

Addressing parents' concerns and complaints effectively: policy and guides

Office for Government School Education



Every
child,
every
opportunity



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Foreword

The Victorian Government's Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development recognises that involving parents in their child's education is critical to children's development and learning. It emphasises fostering positive relationships with parents and families and developing strong school community partnerships.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development also recognises that in all partnerships there will be times when there are disagreements and issues of concern that will need to be resolved. The *Addressing parents' concerns and complaints effectively: policy and guides* supports the Blueprint by articulating the Department's approach to dealing with parent complaints.

The policy provides advice for schools to assist them in developing school-level parent complaints policy and procedures. The guides are for use by school staff and are of practical assistance in communicating effectively with parents.

Some concerns raised by parents are complex; however in all cases an open, consistent approach that is courteous, efficient and fair best addresses parent concerns. Such an approach provides opportunities to build partnerships between schools and families.

Implementing this policy will support school improvement and I look forward to even stronger school community relationships developing in Victorian schools.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Dawkins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Prof, Peter Dawkins
Secretary

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Section A: About the policy and guides

Introduction

This publication contains: the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (the Department) policy and procedures for addressing parent concerns and complaints (including advice for schools to develop their own concerns and complaints procedures) and fourteen guides that provide practical advice for principals, teachers and other educational personnel about issues to consider when implementing the Department's policy and a school's procedures on managing complaints.

The policy and guides were developed in response to a 2005 review by Ombudsman Victoria of the then Department of Education and Training's handling of parent complaints. The Ombudsman recommended that the Department 'review its guidelines for managing complaints in schools and regional offices to ensure a balance between the rights of complainants and officers'.

The policy and guides support the Department's objective of strengthening the quality of its service delivery and responsiveness to the community. The Department uses the information provided through its concerns and complaints procedures as an opportunity for continuous improvement of its services and performance.

Aims

As a result of implementing the policy, the Office for Government School Education, its central divisions, regional offices and schools will have procedures in place to address concerns and complaints promptly, consistently and fairly.

The guides will assist Department staff to confidently address the concerns and complaints of parents about their child's education.

About parents' concerns and complaints

Parents' concerns and complaints most commonly relate to:

- the management of an incident between students at a school
- the educational or other progress of their child
- the development and implementation of school and general education policy.

'Parent' in the policy has the same meaning as in the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*, which is:

'parent', in relation to a child, includes a guardian and every person who has parental responsibility for the child including parental responsibility under the *Family Law Act 1975* of the Commonwealth and any person with whom a child normally or regularly resides.

For the purposes of the policy:

- a **'concern'** is an issue of interest (because of its importance and effect) which is raised informally in order to improve or change a situation. For example:

I believe that the school's physical education policy and program is inadequate. I don't think that it caters for students who have well-developed skills and who need to be involved in competitive sport. I think the school should review its policy in this area.

- a **'complaint'** is an expression of grievance or resentment where the complainant is seeking redress or justice. For example:

My daughter has been left out of the school's netball team for the third time in a row. She is an accomplished netballer and deserves to be part of the team. It is not fair that she is left out and I want you to do something about it!



Applicability

This policy applies to the Office for Government School Education, including its divisions, regional offices and schools.

The policy does not apply to matters about which there are existing rights of (and processes for) review or appeal. If, at any stage, it becomes apparent that the concern or complaint relates to such matters, the relevant procedures should be implemented immediately.

This policy is not applicable where a complainant has employed another party to represent them, such as a solicitor. In these circumstances, the concern or complaint should be referred to the Department's Legal Services Branch for their assessment. However a complainant is entitled to an advocate who can be a friend or colleague or a person provided through an appropriate support agency who does not receive a fee for service.

Policy framework

Legislative and regulatory framework

All concerns and complaints must be addressed in line with the Department's legislative and regulatory framework, which includes the:

- *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*
- *Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007*
- *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*
- *Information Privacy Act 2000*
- *Wrongs Act 1958*.

Dignity and respect statement

Concerns and complaints must be addressed in line with the Department's 2006 *Dignity and Respect Statement*. The statement says that:

The Department is committed to providing safe and supportive work environments where diversity is valued and everyone is treated with respect, fairness and dignity.

Discrimination, sexual and other forms of harassment, bullying, violence and threatening behaviour are unacceptable.

All employees, students, parents and visitors in schools and other Departmental workplaces are expected to act accordingly.

The Department (which includes schools) and school councils, will act to ensure that the safety, security, health and wellbeing of all employees, students, parents and visitors in schools and other Departmental workplaces are protected.

Code of conduct for Victorian teachers and public sector employees

All staff must observe the code of conduct for the Victorian teaching profession or public sector employees. The codes can be found on the following sites:

Victorian Teaching Profession Code of Conduct

www.vit.vic.edu.au

Code of Conduct for Victorian Public Sector Employees

www.ssa.vic.gov.au

Section B: Concerns and complaints policy

Expectations

Concerns and complaints are best addressed by students, parents, teachers, principals and support staff working in partnership.

The Department expects that all parties will, when addressing concerns and complaints:

- maintain the confidentiality of all parties, in line with Departmental policy and legislative requirements
- acknowledge that their common goal is to achieve an outcome acceptable to all parties
- act in good faith and in a calm and courteous manner
- show respect and understanding of each other's point of view and value difference, rather than judge and blame
- recognise that all parties have rights and responsibilities which must be balanced.

Principals should ensure that parents are aware of their right to advocacy when communicating the issues involved in their complaint and in negotiating an outcome. Refer to the parent complaints website:

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/parentcomplaint.htm

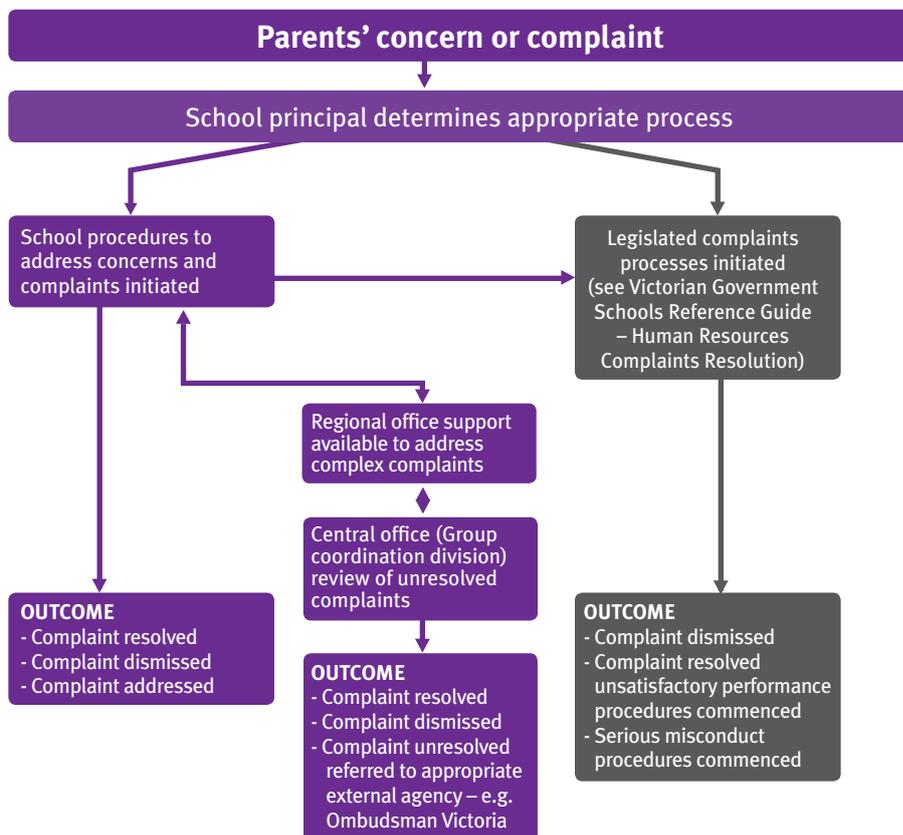
In addition to the expectations of all parties above, the Department will address complaints:

- courteously
- efficiently
- fairly
- promptly, within timelines agreed with the person with the concern or complaint (where possible concerns or complaints should be addressed within 20 school days)
- in accordance with due process and where appropriate, the principles of natural justice and the Department's regulatory framework.

Concern or complaint management process

Figure 1 shows the process by which a concern or complaint made to a school by a parent about any aspect of their child's education will be addressed.

Figure 1: Concerns and complaints management process



Parent concern or complaint

A parent can raise a concern or complaint about any aspect of a school's operations. In the first instance, they should take a concern or make a complaint to the school. Any complaint raised with the regional or central office that has not been raised at the school level will be referred to the school for resolution (unless there are special circumstances which prevent the school from managing the complaint).

School principal determines appropriate complaint procedure

Concerns and complaints relating to a school are most effectively addressed by the school. A school must make every effort to resolve a concern or complaint related to it before involving other levels of the Department.

After due consideration of the issues raised by the complainant a school principal is to determine the most appropriate way to address a concern or complaint, either by:

- using the school's general concerns and complaints procedures, or
- as outlined under legislated and other complaints processes (see page 7).

Also see the Human Resources website at:

www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/workm/perform/conduct.htm

School's policy and procedures to address concerns and complaints

In line with Departmental policy, the Department requires a school to:

- develop policy and procedures to address concerns and complaints, in collaboration with parents and the school community, that respond to the nature and complexity of the concern or complaint
- regularly make information about its procedures readily available to its community, in clear and easy-to-understand language and, where appropriate, in a range of community languages and in formats that are accessible to everyone so that no-one is disadvantaged
- review its policy and procedures as part of the school council's cyclic policy and procedures review schedule.

A school's policy and procedures to address concerns and complaints should be based on the advice provided in Section C and include all the categories of information as described. This will help ensure that the school's procedures are consistent with Departmental policy.

A school must ensure that it has systems and processes in place to implement its policy and procedures in addressing concerns and complaints.

A school is to ensure a complainant is aware of its local policy and procedures to address concerns and complaints and the Department's complaints process. When necessary, information should be provided to the complainant as soon as possible after their concern or complaint is raised.





Legislated and other complaints processes

This policy does not apply to matters where there are existing legislated rights of review or appeal. These matters must be managed in line with the procedures and processes detailed in the *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide* and on the Department's Human Resources website. These matters include:

- student expulsions
See the *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide* at: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/referenceguide/enviro/4_7.htm
- complaints about staff that if upheld would constitute misconduct
- complaints by the Department's employees related to their employment
- complaints about an employee's conduct or performance grievance or action under Division 9A or Division 10 of the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*
- student critical incident matters
- other criminal matters.

See the Human Resources website at:

[www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/workm perform/conduct.htm](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/workm%20perform/conduct.htm).

Regional office support for complex complaints

Each regional director will ensure the regional office has procedures to address complaints which reflect the Department's policy. Regional offices are to:

- support schools to develop policies and procedures to address concerns and complaints in line with the Department's policy
- ensure that, wherever possible, a school resolves concerns and complaints related to it
- ensure that training in complaints management is offered to regional office and school staff, including school councillors and other non-department employees.

If a school is unable to resolve a complaint, it can contact the regional office for support from the community liaison officer, assistant regional director or other officers as appropriate.

Complex complaints are those that:

- defy resolution over a long period of time
- involve complex issues (including issues involving more than one school)
- may include complaints about the principal of a school.

Escalating to the regional office

If a parent with a concern or complaint is not satisfied with the outcome determined by the school, they can contact the appropriate regional office. Depending on the nature and complexity of the concern or complaint, the regional director may involve the assistant regional director, the community liaison officer or other officers in the resolution of the issue.

Where relevant, the officer will ask the complainant for a complete and factual account in writing of the concern or complaint and the complainant's opinion about why they believe the school did not resolve the issue to their satisfaction. Where the complainant is unable to provide a written account the officer should act on the information provided verbally.

Regional office staff will respond promptly to complaints received and, where appropriate, immediately acknowledge, in writing, the receipt of a written complaint. They will, as far as possible, attempt to resolve the issue raised by the complainant and provide a final response within 20 school days.

Escalating to central office – Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education

If the complaint cannot be resolved by the complainant, school and regional office working together, the regional office or the complainant may refer the complaint to the Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education, as per advice provided on the Department's parent complaints website at:

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/parentcomplaint.htm

If a complaint has not already been raised with the school or regional office prior to its receipt at central office, it will be referred to the relevant regional office for investigation and resolution.

When a complainant registers a complaint with the Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education, the complainant will be asked to state in writing why they consider the complaint was not resolved. The complainant will also be asked to outline a realistic course of action to resolve the complaint.

If the complaint raises complex issues, the Deputy Secretary may determine that its resolution requires an independent review undertaken by an external agency.

If the complaint remains unresolved after all the Department's processes have been implemented, the Deputy Secretary may refer the complainant to an external agency, such as Ombudsman Victoria, for investigation.

Group Coordination Division review of unresolved complaints

The Group Coordination Division, on behalf of the Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education, will review unresolved complaints that:

- are exceptionally complex
- relate to broader Victorian Government policy issues.

Outcomes

The school is to communicate the outcomes of concerns and complaints to all parties involved, taking into account any relevant privacy requirements.

When attempting to resolve complaints, schools and regional offices can make use of the services provided by the Dispute Settlement Centre Victoria, which provides a free mediation service. Further information is available at:

www.justice.vic.gov.au/disputes/



Complaint resolved

A complaint is considered to be resolved when the complainant and the Department (school, regional office or central office) agree on an appropriate response or remedy.

Possible responses and remedies include:

- an explanation
- an acknowledgement of each other's perspective and agreement on ways to manage differences
- an apology or expression of regret
- an admission of fault
- a change of decision
- a change of policy, procedure or practice
- agreement on what constitutes acceptable behaviour
- an undertaking that unacceptable behaviour will change
- the waiving of debt related to school fees and payments
- a refund of parent payments
- the provision of counselling or other support.

Remedies should be implemented as soon as possible.

Complaint dismissed

A complaint can only be dismissed:

- after it has been investigated
- if an investigation has determined that the complaint cannot be substantiated.

Complaint unresolved

A complaint is considered to be unresolved if the complainant does not agree on a course of action and/or a remedy, or if the remedy cannot be implemented. In such cases, a school must involve its regional office to assist in resolving the complaint.

If the complaint raises complex issues which are unable to be resolved by the regional office, Group Coordination Division may, on behalf of the Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education, determine that an independent investigation is required.

It may not always be possible to fully resolve all complaints to the complainant's satisfaction. This could happen if the complainant has unrealistic expectations about the outcome of their complaint, or if the Department's policies or regulations are contrary to their views.

If the complaint remains unresolved at the completion of all the Department's procedures, or if the complainant is dissatisfied with the manner in which the complaint was handled by the Department, the Department may inform the complainant of options for review by an external agency such as Ombudsman Victoria.

Anonymous complaints

The Department requires all complaints to be investigated. However, it recognises that its staff might not be able to fully investigate a complaint if they cannot effectively liaise with the complainant. Furthermore, anonymous complaints raise natural justice issues for respondents who have a right to know the particulars of the allegations made against them.

The school principal, regional director or general manager, Group Coordination Division, should determine the extent to which an anonymous complaint received by the school, region or central office shall be investigated. Where the complaint is about the principal of a school the decision to investigate the complaint shall be made by the regional director.

Unreasonable complainant conduct

Unreasonable complainant conduct is behaviour that:

- is clearly and significantly outside the expectations of confidentiality, cooperation, courtesy and respect
- calls for staff resources and time unjustified by the nature or significance of the complaint
- is vexatious (that is, an action or complaint that is brought without merit, often to cause annoyance to another person)
- is oriented towards conflict.

Refer to *Unreasonable complainant conduct: interim practice manual* at:

www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au

The school principal, regional director or the general manager, Group Coordination Division can determine if a complainant's conduct is unreasonable. If so determined, they will:

- develop a plan to address the complaint and the complainant's interaction with the Department
- inform the complainant of the plan
- ensure all Departmental officers adhere to the plan as closely as practicable.

When a complainant uses threatening or violent behaviour all Departmental employees should follow the Occupational Violence Policy, available from the Human Resources website at:

www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/ohs/other/DETPub.htm

Additional information can also be obtained from the *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*, section 6.16.11: Options for dealing with trespassers and violence in schools.

Communicating and monitoring the parent complaints policy

Schools

Communication

Each school should make information about both the Department's policy and procedures for addressing concerns and complaints and its own local procedures readily available to the school community. All information must be in clear and easy-to-understand language and, where appropriate in a range of community languages, and in formats that are accessible to everyone, so that no-one is disadvantaged. Information should include:

- expectations of a person making a complaint
- how a person can make a complaint
- information to be provided by the person
- who the person should contact and their contact details
- the process and timeframe for addressing complaints.

The school should brief all members of staff (including volunteers) about its concerns and complaints procedures annually. It must also provide staff with access to training and support materials appropriate to their responsibilities under the procedures.

The school should ensure parent complaints are addressed promptly, within agreed timelines where possible. The length of time may vary according to the complexity of the complaint, however, in most cases the school should attempt to resolve parent concerns or complaints within 20 school days. The school will communicate to the complainant any reasons for a delay in addressing their complaint.

Schools are required to administer the Department's annual parent opinion survey that includes the statement 'I know how to make a complaint'. Schools should use the results from the survey when reflecting on the school's communication strategy.

Monitoring

The school should establish and maintain a system to record and monitor complaints and their resolution.

The school should consider recording the following details of all complaints received, even if the complaint appears to be minor:

- name and contact details (with permission) of the person with a concern or complaint
- the date the concern was expressed or complaint made
- the form in which the concern or complaint was received (such as face-to-face, by telephone, in writing, by email)
- a brief description of the concern or complaint
- details of the school officer responding to the concern or complaint
- action taken on the concern or complaint
- the outcome of action taken on the concern or complaint
- any recommendations for future improvement in the school's policy or procedures.

However, in the first instance, when the complaint is easily resolved in a telephone call, a brief note in the school's/principal's/teacher's diary recording the issue and the resolution may be all that is required.

The school should monitor parent concerns and complaints and consider issues raised through the parent complaints process, and any other relevant information from the parent opinion survey, when undertaking a review of the school's policies, procedures and operations.

The school council should regularly review its policy and procedures to effectively address parent concerns and complaints as part of its cyclic policy and procedures review schedule.

Regional offices

Communication

Each regional office is to have information about policy and procedures to address concerns and complaints on its website, with a link to the Department's parent complaints website. Information should include:

- how a person can make a complaint
- expectations of all parties involved in resolving a complaint
- information to be provided by the person
- who the person should contact and their contact details
- the process and timeframe for addressing complaints.

The regional office is to ensure staff members have access to training about responding to and addressing concerns and complaints. Training opportunities should be provided to regional and school personnel including school councillors and other non-departmental employees as required.

The regional office should also brief all regional office staff about its policy and procedures to address concerns and complaints annually. Briefings for new staff should be included as part of their induction program.

The region should ensure parent complaints are addressed promptly, within agreed timelines where possible. The length of time may vary according to the complexity of the complaint, however, in most cases the region should attempt to resolve parent concerns or complaints, in consultation with the school, within 20 school days. The region will communicate to the complainant any reasons for a delay in addressing their complaint.

Monitoring

The regional office should maintain appropriate details of parent complaints addressed by the office and use information from the complaints it has managed to identify common or recurring issues that may need to be addressed within the region.



Central office

Communication

The Group Coordination Division on behalf of the Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education:

- communicates the Department's parent concerns and complaints policy and procedures to principals and regional directors
- develops and provides support materials for schools to use in addressing parent concerns and complaints
- ensures appropriate training is provided to central officers involved in the complaints management process
- assists complainants in the complaints process by publishing information about the Department's complaints policy and procedures on the parent complaints website.

The website information will include:

- what a parent with a complaint may expect and is entitled to
- how a parent can make a complaint
- the responsibilities of, and expectations made, of the person making the complaint
- information to be provided by the parent
- who the parent should contact and their contact details
- the process for addressing complaints
- the timeframe for addressing complaints
- access to the Department's policy and guides.

The Division has produced an easy-to-understand brochure for parents outlining its whole-of-Department complaints management process. Schools can access copies of the brochure from the Department website at:

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/parentcomplaint.htm

The brochure is produced in a number of community languages.

The Group Coordination Division on behalf of the Deputy Secretary, Office for the Government School Education will ensure parent complaints referred to the office are addressed promptly, within agreed timelines where possible. The length of time may vary according to the complexity of the complaint, however, in most cases the Group Coordination Division will attempt to resolve parent concerns or complaints, in consultation with the relevant regional office, within 20 school days. The central office will communicate to the complainant any reasons for a delay in addressing their complaint.

Monitoring

The Group Coordination Division will maintain information concerning parent complaints addressed by the Office for Government School Education and use the information to identify common or recurring issues and, where necessary, implement improvements to the Department's policy and procedures.

Summary of roles and responsibilities

School

- Develops, publicises and implements its policy and procedures to effectively address parent concerns and complaints.
- Ensures all reasonable steps have been undertaken in resolving parent concerns and complaints.
- Maintains the confidentiality of all parties and observes the principles of natural justice.
- Contacts the regional office for support with any complex complaints.
- Communicates the outcomes of concerns and complaints, where possible, to all relevant parties.
- Communicates its policy and procedures clearly and regularly to parents and the school community.
- Ensures all new staff members are aware of the school and Department's policies and procedures in relation to addressing parent concerns and complaints.
- Briefs all staff members (including volunteers) on the policy and procedures annually.
- Provides staff with (or provides access to) training and support appropriate to their responsibilities under the procedures.
- Establishes and maintains administrative processes to manage concerns and complaints raised at the school.
- Ensures that its policy and procedures are consistent with the Department's policy.
- Regularly reviews its record of complaints to identify common or recurring issues that may need to be addressed.
- Modifies other school policies and procedures as required as a result of addressing concerns and complaints.
- Ensures that all parties in a disputed complaint are aware of their entitlement to support through an advocate. An advocate can be a friend or colleague or an unpaid support person provided through an appropriate agency.
- Reflects on the personal attributes necessary for staff selected to manage concerns and complaints (see *Good Practice Guide: Ombudsman Victoria's guide to complaint handling for Victorian public sector agencies*).

Teacher and home group teacher: usually best placed to resolve concerns and complaints relating to student learning and specific student incidents in the teacher's class or group.

Year level coordinator: provides support when students from other classes are involved.

Assistant principal: usually best placed to resolve concerns and complaints relating to staff members or complex student issues.

Principal: usually best placed to resolve concerns and complaints relating to school policy, school management, staff members or complex student issues.

Regional office

- Ensures whenever possible that a school resolves concerns and complaints related to it.
- Ensures that regional and school policy and procedures are in line with the Department's policy.
- Supports schools to resolve complex complaints.
- Ensures regional and school personnel have access to appropriate training and support to address parent concerns and complaints.
- Briefs all regional staff on the policy and procedures to address parent concerns and complaints annually.
- Reviews information on complaints it has managed to identify common or recurring issues that may need to be addressed.
- Reflects on the personal attributes necessary for staff selected to manage concerns and complaints (see *Good Practice Guide: Ombudsman Victoria's guide to complaint handling for Victorian public sector agencies*).

Community liaison officer: usually acts as an initial contact for concerns and complaints for the regional office and provides support to schools to address concerns and complaints.

Assistant regional director: usually manages how the regional office will address complex concerns and complaints made to the office.

Regional director: ensures schools' concerns and complaints procedures comply with Department policy and provides advice to schools.

Office for Government School Education-Group Coordination Division

- Develops departmental policy and guides on addressing parent concerns and complaints.
- Disseminates and provides advice to the community about the Department's policy on addressing parent concerns and complaints.
- Communicates the Department's policy to principals and regional directors.
- Ensures whenever possible that a school resolves concerns and complaints related to it, with the assistance of the regional office if necessary.
- Reviews the management and outcomes of specific complaints where appropriate. This may involve assisting regional offices with exceptionally complex complaints or complaints that relate to broader departmental or government policy issues.
- Appoints appropriate persons to undertake independent reviews of complex complaints where required.
- Regularly reviews information on complaints it has managed to identify and, where necessary, implement improvements to the Department's policy and procedures.
- Reflects on the personal attributes necessary for staff selected to manage concerns and complaints (see *Good Practice Guide: Ombudsman Victoria's guide to complaint handling for Victorian public sector agencies*).

Section C: Advice for schools when developing concerns and complaints policy and procedures

The Department requires all schools to develop a policy and develop and implement procedures to effectively address parents' concerns and complaints.

School level policy and procedures are to be:

- developed and reviewed in consultation with the school community
- approved by school council
- widely promoted within the school community.

This section contains advice that schools should use when developing their procedures, based on the requirements in Ombudsman Victoria's *Complaint handling guide for the Victorian public sector*.¹

The advice includes:

- an introduction explaining the required content for each point
- information which restates the Department's policy
- suggested text which a school can adapt to meet the particular circumstances and requirements of the school and its community.

A template that schools can use when developing their policy and procedures is available at: www.education.gov.au/about/contact/parent-complaint.htm

It is suggested that the following areas are included.

Title

Involve the school community when deciding on a title for the procedures. For example, a working title might be:

Raising concerns and complaints

The school's values

Briefly summarise relevant school values as they relate to addressing parent concerns and complaints. For example:

The school's approach to handling concerns and complaints is based on our values of:

- providing a safe and supportive learning environment
- building relationships between students, parents and staff
- providing a safe working environment for staff.

Concerns and complaints covered by the procedures

List the types of concerns and complaints covered by the procedures. For example:

These procedures cover concerns and complaints about:

- general issues of student behaviour that are contrary to the school's code of conduct
- incidents of bullying or harassment in the classroom or the school yard
- learning programs, assessment and reporting of student learning
- communication with parents
- school fees and payments
- general administrative issues
- any other school-related matters except as detailed below.

¹For more information, see www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/www/html/93-complaint-handling-guide-for-the-victorian-public-sector.asp



Include the Department's policy about the scope of a school's procedures to address concerns and complaints. For example:

These procedures do not cover matters for which there are existing rights of review or appeal, as detailed in the *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*.

Those matters include:

- student discipline matters involving expulsions
- complaints about employee conduct or performance and complaints that should be dealt with by performance management, grievance resolution or disciplinary action
- complaints by the Department's employees related to their employment
- student critical incident matters
- other criminal matters.

Ownership and scope

Include the Department's policy about how procedures to address concerns and complaints will be developed. For example:

The school will develop its procedures to address concerns and complaints in collaboration with parents and the school community.

Include information about any other complaints processes the school has, in addition to these procedures. For example, the school might develop and publicise complaints procedures for a specific area of operations that often attracts concerns or complaints, such as a primary school's placement of students in classes for the coming year. In that case, the school's procedures would include an explanation of how students will be placed and how the school will report the outcome to parents.

State the date from which the procedures take effect. For example:

These procedures take effect from 1 January 2009.

Expectations

State the school's expectations of the parent with a concern or complaint, and their responsibilities. For example:

The school expects a person raising a concern or complaint to:

- do so promptly, as soon as possible after the issue occurs
- provide complete and factual information about the concern or complaint
- maintain and respect the privacy and confidentiality of all parties
- acknowledge that a common goal is to achieve an outcome acceptable to all parties
- act in good faith, and in a calm and courteous manner
- show respect and understanding of each other's point of view and value difference, rather than judge and blame
- recognise that all parties have rights and responsibilities which must be balanced.

Include the Department's expectations of the school when addressing concerns and complaints. For example:

The school will address any concerns and complaints received from parents:

- courteously
- efficiently
- fairly
- promptly, or within the timeline agreed with the person with the concern or complaint
- in accordance with due process, principles of natural justice and the Department's regulatory framework.

Raising concerns or complaints

Include the Department's policy for addressing concerns and complaints. For example:

In the first instance, a complaint should be made to the school.

Specify the form in which a concern or complaint should be made and to whom it should be made. For example:

The complainant should telephone, visit or write to:

- the student's teacher or home group teacher about learning issues and incidents that happened in their class or group
- the year level coordinator if students from several classes are involved
- the assistant principal about issues relating to staff members or complex student issues
- the principal about issues relating to school policy, school management, staff members or very complex student issues.

For contact details for any staff member, call the office on (insert telephone number).

Provide a contact point for complainants who are unsure about the person they should contact in the first instance. For example:

If you are not sure who to contact, contact the Assistant Principal on (insert telephone number).

Help with raising concerns or complaints

Personal support is most appropriate in situations where the complainant and others involved in the complaint process have emotional issues related to the complaint.

Describe the resources available to students, parents, teachers and support staff involved in addressing a concern or complaint. For example:

Complainants can seek the services of an advocate when they feel they are unable to express their concern clearly. An advocate can be a friend or someone who is available through an appropriate support organisation who does not receive a fee for service.

All parties involved in addressing a complaint may seek the services of a mediator when there is difficulty coming to an agreement.

The school will ensure that the complainant is aware of these supports. A complainant who wishes to use these support services should ensure the person addressing the concern or complaint is aware of their intention and is in agreement.



Managing parent concerns and complaints information

Include the Department's policy about detailing concerns and complaints. For example:

The school should consider recording the following details of all complaints received, even if the complaint appears to be minor:

- name and contact details (with permission) of the person with a concern or complaint
- the date the concern was expressed or complaint made
- the form in which the concern or complaint was received (such as face-to-face, by telephone, in writing, by email)
- a brief description of the concern or complaint
- details of the school officer responding to the concern or complaint
- action taken on the concern or complaint
- the outcome of action taken on the concern or complaint
- any recommendations for future improvement in the school's policy or procedures.

However, in the first instance, when the complaint is easily resolved in a telephone call, a brief note in the school's/principal's/teacher's diary recording the issue and the resolution may be all that is required.

Describe the process by which the school will record concerns or complaints.

Addressing concerns or complaints

Include the Department's policy for addressing concerns and complaints. For example:

The school will make every effort to resolve concerns and complaints before involving other levels of the Department.

The school will give a complainant a copy of its complaints procedures.

The school will determine whether a concern or complaint should be managed through the school's concerns and complaints process or through other complaints processes of the Department.

Describe the process by which the school will handle the concern or complaint. For example:

All complaints will be noted and acted on promptly by the staff member who receives the complaint.

The school will acknowledge all complaints made in writing. It will provide the complainant with a timeline for investigating the complaint.

The assistant principal will investigate all complaints and will provide a response to the complainant.

Concerns and complaints about general school matters (such as the timing of events, school policies and facilities) will be addressed by the principal or a relevant staff member.

State the timeframes within which the school will handle complaints. For example:

The school will make every attempt to resolve a concern or complaint as quickly as possible. If your complaint involves many students and a range of issues, the school will need more time to investigate and resolve it.



Include the Department's policy about timelines for complaints that escalate beyond school level. For example:

Should the complaint involve complex issues, the school might need to take advice from the Department's regional office which may take more time. The school will tell the complainant the new timeline for addressing the complaint and the reasons for any delays. In all cases, the school will try to resolve a concern or complaint within 20 school days.

Remedies

Explain the types of remedies the school would consider if it accepts a concern or complaint is justified, and when the remedy will be implemented. For example:

If a concern or complaint is substantiated in whole or part, the school will offer an appropriate remedy. For example, at its discretion and depending on the circumstances, the school might offer:

- an explanation or further information about the issue
- mediation, counselling or other support
- an apology, expression of regret or admission of fault
- to change its decision
- to change its policies, procedures or practices
- to cancel a debt (such as for school payments)
- a fee refund.

The school will implement the remedy as soon as practicable.

Referral of concerns or complaints

Include the Department's policy for referral of a complaint. For example:

If a person with a concern or complaint is not satisfied with the outcome determined by the school, they should contact the Department's appropriate regional office.

The officer from the region will ask the complainant for a complete and factual account in writing of the concern or complaint and the complainant's opinion about why the school did not resolve it to their satisfaction.

If the complaint cannot be resolved by the complainant, school and regional office working together, the regional office may refer it to the Department's Group Coordination Division. The Division will ask the complainant for a complete and factual account in writing of the concern or complaint and the complainant's opinion about why the school and regional office did not resolve it to their satisfaction and will ask the complainant to outline their view on the course of action required to resolve the complaint. Where the complainant is unable to provide a written account the officer from Group Coordination Division should act on the information provided.

Communication and training

Include the Department's policy about communicating to parents and the school community. For example:

The school will make information about procedures for addressing concerns and complaints readily available to parents and the school community, in clear and easy-to-understand language and, where appropriate, in a range of community languages and formats that are accessible to everyone so that no-one is disadvantaged.

Include the information the Department expects a school to communicate:

The information will include:

- how a person can make a complaint
- the person's responsibilities
- information to be provided by the person
- who the person should contact and their contact details
- the process and timeframes for managing complaints.

Indicate how the school will communicate its complaints procedures to parents and the school community. For example:

The school's procedures for addressing concerns and complaints will be:

- published on the school's website
- printed in a leaflet given to a parent when their child enrolls
- printed in the parent's handbook
- printed in the school newsletter
- publicised on a poster displayed in public areas of the school.

Include a statement about training and support. For example:

The school will:

- brief all members of staff (including volunteers) about its procedures to address concerns and complaints annually
- provide staff with (or provide access to) training and support appropriate to their responsibilities under the procedures
- ensure staff who manage complaints demonstrate the personal attributes outlined in the *Good Practice Guide: Ombudsman Victoria's guide to complaint handling for Victorian public sector agencies*.

Monitoring the parent complaints policy

Include a statement about how the school will monitor its policy and procedures. For example:

The school will monitor parent concerns and complaints and consider issues raised through the parent complaints process, and any other relevant information from the parent opinion survey, when undertaking a review of the school's policies, procedures and operations.

The school council will regularly review its policy and procedures to effectively address parent concerns and complaints as part of its cyclic policy and procedures review schedule.

State how and when the school will review its reports of complaints and what the outcomes of reviews will be. For example:

The school will review its information about complaints made over time to:

- identify common or recurring issues that may need addressing
- assess the effectiveness of these and other procedures and whether they are being followed
- use information provided to the school through the parent opinion survey on the views of parents.

Section D: Guides

Introduction

These guides have been prepared by the Office for Government School Education, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. They provide practical advice about issues to consider when managing parents' concerns and complaints.

There are 14 guides:

1. Building positive relationships
2. Dealing with a complainant
3. Improving your listening skills
4. Saying 'yes' and 'no' with confidence
5. Understanding the blame cycle
6. Managing a request for an apology
7. Moving beyond a stalemate
8. Encouraging fair play in negotiations
9. Managing aggressive reactions
10. Managing unreasonable complainant conduct
11. Responding to strong emotions
12. Managing confrontation
13. Managing your anger
14. Being calm in a high-stress situation

These guides were originally developed by the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment. They have been adapted for use in Victorian government schools and are reproduced with permission.

Other resources

Many of the guides list further reading and other resources. You will also find useful information on the websites of:

- Ombudsman Victorian at www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au
- New South Wales Ombudsman at www.nswombudsman.nsw.gov.au
- Victorian Health Services Review Council at www.health.vic.gov.au/hsc/resources/guide.htm

1. Building positive relationships

The following tips will help you build positive relationships with parents and the school community, in which power and decision-making are shared.

Seek mutual respect

The unique relationship that a parent or teacher has with a child might at times lead to differences of opinion as to what is best for the child. Both parties need to appreciate and respect the special skills and insights that each brings to their relationships with a child.

Understand and appreciate each other's perspective

If a child is hurt in the playground, or isn't provided with correct information to make career choices, it is natural for a parent to protect and defend their child. Teachers need to appreciate the parent's perspective and parents need to appreciate that the teacher wants to protect the child too.

Use two-way communication

Tension in the parent/teacher relationship can arise when both parties are strongly motivated to do the best for the child. The ability to voice differences of opinion, respectfully and with understanding, indicates that the school community is working well together.

Set common goals

Most parents and teachers would agree that they want the best for the child. However, in practice, either may sometimes find themselves promoting a particular solution to the exclusion of all else. A skilled facilitator can help bring both parties back to focusing on common goals.

Have realistic expectations

If a teacher's or the parents' expectations are unrealistic, they will be dissatisfied with the best efforts that the other party is able to make. Positive relationships are built when each party is able to meet each other's expectations.

Clarify responsibilities

Each staff member needs the knowledge and encouragement to:

- identify what parents need
- identify if what the school provides is meeting parents' needs
- help parents find out more about what the school has to offer their children.

Be positive

Principals can inspire positive talk about the school, from within the school, by:

- repeatedly emphasising to staff that they are influential members of the community and ambassadors for their profession (people often judge the whole education profession by the comments of just one teacher they know)
- highlighting the positive things being done at the school (teaching and support staff often have little idea about the fine work going on in other parts of the school)
- organising staff seminars on public relations (good public relations are everybody's business).

Reward those who talk positively. School leaders set the tone by giving compliments, passing on the appreciation of others, commending ideas and acknowledging extra time freely given. A major reason for job dissatisfaction is that staff don't feel appreciated for what they do.

Other resources

The Schools Communications Toolkit is designed to stimulate and encourage schools to consider different approaches to communication planning. It is available at www.education.vic.gov.au/management/schooloperations/commstoolkit.htm

2. Dealing with a complainant

The following tips will help you negotiate an outcome with the complainant that meets all needs.

Value complaints

Complaints are an important way for the community to provide information and feedback to a school.

Complaints — as well as praise — provide valuable feedback about how well you and the school are meeting parents' needs. The complainant is inviting the school to enter into a problem-solving process to find a solution. Often, if the complainant's emotional investment is high, the complaint can come across as a demand.

Make the first contact count

The complainant's first contact with the school can be the most important. They will be more satisfied if their concerns are dealt with by the first person they talk to, without having to re-explain their situation over and over.

On the first contact:

- listen to the complainant carefully and with an open mind
- treat them with respect and courtesy, take them seriously and let them have their say
- make it clear that the complaint will be taken seriously
- explain the procedures for resolving complaints
- state what you can do, not what you cannot do
- find out the nature of the complaint
- take notes
- if the complaint involves complex issues which are difficult for you to understand on first hearing, ask the complainant to put the complaint in writing
- make a mutually convenient time to meet, if a meeting is required.

Summarise the first contact with the complainant. For example:

Thank you for the information. We have agreed that both you and the principal can meet on (the agreed date). Let me check that I've got the key issues you'd like to discuss. With your permission, I'll write them down so that you don't need to explain your position again.

The great majority of complaints are by nature concerned enquiry with no hostility intended. However, you should be prepared for the occasional instance of aggression. Guide 12: Managing confrontation in this document has tips to help you take control of situations where the complainant is being confrontational.

Discuss the complaint with the complainant

When it comes to discussing the substance of the complaint with the complainant:

- give the complainant your name and refer to them by name
- let the complainant decide whether the matter is really an enquiry, a concern or a complaint
- keep the discussion to relevant issues
- check the facts to make sure they are clear and beyond doubt
- check any assumptions you might have made by asking questions
- don't form an opinion before hearing all sides of the story.

If you are unsure about what should have happened, refer to relevant policies and documented processes.

Work through a problem-solving process to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions based on meeting the needs of all parties. Be clear about what solutions you can actually offer. Sometimes an outcome might be non-negotiable.

Explain what will happen next and what steps and support are available.

Follow-up

The complainant with a particularly complex complaint should be followed up. It is important to keep lines of communication open after the initial discussion. Discuss how actions that have been mutually agreed will be followed up by both parties, and how any changes will be maintained. Discussion needs to focus on learning rather than attributing blame.

Make sure written responses address all of the issues, contain correct information and use plain language.

Keep everyone who is involved informed of the progress and outcome of the complaint.

Follow the requirements of your school's procedure to fully record the details of concerns and complaints.

Adapted from material published by the Western Australia Department of Education and Training.

3. Improving your listening skills

The following tips will help you improve your listening skills so that you better understand the complainant's issues, perspective and feelings and can also make them feel they are being heard.

Things to try

- Focus your attention totally on the person and concentrate fully on what they are saying.
- Repeat conversationally and tentatively, in your own words, your understanding of the person's meaning.
- Give feedback on feelings as well as content by asking questions (as appropriate), such as, 'How do you feel about that?' or 'How did that affect you?'
- Repeat information and give feedback to show that you understand and to enable the speaker to hear and understand their meaning.
- If your feedback is not well received, only try again if you can do so with tact and understanding.
- Be as accurate in your summary of their meaning as possible.
- Challenge feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness subtly. For example, if they say, 'It is hopeless', you might ask them, 'It seems hopeless to you right now?'. If they say, 'There's nothing I can do', you could question, 'You can't find anything that will help fix the problem?'
- Allow silences in the conversation.
- People will sometimes indicate a shift in their attitude by changing their body position. A good response to such a body shift is to wait, then suggest, 'How does it all seem to you now?'

Things to avoid

- Avoid talking about yourself.
- Don't respond with your own reactions or make well-intentioned comments.
- Don't ignore or dismiss the person's feelings.
- Avoid advising, diagnosing, baiting, reassuring, encouraging or criticising.
- Avoid thinking about what you will say next: think about what they are saying.
- Avoid parroting the person's words or only saying 'mmm' or 'ah hah'.
- Don't pretend that you have understood if you haven't (ask for clarification).
- Avoid letting the person drift to less significant topics because you haven't shown you have understood.
- Avoid fixing, changing or improving what the speaker has said.
- Don't change topics.
- Resist filling every space by talking.
- Don't neglect the non-verbal content of the conversation.

4. Saying 'yes' and 'no' with confidence

The following tips will help you say 'no', which is sometimes the most useful response but something that many people find hard to do.

Why we have difficulties saying 'no'

Our belief system: We believe that saying 'no' is selfish and uncooperative so we tend to feel guilty when we do it.

Personal needs: We enjoy the feeling of being wanted and needed that requests (even unreasonable ones) bring and answering 'yes' will usually get a response that satisfies our need to be liked.

Lack of skills and experience saying 'no': We don't know how to say 'no' assertively. We weren't taught to say 'no' in ways that don't hurt the feelings of others. We weren't taught to value saying 'no'.

Our perception of our work role: We have a belief that as we are paid to do our job, we should try and fix problems and satisfy parents, students and other stakeholders. 'The customer is always right' easily translates to, 'People might see me as incompetent if I can't provide the solution they want'.

It serves the purpose of distracting us from other tasks: Time allocated to trying to meet unreasonable needs is time that can't be spent on something we can't or don't want to do.

To avoid potential confrontations: Very few people enjoy a confrontation and the path of least resistance can be to avoid saying 'no'.

Good reasons for saying 'no'

A good role model: You will be a good role model for other staff members. When you turn down a person you are indicating that it is acceptable for them to occasionally refuse you and that your relationship isn't based on saying 'yes' all the time.

Increased respect: You will be respected more. So will others including, more often than not, the people you turn down.

Increases creativity: When you say 'no', you encourage others to come up with their own creative solutions.

More control over your time: You will have more control over your time and therefore your life. Until you have trained yourself away from the habit of saying 'yes' too often, other people will have more control over your time than you will. That leads to you feeling powerless, or at least less powerful.

Seven points to remember

- When you say 'no' you are refusing a request, not rejecting a person. Saying 'no' does not mean a rejection. Much depends on the way you refuse.
- When making a refusal, accept full responsibility for doing so. Don't blame or pass the buck. Unless it is outside your power or ability to say 'yes', don't say 'I can't' when you mean 'I don't want to'.
- Saying 'no' does not need excessive apology or excuse, although you may choose to make some explanation. Ask yourself whether you are explaining because you are anxious or to provide information to support your refusal.

- You may be overestimating the difficulty the complainant will have in accepting your refusal. Very often if you express your feelings openly and honestly you allow other people to express themselves.
- If you said 'yes' but wanted to say 'no', it can show. Headaches, grimaces and muscle tension can all result from the stress caused by being over compliant.
- Acknowledge your feelings. A simple statement like 'I find this difficult' allows you to express your feelings honestly.
- If the complainant is having difficulty accepting your 'no', use the broken-record technique. Repeat your assertive refusal, couched in slightly different ways, each time the other person tries to persuade or evade you.

Setting limits

- If you are uncertain about how to respond to a request, saying 'let me get back to you' will give you time to consider whether:
 - the request is within the school's policy and priorities, and Departmental values
 - school personnel have the time and resources to accomplish what is being asked
 - the request risks the safety and wellbeing of staff or compromises their duty of care to students
 - the complainant can get help from a more appropriate source. For example the principal, regional office or central office

How to make saying 'no' easier

- Keep your reply short.
- Give a reason for refusing the request.
- Avoid 'I can't ...' phrases which sound like excuses.
- If you genuinely need it, ask for more time to decide on the request.
- Don't be abrupt in your refusal.
- Lead up to the 'no' with a preliminary statement such as, 'This may be difficult for you ...'.
- Explain the facts and the rationale for the decision.
- Provide an alternative course of action if possible.
- Allow the complainant to have some control, such as in the way the decision is announced or timed.
- Ask for immediate feedback about your refusal.
- Be prepared to listen to defending complaints.
- Offer soothing words such as, 'I know this seems harsh or sudden to you.'
- Suggest another meeting if necessary after the person has had time to digest the refusal.

When you have to say 'yes'

- Tell the complainant you can agree to their request this time, and ask how the two of you might plan things better if there was a next time.
- Tell them 'yes' and set limits about when you can reasonably deliver.
- Put a condition on your agreement. For example, 'I can talk to you for an hour at two o'clock, but I have a class scheduled at three o'clock.'

5. Understanding the blame cycle

The following tips will help you understand the 'blame cycle' and focus on problems and how to solve them.

The blame cycle

Being under extreme pressure can make a person angry, judgemental, fearful, self-righteous or revengeful. They might find themselves believing that other people are badly intended or lack ability, and wanting to blame (and punish) anyone and everything. They might also try to cover their actual or perceived mistakes because they don't want to take the risk of being seen as performing inadequately. In the circumstances, things can quickly become personalised and blame and ill feeling develop into a self-perpetuating cycle.

Blaming might appeal as a quick fix but it creates bad feelings, undermines everyone's willingness to work together and can perpetuate difficulties rather than address them.

What you can do

- Appreciate and remind yourself that others are acting rationally, as they see it.
- Remember: Most people act with the best intentions and their actions are reflective of the pressures they are under and the experience and the information they have.
- Realise that your behaviour may be influencing the complainant's behaviour and having unintended effects. It may be that in justifying your own actions you are discounting the action of others.
- Ask yourself questions rather than make judgements. You might ask yourself:
 - What information am I missing that would help me understand this person's behaviour?
 - How might this behaviour make sense?
 - What pressures are they under?
 - What structures or systems might be influencing their behaviour?
- Reflect on any anger you might feel and try and turn these destructive thoughts and feelings into constructive things. You might ask yourself:
 - What am I learning about myself in this situation?
 - What do my feelings remind me of?
 - What new behaviours or thoughts does this situation require that might be difficult for me?

How a coach could help

- Enlist the support of a coach (such as a trusted friend or peer) who can help you to clarify your concerns by discussing with you questions such as:
 - What results do you want from the situation?
 - What is another way of explaining the complainant's actions?
 - How might the complainant describe the situation?
 - What was your role in creating the situation?
 - What requests or concerns do you need to bring to the complainant?
 - How will you state them to get the result you want?
 - What do you think you are learning as you work through this situation?
- Let your coach know what happened as a result of the coaching and work through what worked and what didn't.
- Don't make negative comments or gossip about the complainant. Your coach is the only person you should confide in.

Other resources

Better Health Channel, Assertiveness at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Assertiveness

6. Managing a request for an apology

The following tips will help you manage a request for an apology.

Parents who make a complaint may ask for an apology. If both parties recognise each other's rights and responsibilities and want a 'win-win' outcome, an apology alone may resolve the complaint. Where it does not, it can reduce tension and pave the way for maintaining and repairing relationships. However, if the apology is given in a way that results in the recipient seeing it as a defeat, the apology can backfire and escalate a conflict.

What to ask yourself

- What specifically is the parent seeking the apology for? For example, are they asking me to apologise for the actions of someone else or for something that I did?
- Is our relationship too adversarial or the differences too great for the person to accept my apology as sincere?
- Is the liability too great for me to offer an apology?
- Would an apology be more beneficial at some future time and after a process of dispute resolution?
- Would apologising at this stage be too personally humiliating for me?
- Will the other person accept the apology with good grace?
- Should I ask someone else to apologise on my behalf?
- Will the other person interpret the apology as a sign of weakness, defeat and admission of total responsibility and try to use it to win over me, rather than us winning together?

Features of an effective apology

- A specific statement of the action or inaction that both parties agree led to the request for an apology. For example, 'We agree that I didn't take into account the views of ...'.
- An acknowledgement by the person making the apology of their responsibility and accountability. For example, 'I now recognise that I should have...'
- An acknowledgement of the motivation of the person asking for the apology, which does not necessarily name the motivation nor imply that the motivation is typical, mature or appropriate. The acknowledgement can just state the fact that the motivation existed. For example, 'I now know that receiving a prompt reply is important to you'.
- A direct self-judgement. Saying things like, 'I was insensitive' or 'What I did was wrong' can help to establish common ground with the person receiving the apology.
- A statement of regret, such as 'I am sorry'. This indicates that the person making the apology takes responsibility for having acted wrongly or for hurting the other person.
- An explanation of why the person making the apology did what they did. The explanation must not intend to be (or sound) self-serving and must not blame another person. For example, 'I was very concerned about the student's welfare' presents a point of view that everyone can share.

Making the apology

- Match how the apology is communicated (for example, the body language and tone of voice used) in the message.
- If you are likely to interact with the other person in future, you both should discuss how to prevent conflict from arising in future and how any future conflict will be handled.

7. Moving beyond a stalemate

The following steps will help you recognise and address a stalemate.

Step 1: Recognise a situation that is not reaching resolution

Ask yourself the following questions about the situation. This will help you form a view on whether the situation is likely to be resolved in the short term.

Time

- Has the situation continued for longer than anyone would have reasonably expected?
- Are meetings becoming long-winded and not leading to clear conclusions?

Blaming and secrets

- Is the focus on people's wrongdoings rather than on the problem?
- Is information being withheld from any of the parties involved in the complaint?
- Are sub-groups forming against others?
- Is gossip increasing?

Intense or uncomfortable emotions

- Is the situation dominating your thoughts, time and energy?
- Are feelings more intense or uncomfortable than you would normally expect from any of the parties involved in the complaint?
- Are behaviours out-of-character?

Resistance and motivation

- Is there a marked lack of motivation on the part of particular stakeholders to reach goals or try anything different?
- Does the complainant appear to persistently reject, ignore or oppose suggested remedies over a long period of time?
- Does their advocate argue at length or dissuade them from accepting suggestions?

Contradictory information

- Do any of the parties involved in the complaint repeatedly suggest information or give opinions which are contrary to the suggested goals?

Same solution tried repeatedly

- Are the solutions asked for by the complainant repetitious?
- Has the same kind of solution been tried more than once?

Step 2: Evaluate your part in the conflict

If the situation is moving towards a stalemate, the following questions will help you honestly examine whether you are doing your utmost to resolve it.

- Are you using your power appropriately? For example, does the situation require ‘power over’ the person (by enforcing Departmental requirements) or ‘power with’ the person (by helping them have more of a say, and by listening to what they say)?
- Have you tried building empathy with the complainant? For example, have you tried seeing the situation from the complainant’s point of view?
- Have you communicated your perspective, needs and concerns clearly? For example, are you talking in generalities or are you providing specific and objective information?
- Are you dictating solutions? Or are you exploring the person’s needs, using words such as ‘could’ rather than ‘should’, and together arriving at solutions?
- Have you considered your language and how the person might be interpreting it? For example, do you start your sentences with ‘You should’ or ‘I feel’? One is demanding behaviour change, the other is offering a preferred action and explaining its impact on you and others. Do you say what you can’t do, rather than focusing on what you can do?
- Are you adding to options by using words like ‘and’ or are you appearing to dismiss possibilities by using words like ‘but’?
- Do you hold beliefs that lead to a brick wall or to a resolution? For example, do you say to yourself:
 - ‘I just can’t get anywhere with some people’ or ‘I can get somewhere with almost anyone’?
 - ‘This is just the way it is’ or ‘There are other ways’?
 - ‘Life and its difficulties are just too complex to solve’ or ‘It’s possible to solve problems. We can handle the complexities of life’?
 - ‘Things don’t work out’ or ‘Many things do work’?

Step 3: Explore barriers to further discussion

Consider whether the complainant has been backed into a corner. Is there something you can do to help them save face?

Identify areas of misinterpretation (for example, objectives, motives, points of view, values, feelings, requirements, outcomes, needs and concerns). How can these be clarified and any misinterpretation overcome?

Consider your relationship with the complainant. Can you develop a relationship of greater trust independent of solving the problem?

Step 4: Address emotions to move towards resolution

In some cases, the best solution for a persistently complaining parent might be no solution. Their personal and psychological needs might be better met by persistent complaining than by resolution. A need for power, for attention, for revenge, for belonging or for achievement might motivate a person to keep complaining. They might have a high investment in being right, in having the final say or in financial compensation. If this is the case, there has to be greater benefit for the person in changing than in not changing.

Despite your best efforts you may be powerless to make a difference without addressing what is motivating such a person to keep complaining.

A counsellor, senior staff member from the regional office or a peer could help you to identify their motivations and to resolve the situation. Or you might consider stepping back both physically and emotionally. You might ask a senior staff member from the regional office to chair meetings or act as a mediator. Or you might choose to use an external (outside the school system) and impartial review or mediation process to develop a way forward that both parties see as having no vested interest in the result.

Other resources

The Victorian Department of Justice's Dispute Settlement Centre helps individuals resolve a variety of common disputes. Further information is at www.justice.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/DOJ+Internet/Home/The+Justice+System/Disputes/

This guide was adapted from R Gaspari's, Dispute resolution one day program for South Australian leaders prepared for the *South Australian Centre for Leaders in Education Network community-based project 1999*.

8. Encouraging fair play in negotiations

The following steps will help you negotiate a satisfactory resolution for all parties in cases where some people aren't playing fair.

Step 1: Respond, don't react

- Manage your emotions and buy time by using power breathing (as explained in guides 12 and 14)
- When confronted with accusations, attacks, threats or ultimatums, don't take the bait but let them pass.
- Don't let yourself become defensive. Remain flexible and open in your thinking.
- Instead of getting mad or even, focus on what you want to have happen.
- Make it possible for the other person to back down without feeling humiliated. For example, you could say, 'Well, it now looks like things aren't quite as they first seemed ...'.

Step 2: Step to one side

- If there is tension, try to disarm it by clearly appearing to listen.
- Agree with as much of what is being said as you feel genuinely able to do.
- Take a break, change location or seating arrangements in order to change the dynamic of a particular situation.
- Call for the meeting to end now and resume later, giving all parties the opportunity for reflection.

Step 3: Find options and move to the positive

- Rejecting the position of a person with a complaint usually only reinforces it. Instead, direct attention to meeting the needs of each party. For example, you could say, 'One view is that ... ; another view is that Both viewpoints have their merits. How can we work together to incorporate the best aspects of both views?'
- Ask open-ended questions which increase the options and move to the positive. For example, 'What would be happening in ... class if things were working better?'

Step 4: Identify unfair tactics

- Name the behaviour as a tactic. For example, 'Could calling the press about this be a way of indicating that you believe things could have been done differently?'
- Explain how the tactics have made you feel. For example, 'I felt frustrated that we hadn't had the chance to consider all possible ways of dealing with this issue before the press put their interpretation on it.'
- Address the motive for using the tactic. For example, 'Could it be that you hoped to embarrass the school into doing something different?'

Step 5: Refocus on the issue

- Maintain the relationship and try to resolve the issue. For example, 'We are all obviously concerned for ...'s welfare'.
- Summarise what you believe to be the common ground and what has been agreed. For example, 'We have agreed that ...'.
- Divide the issue into parts. For example, 'We have discussed the issues around homework and they seem to relate to three areas:
 - firstly, there are differing views about the importance of homework
 - secondly, there is confusion over the amount of homework the teacher expects
 - thirdly, you don't know if you can help your daughter with her maths homework'.
- Address the less difficult issues first. For example, 'Let's start by talking about the school's homework policy'.
- Introduce some bargaining such as 'if you will, I will' agreements. For example, 'If you are able to send a note to the teacher each Friday with any questions you need answered about the week's homework, I'll ensure the teacher responds to you each Monday'.
- Try for agreement in principle. For example, 'We have agreed that homework is an important part of the learning program and we will continue to work together on addressing the details'.

Other resources

Department of Education, Training and Employment, *Making positive choices: psychological health for worksites*, DETE South Australia, 1999

Hollier F, Murray K & Cornelius H, *Conflict resolution; Trainers Manual; 12 skills*, The Conflict Resolution Network, 1993 (PO Box 1016 Chatswood, NSW)

9. Managing aggressive reactions

The following tips will help you deal with complainants whose approach is aggressive.

Use these tips before the level of emotional intensity has risen or after it has dropped. Often the complainant will indicate their readiness to start engaging in a more constructive dialogue by sighing or shifting position.

Persist

- Use the broken record technique. Repeat what you have said without adding further argument or reason. For example:
 - ‘We need to discuss this away from the children. Please come with me to my office’ or
 - ‘We need to talk about this in my office away from the children’ or
 - ‘My office is this way. We can continue this conversation away from the children’.

Emphasise your feelings

- Emphasise the importance of the subject to you personally. For example, ‘I am worried about this allegation and I’d like to start sorting it out now’.

Acknowledge and continue

- Acknowledge their concerns but don’t let the discussion stop there: continue immediately towards a solution. For example, ‘Yes, I know it is an unsatisfactory situation for you, and I would prefer...’.
- As in the example above, use ‘and’ rather than ‘but’. If you use ‘but’, the listener invariably hears only that part of the sentence that follows the ‘but’. They might interpret what you are saying as a demand, increasing the likelihood of a defensive reaction.

Ask open questions to explore possibilities

- For example:
 - ‘What would we need to do to improve the current situation?’
 - ‘How do you think we could satisfy your son’s needs?’
 - ‘What would you like to see happen as a result of our discussion?’

Disagree if necessary

- Say if you don’t agree with a point being made, but try to establish areas of agreement. For example:
 - ‘I don’t see the situation like that ... I think we both agree that ...’.

Reschedule

- Reschedule if necessary to ensure there is adequate time to discuss the issues. Rescheduling may also help to defuse the situation. For example:
 - ‘There is a better time to discuss this issue in the detail required. When do you have an hour we can both set aside?’

Follow-up

- After any situation marked by aggression, awkwardness or uncertainty, take the time to follow up with a letter, brief note or phone call. This is likely to make further interactions with the people involved smoother.

Other resources

Converge International provides the Department’s Employee Assistance Program – a short-term, solution-focused counselling service. You can contact them on 1800 337 068. Further details are at www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/ohs/health/morale.htm

Better Health Channel, Workplace conflict at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Workplace_conflict

10. Managing unreasonable complainant conduct

The following tips will help you identify and deal with unreasonable conduct by a complainant.

While the majority of parents have legitimate concerns and genuinely seek resolution, a small proportion of complainants demonstrate unreasonable concerns and unreasonable and uncooperative behavior. A complainant with unreasonable conduct can be unusually persistent, pursue complaints for longer, supply more written material, telephone more often and for longer, and require more meetings. They are often still complaining after the complaint is closed. Such complainants sometimes want what a complaint handling system cannot provide – vindication, retribution and revenge.

There are five types of unreasonable conduct:

- unreasonable persistence
- unreasonable demands
- unreasonable lack of cooperation
- unreasonable arguments
- unreasonable behaviour.

Action to manage unreasonable complainant conduct must be based on the clear understanding that:

- unless there are extremely good reasons otherwise, all members of the school community have a right to make a complaint or raise a concern
- every complainant deserves to be treated with respect
- every complainant, regardless of how much time and effort is required to respond to their complaint, should have their complaint properly considered
- the complaint of a complainant whose conduct is unreasonable should be considered as legitimate until proved otherwise
- the substance of a complaint should dictate the level of resources allocated to it, not the complainant's wishes, demands or behaviour.

Unreasonable persistence

Unreasonable persistence is often characterised by the complainant:

- persisting even though the complaint has been comprehensively addressed
- reframing the complaint
- demanding a review of the complaint
- making an issue out of trivial things, repeatedly.

The following tips — based on saying 'no' — will help you deal with unreasonable persistence.

- Communicate clearly.
- If after investigating the complaint there is nothing further you can do, and no resolution has been reached, or mutually agreed remedy, escalate the complaint to the regional office in line with Departmental policy.
- Where appropriate, make it clear that there will be no further correspondence or contact with the school about the complaint.
- Do not allow the complainant to reframe the complaint to restart the process.
- End phone calls that are unproductive.
- Assert the school's position. For example, you might say, 'I acknowledge that your view is different; however, the school policy is ...'.

Unreasonable demands

Unreasonable demands are often characterised by the complainant:

- insisting on unattainable outcomes
- insisting on a moral outcome for example, justice in the community interest, when really a personal interest is at stake
- wanting revenge or retribution
- making demands about the way the complaint should be handled
- providing extraordinary detail which is not relevant to the complaint
- wanting regular and lengthy phone contact
- moving the goal posts
- creating complexity when there is none.

The following tips — based on setting limits — will help you deal with unreasonable demands:

- Let the complainant know about the school's concerns and complaints procedures; that is, have a plan and stick to it.
- Make it clear that the school will decide how the complaint will be handled.
- Clarify the limitations of the concerns and complaints procedures.
- Avoid being drawn into unproductive arguments and personal attacks.
- Restrict contact to defined times and staff members where necessary.
- Respond only to emails and letters addressed to the school directly. Do not respond to mail where the school is copied in.
- Limit contact to writing only.
- Do not do things for an unreasonably demanding complainant just to appease them that the school would not normally do for any other complainant.
- As a last resort, inform the complainant that the school finds their approach unreasonable and set terms and conditions for further contact.

Unreasonable lack of cooperation

Unreasonable lack of cooperation is often characterised by the complainant:

- presenting a large quantity of information that is not organised
- presenting information in dribs and drabs, or withholding information
- refusing to define the issues underlying the complaint
- focusing on principles rather than issues
- changing the complaint.

The following tips — based on setting conditions — will help you deal with unreasonable lack of cooperation.

- Where they are capable of doing so, require complainants to organise or summarise their supporting information before you will consider the complaint. Make it clear that the school will not look at the complaint until they present all the required information.
- Require complainants to clearly define what their issues are.
- Terminate consideration of the complaint if it is established that the complainant has been misleading or untruthful.

Unreasonable arguments

Unreasonable arguments are characterised by the complainant:

- advancing irrational beliefs (such as seeing cause and effect links where there are clearly none)
- advancing and sticking to what is clearly a conspiracy theory unsupported by evidence
- insisting that a particular solution is the correct one
- insisting on the importance of an issue that is clearly trivial.

Unreasonable arguments are best countered by declining or discontinuing the school's involvement. A groundless complaint should be declined at the outset, or discontinued as soon as it becomes clear that it is groundless.

Where unreasonable and reasonable arguments are mixed together, the school should refuse to consider the unreasonable arguments.

Unreasonable behaviour

Unreasonable behaviour is when the complainant:

- is very rude or aggressive, makes threats or harasses others
- sends rude, confronting or threatening letters
- makes threats to harm themselves or others
- is very manipulative (such as overly ingratiating, cries as a tactic or makes veiled or implied threats).

Unreasonable behaviour requires the school to have risk management protocols to deal with aggression, anger and threats of harm that are made in writing, by telephone or in person; and to set limits and conditions.

The following tips will help you deal with unreasonable behaviour:

- Return letters that use rude or intemperate language and ask the complainant to restate their complaint in more moderate language.
- End a telephone call or interview if the complainant engages in unreasonable behaviour. If the complainant wants further contact, specify your expectations of reasonable behaviour.

When a complainant uses threatening or violent behaviour all Departmental employees should follow the 'Occupational Violence Policy', available at: <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/hrweb/ohs/other/DEtpub.htm>

Other resources

Unreasonable complainant conduct: interim practice manual. A joint project of the Australian Parliamentary Ombudsman, Australian Parliamentary Ombudsman, August 2007 available under Complaint handling guide for the Victorian public sector at: www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au

Additional information can also be obtained from the *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide, section 6.16.11: Options for dealing with trespassers and violence in schools.*

The information in this guide was adapted from *Unreasonable complaint conduct: interim practice manual, Australian Parliamentary Ombudsman, August 2007.*

11. Responding to strong emotions

The following tips will help you deal positively with the difficult emotions of complainants and avoid defensive responses.

- **Receive:** Listen and say nothing for the moment. Give the complainant room to express their emotions. Respect the complainant's communication of their feelings.
- **Notice:** Observe your own reaction to the person's expression of their emotions.
- **Centre:** Tune into yourself. Breathe deeply.
- **Listen again:** Ask yourself what you are picking up from what the person is saying. Separate their feelings from the content. Do not react emotionally to accusations aimed at you personally.
- **Reflect back:** Summarise what you believe to be the person's main points of concern and how they are feeling.
- **Clarify and explore:** Identify precisely what it is the person needs or is concerned about. Think about what is behind the words they are using. Ask questions that shift the focus from their anger to exploring the issues.
- **Repeat the cycle:** Ensure that feelings and facts are mutually understood.

Other resources

Better Health Channel, Negative emotions – coping tips, at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Negative_emotions_coping_tips

Better Health Channel, Assertiveness, at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Assertiveness

12. Managing confrontation

The following tips will help you take control of a situation where the complainant is being confrontational.

Stay calm by practising S-T-O-P

Signal: take note of your body's early warning signs of tension (such as shallow breathing and throat tightness).

Take control through power breathing:

- take a deep breath through your nostrils. Do this without exertion and without raising your shoulders or puffing out your cheeks
- hold the breath for a second
- push the breath into the extremities of your body (skull, hands and feet)
- slowly breathe out through your lips
- breathe in and out a few times, smoothing out the inhalation and exhalation to experience an unbroken inflow and outflow of air
- as you breathe out, feel the tension melting from your body into the floor through the soles of your feet.

Opposite: a habitual response under tension is to tighten up our muscles and to negatively self-talk, 'Oh no!'. The opposite response is to breathe deeply and smoothly and to say to yourself, 'calm, in control'.

Practise: a good time to practise is just before an appointment you think might be confrontational.

Let the complainant have their say

Actively listen: let the complainant know you are listening by using appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues.

Don't interrupt: an interruption will only lead to the complainant starting at the beginning again.

Listen for the sigh: don't move to developing options until the complainant has indicated a readiness and willingness to engage. One way they might do this is with a sigh, and by dropping their shoulders.

Deal with the complainant's emotions

Acknowledge emotions: acknowledging the complainant's emotions helps make them feel valued, and helps develop a partnership with them.

Restate content and emotion: let the complainant know you heard them by paraphrasing what they said and expressed.

Be empathetic: show that you understand and are sensitive to the complainant's feelings, thoughts and experiences. This is not necessarily the same as sharing those feelings or agreeing with the complainant's position.

Identify underlying needs and concerns: clearly identify the real problem and make the problem — not the person — the problem.

Respond to criticism non-defensively

Acknowledge any truth in a concern or complaint: accept that there may be some truth to criticism of you or the school.

Guard against absolute responses such as, ‘I can assure you I would never say something like that!’. Say things like, ‘... you might be right about that ... perhaps I could...’.

Request specific feedback to criticism: for example, you could say things like, ‘What specifically did I do that ...’, ‘If you were in my shoes, what would you do differently ...’, ‘I’m not sure I’m clear about your concerns ...’, ‘Can you give me some specific examples?’.

Avoid negative triggers

To successfully resolve confrontation, you need to use language that expresses your desire to work in partnership with the complainant to find a solution.

Negative triggers have the effect of setting up roadblocks to, or shutting down, discussion. They make it harder, not easier, to find a solution.

The table below shows some negative triggers and some positive alternatives.

Negative triggers	Positive alternatives
It’s our policy to	Here’s what we can do
I can’t	I can
No, I don’t know	I can find out
But	And
You should have	I understand why you
Why didn’t you	I can see why
The only thing we can do	The best option I think

Sound helpful

Address the complainant by name, use a tone of voice that sounds helpful and ask the complainant to help you. For example:

‘Ms ..., I am not clear about the issue you are raising. Can you identify the precise issue you are concerned about and what you feel needs to happen, so I can investigate the issue on your behalf?’

Delay action to provide ‘time out’

By not taking action immediately, you give yourself and the complainant ‘time out’. For example, you can say things like, ‘Ms..., I think we need some more information before we can move any further ...’.

Other resources

Ombudsman Victoria, ‘How to deal with challenging behaviours’, in *Complaint handling guide for the Victorian Public Sector*, at: www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au

Better Health Channel, *Stress in everyday life*, at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Stress_in_everyday_life

Better Health Channel, *Workplace conflict*, at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Workplace_conflict

Better Health Channel, *Assertiveness*, at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Assertiveness

13. Managing your anger

The following tips will help you control your feelings of anger and use other more effective ways to respond.

The impact of anger on our bodies

While it is natural to feel angry when facing situations we believe are unfair, anger is seldom helpful. It can also become a bad habit and appear to others to be a way of trying to control a situation.

When you feel angry, your body releases adrenalin. Blood rushes to your legs, arms and head. You may begin to sweat and breathe quickly. Your heartbeat speeds up and you get urges to yell, scream, lash out or run. This is the 'fight or flight' reaction.

We tend to suppress anger at work because we are afraid of damaging relationships or hurting someone. This can quickly result in muscular tension in the shoulders, neck, back or any part of the body. Unreleased tension can build up until we can no longer suppress it and fly off the handle, perhaps at someone who had nothing to do with the original cause of the anger. Or, if it slowly builds and is unreleased over many years, tension can become chronic and possibly damage your immune system.

Releasing tension

While most of us cannot just tell our anger to go away and have it obey, you can do the following exercises when you feel tension and anger arising.

- If you can, excuse yourself from the situation as soon as you recognise that your emotions are beginning to overtake you. For example, take a brisk walk around the school oval.
- Go to the bathroom and splash your face with water.
- Slow down, don't speed up as a natural response to anger.
- Do the breathing and other calming exercises described in guides 12 and 14.

Principles of anger management

- Identify situations and types of behaviours that can make you angry.
- Learn to recognise your first signs of anger. Then watch out for them when they arise.
- Use these first signs of anger as a signal to focus on solving the problem and not on attacking the person.
- Anger can stem from doubt about your ability to face and solve problems. Use the first signs of anger to remind yourself that you are a worthy person with many strengths and good qualities.
- Ask yourself whether the other person's criticism is valid or justified. For example, ask yourself:
 - 'Have I made a mistake?'
 - 'Are the other person's standards known and reasonable?'
 - 'Do other people agree with the criticism of me?'
 - 'Is the criticism more about me or the other person?'
 - 'Am I being side tracked by personalising the situation?'
- Identify and anticipate situations where conflict can arise. For example, it is likely that complaints will arise after school reports are issued. Use past experiences to identify areas of concern and be prepared to respond to common concerns.

Responding when angry

Generally speaking, there are three forms of interaction with others — assertive, aggressive and passive. Assertive responses are usually best when resolving a complaint.

With assertive responses, you:

- clarify your own needs directly, openly and appropriately
- are aware of your own rights and the rights of others
- ask confidently and without undue anxiety (often expressing yourself with an ‘I’ statement, as explained below).

With aggressive responses, you:

- try to get what you want in any way possible
- often give rise to uncomfortable feelings in others
- threaten, cajole, manipulate or use sarcasm
- say: ‘you should ...’, ‘you must ...’, ‘you’d better ...’, ‘never’, ‘always’, ‘impossible’, ‘won’t’ or ‘can’t’.

With passive responses, you:

- hope that you get what you want
- sit on your feelings
- rely on others to guess what you want. Expressed as: ‘maybe’, ‘I guess ...’, ‘I can’t ...’, ‘you know ...’, ‘they don’t listen’ or ‘they’re obnoxious’.

‘I’ statements

By using an ‘I’ statement, you tell other people how you feel about something while clarifying your needs. An ‘I’ statement:

- does not blame someone or require them to change
- helps to identify a concern and open a discussion (but does not resolve the situation)
- addresses ‘I’ and ‘we’, rather than ‘you’
- is informal and simply states how you feel and what your concerns are.

An ‘I’ statement has three parts:

- a statement of your feelings (such as, ‘I feel attacked ...’)
- a description of the behaviour that brings forward the feelings (such as, ‘... when people raise their voice to make a point ...’)
- a statement of the consequences of the behaviour (such as ‘... because it invariably makes others angry and leads to more aggression’).

You might like to add a fourth component — what you would like to see happen (such as, ‘I suggest we try to remain calm so that we can discuss the concerns you want to raise and develop a timeline to try to resolve them’).

14. Being calm in a high-stress situation

The following tips will help you be calm before, during and after a high-stress situation.

The most effective way to overcome the stress and anxiety of a high-stress situation is usually to be realistic about how much of the situation you can change. You may not be able to control the situation but you can control the effect it has on you.

In these hectic times, the ability to become calm is one of the most important life skills. It enables you to restore your sense of wellbeing when things go wrong. It helps you to feel better when normally you would feel awful. It helps you address with equanimity the stressful things that happen.

Breathing to become calm

The usefulness of any technique to become calm depends on whether you believe it will be useful. If you have successfully practised the technique in the past, it is more likely to work in the future. Therefore, the best time to practise calming techniques is not in a crisis, just like the best time to practise swimming is not when the boat is sinking. The best time to practise calming techniques is when life is relatively calm.

Breathing techniques have proved effective in bringing about calm. Deep and focused breathing causes your body to release endorphins, which are tranquillising hormones.

By practising these calming exercises regularly, you can equip yourself to better handle the stresses of daily life. The following simple breathing exercise is a good place to start.

- Find a warm, quiet place and a straight-backed chair. Loosen your clothes, take off your shoes and sit down.
- When you do the following breathing exercises, try to focus on the experience of breathing and not on what is happening around you or on yesterday's, today's or tomorrow's problems.
- Take a deep breath in through your nostrils. Do this without exertion, neither raising your shoulders nor puffing out your chest.
- Hold the breath for a second or two. Imagine the breath flowing through your body into the extremities — your hands, feet and skull.
- Slowly breathe out through your lips.
- As you breathe out, feel the tension melting from your body into the floor. As you continue to practise, you may notice that the tension is passing from your body through the soles of your feet.
- Repeat the exercise.
- Try to do this exercise for at least 10 breaths without losing concentration too much.
- Try to do the exercise every day or second day.
- If you find the exercise helpful, make it part of your routine (at the same place and same time) and slowly extend the time. Even five minutes, four days a week, should result in a very pleasurable sense of calm that gradually extends well beyond the time of your practice.

Other calming exercises

By practising these calming exercises regularly, you can equip yourself to better handle the stresses of daily life.

- Sigh (with a big out breath), drop your shoulders, close your eyes and form your lips into a half smile.
- Physically change your position by sitting down, opening a window, getting up from your desk or getting a cup of tea. Simple changes in position can dramatically alter the amount of tension you feel.
- Meditation, yoga and massage are proven calming strategies.
- The fitter you are, the better able you are to cope. Many fitness activities (such as bicycling, walking, jogging or swimming) involve repetitious movements. Approached in a relaxed frame of mind, such repetitious movement also has a powerful meditative effect.

Calm during a crisis

- Do the breathing exercise that you have practised.
- Slow down your actions.
- Remove yourself and others from the situation if necessary.
- Apply the school's crisis plan.

Calm after a crisis

- Remove your shoes, make yourself comfortable and stay warm.
- Don't use cigarettes, coffee or alcohol — they are stimulants.
- Continue your breathing exercise. Listen to each breath and concentrate on your breathing, just as you have practised.
- Seek support.

Support

One of the biggest mistakes people make when trying to deal with a crisis is to try to handle it alone. Seeking support is not a sign of weakness. Seek it from a friend, a personal counsellor or a colleague.

There are enormous — sometimes even lifesaving — benefits to be had from an intimate discussion with another person. Whether that discussion yields useful advice or not is seldom the issue. The real benefit comes from sharing your experience and in receiving encouragement to continue.

