college. This isn't daycare. I'm not going to watch them."

These kinds of initial responses, I think, need to be modulated so that they're not the things that we're saying directly back to the parent. Let's pay attention to what they're saying underneath. While they're saying all of these things, the real message here is, "I'm worried about my kid. They're not doing what I think they should be doing. I don't think they have the textbooks for your class and I don't have anyone to help." Instead of having that immediate response of, "I'm not a daycare. Your kid needs to figure out what they need to do and buy their own textbooks," try a response like this, "It sounds like you're worried about your son

following through with his assignments and doing what he needs to do for my class. Has he had problems like this before?"

You're beginning a conversation and starting to shift their frustration with making you solve the problem to understanding the problem a bit more. As a psychologist, as a counselor working with university and college students, one of the things I've found that listening and engaging in that conversation often resolves some of the conflicts that are there, that the thing they are presenting with initially actually fades from view if we can attend to the right underlying motivation.

We've all heard the term "teachable moment." I think this is an important way to view parents. We think that it's just the students that we're working with and, in fact, that's not the case. I think student affairs folks know this very well, during orientation, that this teachable moment needs to occur not only for the student, but also for the parent. Can we help them understand better how they can help their child?

Again, this spoken message that they might say on the top of, "You need to help Justin with your assignments more. You aren't being clear in your grading. Your syllabus is a joke. I've read it and it's not clear about what they should do." There's that message on the top of this, but we need to tend to that message underneath and help the parent understand that. What they're really saying is, "I'm far away and I'm scared that no one is helping my son." If you can tie into that idea of why they're worried or why they're frustrated, it becomes a teachable moment to help the parent understand how to help their student and advocate better for the student.

One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I think, shall we say – gosh, 'mature' is not really the right word – 'experienced' faculty have had this, I think, well-understood in their minds. Year after year, they run into these conflicts with parents. They hear these frustrations in their voices. They hear these problems occur. If this a problem that's occurring year after year, let's do something different about it.

Let's include in our syllabus a paragraph about how we're going to deal with parents. This might be more common in a university experience class or an introduction to psychology class, where freshmen are coming in. Probably, if you're teaching a senior-level topics course that the kids in college have figured this out already, but for these new students coming to college where the transition is fresh, let's include a statement about your approach to dealing with parents.

Let's not have that statement be inflexible and sarcastic. "You've grown up and gone to college and you don't need your parents anymore." Let's have it be developmental. Let's have a statement that talks about the

importance of having parents involved, but also the importance of individual responsibility on the part of the student.

Redirecting is important to understand that sometimes you're going to be dealing with a parent who is so frustrated that you're not going to be able to solve their problem. All the things that I've talked about so far just aren't working, frankly. You've tried to set early expectations. You've tried to make it a teachable moment. The parents are having none of it.

So at this point, I like to use a Kung Fu or Kito example, where you take the anger and the frustration, the belligerency and the attack that the parents basically bring to you – “You need to fix this problem” – and you shift that to a different source. There are different ways to do this. One example might be to try to move out of the moment. Right now, the parent might be so upset and frustrated that having any type of other option put in front of them; they're just not going to be responsive to it. You can redirect – “I'd like to meet with you next week. I'd like to sit down with your son and daughter *and* you and have this conversation. Can we set up a time to do that?”

You could try to redirect the parent towards peer tutoring as well, and academic support. That's another option, saying, “Can we meet with another third party to come in?” “Can I help you talk to peer tutoring about the services they offer to work with your son or daughter?”

Finally, here, “Perhaps it would be helpful to talk to the dean about our attendance policy.” If you're talking to a parent and you're not getting anywhere useful with the conversation, it might be worth shifting that conversation to the dean, and say, “This is my attendance policy. I have developed this over the years. It's not something that I'm going to change. You certainly could talk to the dean, or my boss, about this policy if you want to understand it a bit more or have a question about it.” That redirects them to be able to talk to another source, probably with some more power to respond to them, similar to, “I want to talk to your supervisor.” You jump ahead of that conversation and give them that as an option – redirecting if it's not going to go well, and, again, done with a sense of grace.

While you're in your rights to say these things, I don't think faculty should. I'll be honest with you. Faculty say things like, “I don't talk to the parents of my students.” It's an inflexible, all-or-nothing approach that, in my experience, has not been a useful approach to have. Statements that are negative, like, “I'm not going to take responsibility for your son's study habits. That's his problem.” I get what you're trying to say underneath that; you're trying to say that individual responsibility is important and that each person has to take responsibility for their own choices, which is a great thing to say. What the parent is hearing, though,

is, basically, an aggressive statement. There are other ways to get that message across without saying it that way.

Requests for accommodations from parents. “Putting notes online isn’t something that I do;” that may not be something that you can do, but, again, you’re starting with this negative comment as opposed to, “Well, I don’t put my notes online. Maybe there is something else that I could do to work with your student. Maybe they could have an accommodation that has a note-taker in class. Maybe I could sit down with them and help them understand how to take better notes in class. Maybe peer advising could help them with that or the academic tutoring center. What other ways do we have to address this?”

The famous one here is, “I don’t have time to talk with you.” That might be the case, but could we add on to that, “I can’t talk with you right now. I’m preparing for my class. Is there another time that we could schedule a talk?” Help create a space so that you can have that conversation. Maybe say something like, “What you want to talk to me about is really important. I only have about five minutes. I feel like that conversation is going to take a bit longer than that. Can we meet again? Can you give me a call tomorrow and we’ll talk about this?” This kind of redirection – the parent is already upset, let’s not make things worse.

Finally, this idea of building good karma is really important. Professors willing to have and handle these conversations with parents with some grace and equanimity are essential. My parents, 15 years later – actually longer than that – still hold Dr. Cook at Gordon College on this pedestal because of the work that she’s done in talking with them throughout the years. She’s probably had a total of 25 minutes worth of conversation with my parents over the four years that I was in school, in my undergrad, but still about 19 years later, she still is seen as like walking on water.

This effort that professors can put in, very little effort, to listen to parents and to help them, has enormous payouts in terms of the family and also good karma in terms of working with presidents and deans. That kind of stuff gets repeated. Don’t underestimate the power of your position to work and make a situation better.

Let me give you another example. “It seems to me that we are both worried about how your student is doing in class. You are most worried that they won’t pass to the next test. Is that right?” Again, you’re clarifying. You’re trying to understand; you’re building those kinds of questions. Then listening, really being quiet and listening to what the parent has to say. You might try, “I’m also worried about your student. What can we do to help her improve in my class?”

Listen to the parents concerns without trying to make your own points. So often, we're trying to make our own points that we forget to listen to the parents and what their concerns are. They don't always want an answer, they want someone to understand. So it's not always about solving the problem that's presented, sometimes it's just about listening to those concerns that they bring.

Let's go ahead and do a role-play here. Let's imagine a student's mother, named Nancy, calls into the office and wants to come and talk to me about her daughter's grade in my class. She's in a nursing class that I'm teaching and she's been handing her papers in late all semester and just scored poorly on the mid-term. She'll be lucky to get a "C" in my class. Nancy is worried that her daughter will not be able to enter the nursing program, formally, with the "C," and that's probably correct. She demands help and questions my competency as a teacher.

I'm going to first show you the bad way to handle this and then I'll show a different way to have that conversation.

Professor: Hi.

Mother: Professor, do you have a moment?

Professor: Yeah, I have just a couple minutes right before class. I don't have too much time.

Mother: This is very important. I took time off of my job to come here and talk to you. I am Jessica's mother and I'm very concerned about the fact that she's not doing very well in your class.

Professor: Well, you're right. She isn't doing very well in the class, and I'm not quite sure what that's about. My class is a hard one and she's not putting in the work that she needs.

Mother: Are you putting in the work you need?

Professor: Yeah, I'm putting in the work that I need. To be honest with you, I'm not sure why you're here instead of Jessica. She's what, 18 or 19 years old, at college? She needs to be doing this on her own.

Mother: She's doing a good job in her other classes, so I'm wondering if the problem is with you.

Professor: Well, she's had the syllabus from the beginning of class. She's handing in her papers late. She just bombed the mid-term, so I'm not quite sure what the problem is, if it's something going on at home or if she isn't doing what she needs to do.

- Mother:* There's nothing going on at home that you need to be concerned about. I'm wondering why there is no way that you can help her.
- Professor:* Well, there's help on campus. It's all clearly outlined in the syllabus and I'm not quite sure what to tell you. Actually, I shouldn't even be having this conversation with you. FERPA forbids me from talking to you.
- Mother:* Don't FERPA me, young man. I know all about FERPA and she's a dependent and you can talk to me all you want.
- Professor:* Well, I don't know about her dependant status. You'd have to fax tax records or something in for me to review that or the registrar. I think this conversation is done. Like I said, I have to get to class and if your daughter has a problem, she either needs to work harder or come talk to me herself. I'm not in the business of talking to parents about this.
- Mother:* This simply isn't going to do. I have no choice but to contact the president.
- Professor:* Oh, good luck with that.
- Brian Van Brunt:* So here you see a dismissive approach. Obviously, she's getting my ire up. I'm getting frustrated. I'm not really listening to what she's saying. I'm responding to the things that she's saying. I'm not really handling the situation very well. While I didn't say anything outside the truth, FERPA has some limitations on what I can say. Her daughter has some responsibility to do what she needs to do. You can see how the situation is going to end up – with a conversation, probably, with my dean and depending on the president's mood that day, probably a phone call or at least some information about how that went badly.
- Let's try this, again, a different way.
- Mother:* Professor, do you have a moment?
- Professor:* I just have a couple minutes before class, but I'll do what I can.
- Mother:* I'm Jessica's mother and I'm very concerned about her performance in your class.
- Professor:* Yeah, me too. She hasn't been doing as well as she started at the beginning.
- Mother:* She's not doing as well as I expected her to do, either, and this is very important. She's going to be a very good nurse some day, but how is she going to get into the program if she doesn't do well in your class?

Professor: Yeah, I agree. My class is a hard one and often seen as a gatekeeping class for the nursing school and she isn't doing well right now and probably will have trouble getting into the program. She does need to change some of the work that she's doing. She really hasn't talked to me much about her concerns. I've noticed her grades slipping. Have you encouraged her to come in and talk with me?

Mother: Well, unfortunately, she says that you're not available to help her.

Professor: Hmm, that's not an uncommon response from students. I do have posted office hours and I do like to talk to students either before or after my class, so I am available. I can come up with some times that I could give to you to let her know that she can talk to me. She's in my Monday, Wednesday, Friday class, so there's three times right there. Then I can give you my office hours that she can stop by.

Mother: So you do have office hours?

Professor: I do. Again, students, sometimes when they get in a hole, they sort of blame the professor for their problems. Mostly her problems, if I'm remembering right, are getting those papers in on time and studying enough for the final, or studying the right way. This is difficult material and maybe she's not preparing the way she should.

Mother: Is there any help available for her?

Professor: Yeah, there is. Oftentimes, it's hard for students to make that first jump to actually go to peer tutoring, but that's –

Mother: Oh, peer tutoring?

Professor: It's offered both with peers and academic support and they really have some nice hours. They're open late, until about 1:00 most evenings.

Mother: Wow, those are her hours!

Professor: She's up pretty late? There are a couple options. Let me walk you through them. I think probably what first needs to happen is a meeting either with me and Jessica or if she's not going to come in under her own steam, maybe you can come in with her and we can all talk about how to work on her grades, because clearly you're worried about her and she's talking to you.

Mother: Sure. Sure.

Professor: I do think getting her a referral and getting her over to academic tutoring would help her with some of the material because she's struggling with the math and that's something, with a little extra help, she could do better on.

Mother: Yeah. Well, good. Well, thank you very much. This has been really helpful. We'll move forward with this.

Professor: Okay, I'll get you those times.

Mother: Thanks.

Brian Van Brunt: So here you see a slightly different approach, a little more understanding and a little more listening in the short role-play. I didn't really change any of the beliefs that I had. I stuck to my guns about making sure it's the student's responsibility. I think you can see some of the differences in the approach.

I hope this has been a helpful program for you today. If you can, I would like to have you go ahead and do the evaluation, which you see up on the screen, to give us some feedback on how the program went. I hope to be talking with you again soon.

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