

Parent traps

If mums and dads are lying in wait outside your classroom, Sue Dixon is on hand to help you defuse resentment and build positive relationships...



Got a problem?
Want Sue's view on difficult parents?
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Q: The parents of a girl in my class (aged 8) keeps coming in to see me at the end of the day demanding that she is given more homework to do. They essentially want more worksheets so they can sit her in the corner and make her do more at home. Her ability is average, she is a pleasant, well-behaved child and there is no need for any further support. But they are becoming really persistent. What shall I say or do?

A This feels like a case of 'blurred boundaries'. What you do as a teacher in your own classroom, the homework policy of the school and what parents might do at home needs some clarity. I don't think it is appropriate for them to try and dictate to you about your homework schedule. That's your territory, so stand firm on that.

Rather than trying to battle with them in the classroom, why not set up a meeting and ask a member of the senior team to be there too? Have the homework policy of the school to hand. Maybe use it as an opening for the meeting, to stress how seriously the school takes the matter of home / school relationships.

Share with them some progress data about their child, pointing out the positive gains - but do make it understood that to push any harder would be counter productive. Children, in your experience, don't learn when under pressure; in fact adults don't either, do we? (Smile, smile and smile some more.)

Highlight that playing educational games and discussing things around the kitchen table would be the best 'extra homework' they can choose to do.

You might want to follow up with a quick after school session for all your parents where you offer to show them a few literacy/numeracy games they can choose to play at home. And make sure you have a follow up conversation with them soon after.

Q: The father of a child in my class keeps insisting that his child is a really bad speller and that he was much better at her age. She is about right for her age and not causing any concerns. He has now written a letter of complaint to the head accusing me of being an ineffective and boring teacher. I'm really hurt and although my colleagues tell me it isn't true, I'm not sure how to tackle this.

A Don't feel hurt. If you are getting complaints then you are definitely not boring. Spelling just seems to have the capacity to polarise. I've known parents, whose own spelling is poor, defend their child's lack of effort with some kind of 'genetic excuse': "Well no one in our family has ever been a good speller, so it's no wonder..."

At the other end of the scale there are those who can't seem to remember the

efforts they took to become the proficient spellers they now are (or think they are). Perhaps this dad expected his daughter to be born with a full set of English spelling rules that would be fully matured in her reading and writing by the age of five?

Help him to understand that to be a 'good speller' at the age of six is to be making logical phonic choices, not fully correct ones. It is regular teaching of word and sentence level work at school, reading widely - especially for pleasure - word games, writing opportunities and 'exposure' to language at regular intervals that will produce the speller he wants his child to be. All in good time.

Why not invite all your parents in for a fun spelling session? Give them a word like Callipygian to spell; talk about all the phonic possibilities, the fact that not everyone will get it 'right' (because it is unfamiliar) the various strategies they used and how this relates to children's spelling journeys. Telling them what it means is up to you.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Dixon is an experienced educator and the founder of Thinking Child, which provides resources and training to support schools, parents and children to work together more effectively. thinkingchild.org.uk

