

## When Parents and Caregivers are Concerned about their Child's Mental Health

Often secretaries, office administrators, administrative assistants or executive assistants are the first point of contact for parents and caregivers when they are concerned about their child's mental health at school. It can be challenging to be the person who is first approached by a worried, angry, or distressed parent/caregiver. Often, fear and concern for their child's mental health can lead to strong emotions for parents/caregivers. You are a supportive and understanding presence in your important role, which goes a long way to support the well-being of parents/caregivers, as well as the students you serve.

Situations involving mental health problems are often sensitive and unique. Parents/caregivers may be processing their own understanding of their child's experience in addition to any events at school that have been challenging or painful for them. Therefore, these situations require thoughtful and compassionate responses, allowing for healthy and supportive dialogue with the end goal of finding a solution or directing parents/caregivers to the most appropriate person who can offer needed support.

In some cases, a conversation with you may be sufficient for a parent/caregiver to have their needs met (an opportunity to vent, express their frustration and receive guidance). Still, sometimes, a caring hand-off to another team member is required. The following tips are suggested to support you during challenging conversations to help you and the parent/caregiver move forward in a way that best meets the student's needs.

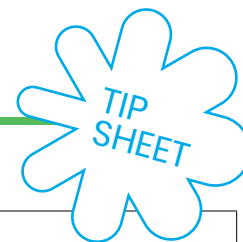
These strategies will be familiar to you, but we hope that having them in one place as a helpful reminder and handy reference will assist you to enhance relationships, diffuse tensions, and strengthen engagement with parents and caregivers when matters related to student mental health arise. As the first point of contact for many, your ongoing role in being a caring, calm, and supportive presence is integral to the success of the school and board. You care, which demonstrates to parents and caregivers that their child's school and school board also cares about student mental health and well-being.

### Notes

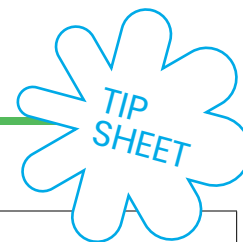
While you sometimes interact with parents and caregivers who are upset, ***you are never expected to put yourself at risk***. If you feel unsafe, seek guidance on how to move forward by using your school/board protocol.

**The term caregiver:** While most of our students reside with and are cared for by their parents, we must be mindful that many students live in group homes, foster care, with other family members, and in other types of dwellings. A caregiver can be a family member; however, we must not assume either way.





<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: purple;">W</p>	<p><b>Warm Welcome</b></p> <p>Kind greetings demonstrate friendliness. It is a welcome that acknowledges each parent/caregiver as a member of the school community. This can be difficult if they arrive or begin the call speaking loudly, using inappropriate words, or posture aggressively. However, this is the first chance to set a more positive tone and to respond calmly. With a warm welcome, you set up the interaction to be kind and understanding. You let them know you are ready to listen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Acknowledge the parent/caregiver by name to assure them they are part of the community and welcomed.</li> <li>▶ When families and caregivers are upset, they need to be heard. You can demonstrate your willingness to listen in the first few minutes of the interaction.</li> <li>▶ Remember that culture and ethnicity influence how we speak and how emotions are expressed. As you engage in conversation with a parent/caregiver, consider that approaches may be different from your own, and respond respectfully. Also be aware of the parent's/caregiver's response to your method of communicating and adapt as needed (e.g., slow your pace of speech, allow pauses, speak more quietly/loudly, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: purple;">E</p>	<p><b>Engage</b></p> <p>Speak with the parent/caregiver to gain better insights into what they seek. What is their area of need with respect to their child? Using soft tones, relaxed body language, and remaining calm as you engage with them will help to decrease any heightened emotions. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ It is important to remember that someone angry may not be able to hear you until they have calmed. Your supportive listening may help. Be mindful that any anger expressed is not about you personally. Rather, it may be due to something that happened at school involving their child's mental health and well-being.</li> <li>▶ Remain calm and attentive. This will allow you to navigate the conversation more easily instead of being reactive to an emotional person. Demonstrate care by actively listening to their concerns without judgment. This can often decrease their heightened emotions (e.g., allow them to finish sharing their concerns before you respond).</li> <li>▶ Let them know you would like to help, and you are open to hearing their concerns. If in-person, maybe offer a private space to share their concerns allowing them privacy and time to compose themselves, which will enable you to better focus on them without interruption.</li> <li>▶ Take a moment if you need one or feel the parent/caregiver requires time to settle their emotions. For example, you could offer them a drink of water or let them know you will be right back. With this time, you might let other school staff know that a parent/ caregiver is upset and requesting time to meet with a school or board official.</li> </ul>



## Care & Compassion

Empathy allows us to instantly connect with others, especially during challenging times. Parents and caregivers may need to hear you acknowledge their feelings through your responses. Be mindful that anger can mask other emotions such as hurt, sadness, or even embarrassment. By listening and empathizing, you demonstrate your understanding of their situation.

- ▶ Take the time needed to hear the concerns fully. It may require you to let other colleagues know you'll be preoccupied for several minutes.
- ▶ Empathize with responses such as:
  - "That must be difficult for you!"
  - "I hear your frustration."
  - "I understand you want the best for your child."
- ▶ Demonstrate active listening through appropriate eye contact, nodding, etc.
- ▶ Ask for clarification if you are unsure about any points being made.

You do not have to be a mental health professional or counsellor to listen compassionately when someone shares their worries and concerns. Remember that when a child is struggling with a mental health problem, it can be an incredibly stressful time for parents and caregivers, and sometimes it is hard to find the energy or the right words in challenging conversations.

## Action

As the first point of contact for many parents and caregivers, your role in facilitating a supportive hand-off to other team members can go a long way in shaping the future relationship between the parent/caregiver and school or board. It is affirming and validating for a parent/caregiver to hear what actions will be taken to rectify their concerns.

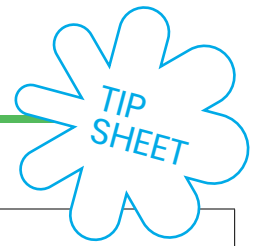
- ▶ Thank the parent/caregiver for bringing their concern forward so it can be acted upon.
- ▶ Assure them that you will share the information with the appropriate school or board staff and that someone will get back to them if the issue cannot be resolved in the moment.
  - "I appreciate you bringing this to our attention so that we can work together to resolve it."
  - "I will share your concern with your child's teacher/principal/the manager of social work services, etc."
  - "Thank you for providing the psychology report that was requested. That will help us to understand your child's strengths and needs so we can put a plan in place."
- ▶ Offer information about available mental health resources and pathways to service, as appropriate.

Knowing the school and board mental health services and ways of accessing support is vital so you can clearly explain this if asked. If you are unsure about this, you can consult with your principal or supervisor to learn more about the board's mental health and addictions strategy. Have on hand the names and contact information for the school support staff, for example; Social Worker/Mental Health Worker, Guidance Counsellor, Psychologist, Speech & Language Pathologist, and other support staff in your school for quick access you can share with the parent or caregiver if needed.

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R	<p><b>Review</b></p> <p>By reviewing all that you have heard in a caring and compassionate way, you demonstrate you are interested in the concerns of the parent/caregiver. It shows that you want to better understand all that is contributing to their distress and that you have listened attentively. This also conveys that you value their input and care about their feelings. Listening and validating feelings can often diffuse a challenging situation and may give space for more effective problem-solving conversations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Summarize what you have heard, echoing expressions, and phrasing the parent/caregiver used when sharing their concerns.</li> <li>▶ Ask questions thoughtfully where you need clarity to ensure you understand the situation as the parent/caregiver intends.</li> <li>▶ Validate the emotions that came across, with statements that show that you heard the reasons behind this (sometimes called emotion coaching):             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I really heard how frustrated you felt when you came in. And listening to your concerns, I can see that you are upset because... And because... Do I have that right?”</li> <li>• “When you spoke about... It helped me to really understand and empathize with what you’re experiencing.”</li> <li>• “Given how you described the events... It makes sense that you are upset. Your child’s mental health and well-being are important.”</li> <li>• “I want to be sure I have this completely right when I speak with the Superintendent. Here is what I heard... Are there any points you want to correct or clarify further?”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
E	<p><b>End the Conversation</b></p> <p>In a supportive way, close the conversation. These conversations are rarely easy, but in showing you care, this interaction could be the beginning or building of a positive relationship between this parent/caregiver and the school or board. Some ideas to wrap up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ “Thank you so much for reaching out. It is not easy to come to school to raise concerns like this. You are working hard for your child, and we will do all we can to help.”</li> <li>▶ “We are here to support you and your child. We are a team, and we will do what we can to help”</li> <li>▶ “Thank you for your honesty in expressing your concerns. We will work to find a solution in the best interest of your child.”</li> <li>▶ “I appreciate you coming in/calling in. We can only be helpful when we hear directly what the concerns are. You have described things clearly and that will help me when reaching out to my manager to summarize our conversation.”</li> <li>▶ “This was a hard conversation. I hope you will take a moment to do something nice for yourself to support your own well-being when things have been so difficult.”</li> </ul> <p>Ending on a note of hope may leave the parent/caregiver feeling better than when they first reached out, which will lift their spirit and yours. It also may support their child’s mental health. Instilling hope creates space for positive engagement moving forward.</p>

