

CHAPTER 1

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY ANGRY PARENTS?

Seek first to understand, before you seek to be understood.

—Stephen Covey (1989, p. 235)

If you have a strong desire to work collaboratively with difficult and dysfunctional parents to advance the goals of academic and social success for their children, you will need to understand the variety of variables and their complexities that can often interact explosively to create parents who are angry, troubled, fearful, or just plain dysfunctional. Dealing with difficult parents can be challenging for the most experienced teachers, but it's always on the minds of novice faculty members. In addition to dealing with parents, they are also expected to assimilate new curricula, implement complex technologies, and teach students with a wide range of abilities to master the core curriculum of their grade level or subject specialty.

At first glance, the problem posed by most upset parents would seem to be a relatively straightforward one to solve. First, examine the list of things that teachers do to irritate and inflame parents; second, help teachers to be more sensitive to these issues and encourage them to stop doing them; and finally, provide teachers with some strategies for ameliorating the super sticky situations. What complicates the angry parents problem is that there are more aggravating variables in the angry parents dilemma than just one generic parent and one generic teacher. A *variable* is “a characteristic, number, or quantity that increases or decreases over time, or takes different values in different situations” (Variable, n.d.).

In the dealing with an angry parents scenario, there are five facets, each one with a broad range of variables: (1) the increasing variety of today’s *family units*; (2) the range of abilities, needs, issues, and problems of today’s *students*; (3) a continuum of types of *schools* ranging from those that are highly effective to those that are low-performing and quite a few that are on their way to failing; (4) the wide variety of all too human, but totally inappropriate, behaviors that *teachers* display that irritate and inflame parents; and (5) nearly a dozen categories of *parent* types who can all become angry and distressed at a moment’s notice.

FACET 1: THE INCREASING VARIETY OF TODAY’S FAMILY UNITS

Your natural inclination might be to think of today’s parents in terms of the family in which you were raised or even your current family configuration. However, today’s students have complicated and often shifting family structures that may have little in common with your experiences. A Pew Research study reported that in 2014, less than half (46%) of U.S. children younger than 18 lived in a traditional home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage. Contrast that to 1960, when 73% of children fit that description (Livingston, 2014). Flip the calendar forward to 2017 to tease out another demographic data point: the percentage of children living with an unmarried parent. A 2017 Pew Research study found that this percentage has doubled since 1968, going from 13% then to 32% in 2017 (Livingston, 2018).

These demographics describe today’s families in broad strokes. As a teacher you will be expected to map names, faces, personalities, and family dynamics on your students and then proceed to teach to the academic strengths and weaknesses of those students.

Bear in mind that the individuals who show up for the first open house or parent-teacher conference will present to you in many combinations and permutations. You’re

safest if you wait for the “parental units” to introduce themselves. They might come in the form of grandparents, two mothers, two fathers, an aunt and uncle, a mom and her boyfriend, a father and his girlfriend, foster parents, or even a noncustodial parent who wants to stay connected to a child. Sorting out the demographics of the students you have been assigned for any given school year is an essential part of getting to know “parents” and then enlisting them as members of your team.

Contributing educator Joelle Wright is something of an expert on communicating and meeting the needs of a wide variety of parental units. During her 14 years as a classroom teacher, she has encountered all of the sets of “parents” displayed in Figure 1.1, *The Increasing Variety of Today’s Family Units*, on the following page.

As you consider the variety of today’s family units, you can readily see dozens of complicating variables at work. Many of today’s family units have enough moving parts to keep both you and your students wondering who’s in charge at home. For example, consider the challenges of meeting with a pair of angry grandparents who have adopted their grandchild and are truly unprepared to be parents a second time around. They are struggling with the constant barrage of notes to sign and demands for assistance with homework, to say nothing of navigating social media, email, and the class website. One of the main characters in their “story” is a daughter who has lost custody of her daughter because of mental health and addiction issues. So, in addition to parenting a second time, the grandparents are bearing a load of guilt over their failure to be better parents to their “first” daughter.

FACET 2: THE RANGE OF NEEDS, ISSUES, AND PROBLEMS OF TODAY’S STUDENTS

The students of today present with a wide range of needs, issues, and problems. Figure 1.2, *Typology of Today’s Students*, sets forth and briefly describes each category (see page 5). All of these types of students can be found in almost every type of school.

Contributing educator Joelle Wright notes,

I think it is safe to say that the generation of students we currently have are harder to teach than when I first began teaching 14 ago. There is a distinct increase in the population of students with traumatic backgrounds. Some of these students are now in foster care homes, are living with relative caregivers, or have been adopted. These kids are still struggling, but they have parents who are actively working

FIGURE 1.1 The Increasing Variety of Today’s Family Units

Parental Unit	Additional Information
Grandparents who have legally adopted a child	Even though these individuals are the biological grandparents, they are called mom and dad by the child.
Grandparents who are foster parents or have guardianship of their grandchildren	The child refers to these “foster parents” as grandma and grandpa.
Caregivers can also include aunts and uncles or distant relatives that are providing foster care for a child who is related to them	These caregivers may even eventually adopt the child. The child refers to these caregivers as mom and dad or aunt and uncle, or uses some other term of endearment.
Biological parents with their girlfriends or boyfriends	Girlfriends and boyfriends often are called mom or dad, even if they are not biological parents or stepparents by marriage. Some students have had a revolving door of moms and dads in their lives. Somewhere in this mix is often the ex-husband or ex-wife who also has custody of some sort.
Stepparents	Stepparents can have varying degrees of parental responsibilities, depending on the individual family dynamic. This works well when the biological parents and stepparents of both families get along. It can be problematic when they do not.
Biological mom and/or biological dad	These biological parents are sometimes married, but sometimes not. Sometimes it is a single-parent home.
Adoptive parents from foster care, international adoption, or domestic adoption	All adoptive parents should be considered <i>parents</i> , plain and simple. Adoption is part of their story, and can often explain some of the trauma the child has endured. An adoptive parent is not any less of a parent than a biological parent. If anything, these parents have worked harder to parent a child that has greater needs than an average child without any special needs.
Foster care parents	Licensed foster care parents have attended all of the trainings and have to abide by all of the state laws about caring for a child in foster care. They are also paid by the state to care for children.
Relative caregiver, fictive kin, or “suitable other” foster care parent	Fictive kin is a term used to refer to individuals who are unrelated by either birth or marriage to the child, but have an emotionally significant relationship, and have agreed to take a child into their homes. They have not received any training, their homes do not have to be held to the same standards of safety as a licensed foster care home, and they do not receive any payments from the state to care for the child placed in their home.

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FIGURE 1.2 Typology of Today's Students

Type of Student	Description
Highly gifted, above grade level	Students whose test scores exceed a certain level as defined by the school, district, or state guidelines.
On-grade-level students	Students whose test scores are at or above proficiency.
Students with disabilities	About 13% of public school students have been evaluated and placed in special education programs. This includes students ages 3–21. These students may be served in self-contained classrooms or through pullout services with a resource teacher.
RTI students	Students receiving interventions and being monitored for their responses to those interventions.
English language learners	Educational models and programs of service vary according to the educational theory selected by the school (ESL, transitional bilingual education, dual language, etc.).
Included students	Students who have qualified for services in one of 13 categories of special education because their educational performance has been adversely affected. These students are included in the regular classroom and receive modifications in the educational program to include both curriculum and instructional methods. About 63% of students with disabilities spend at least 80% of their school day in general education classrooms.

Source: Information and statistics regarding special education have been adapted from Heasley (2018)

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to help their children. Some of these parents are trying but don't have the necessary tools to help their children from hard places, and other parents are doing an incredible job of trying to support their children through their trauma. The other group of children that struggles are still living in traumatic family lives. They are currently in homes where parents are verbally abusive, neglectful, or struggling so much with their own issues that they aren't able to care properly and support their children, because they can barely take care of themselves.

FACET 3: A CONTINUUM OF TYPES OF SCHOOLS

The type of school (see Figure 1.3) in which you currently work can either help or hinder you when it comes to dealing with dysfunctional parents. In fact, the school culture in which you work is seldom added into the mix when teasing out the reasons for a growing number of angry parents. For example, in underperforming schools, the achievement of struggling students (who are constantly in need of extra support from their parents) is masked by the achievement of high-performing students. The community and staff members may perceive the school to be a good one, but it is not increasing the academic capacity of all students, and consequently there is a contingent of angry parents whose issues and complaints are often given short shrift by teachers.

FIGURE 1.3 A Typology of Schools

Type of School	Description
Highly effective	An equitable and excellent school that enables all of its students, regardless of their demographics or categorical labels, to achieve academic success.
Effective	An equitable and excellent school that enables at least 95% of its students, regardless of their demographics or categorical labels, to achieve academic success.
Good	A school that is moving steadily toward effectiveness but is not quite there yet. Many, if not all, of the traits usually found in a good school are present, but student achievement is not yet at 95%.
Transitional	A school that was once failing or underperforming but is now steadily improving. The transitional school is vulnerable to inalterable variables, such as the loss of a strong instructional leader or key teacher leaders, an unexpected influx of students due to boundary changes or natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, violence and death in the community or school, or the death, suicide, or serious illness of a student or faculty member.
Underperforming	A school where student achievement is acceptable to most observers, unless one considers the school's demographics. Educators in the school feel little accountability for the achievement of struggling students in their classrooms, and many of its teachers are underachieving along with their students. The achievement of high-performing students masks the low achievement of other students. The community may perceive this school to be a "good" school, but it is not increasing the academic capacity of all students.

Type of School	Description
Stuck	A school that is in an achievement “rut.” The school is not declining, but neither is it improving. Test scores remain fairly stable year after year— not failing, but not great, given the demographics of the student body. Leadership is not focused on building academic capacity.
Low performing	A school in which the principal and teachers are good people who care for their students and work very hard. The educators in this school make periodic attempts to raise achievement, but their expectations are low, and their energies are largely focused on making themselves and their students feel good. School leaders are not committed to building academic capacity.
Dysfunctional	A school that has not been officially labeled as failing, but a toxic culture and absence of academic press have resulted in extraordinarily low student achievement.
Failing	A school that has failed to make its academic targets and has been placed under sanctions by the state or federal government.

Source: McEwan (2008)

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When questioned about whether today’s parents have become more difficult than they were in earlier decades, contributing educator Tresa Watson explained it this way:

I don’t know that parents are more difficult to deal with now, but I do think there are more parents who struggle with knowing what to do with their children when issues are brought up, whether it be academic or behavioral. I believe there is less interaction between children and parents for numerous reasons from almost the moment of birth. Many parents work long hours and their relationships with offspring aren’t as strong as they were in the past. Children spend much more time on their own and with technology than with playmates, which inhibits their development of appropriate social-emotional skills. As each generation passes, I believe our societal trends have caused families to be less cohesive with fewer positive role models available. All of the moving parts of this facet of school life change the conversation teachers have with parents. In the past, most parent contact focused on academic concerns or serious behavioral issues. Now it seems that more parents

need guidance and help with problem-solving for a wide range of issues with their children and they need it frequently. In fact, parents need our support and empathy as much as their children do.

FACET 4: THE THINGS TEACHERS DO THAT IRRITATE AND INFLAME PARENTS

Figure 1.4, The Things Teachers Do That Irritate and Inflamm Parents, describes a range of teacher behaviors. Singly or in combinations, these behaviors can ignite an explosion that you will long remember.

FIGURE 1.4 The Things Teachers Do That Irritate and Inflamm Parents

Type of Teacher Behavior	Description
Communication issues	Failure to communicate in a timely way is the number one reason why parents get angry. To avoid this problem, build communication networks and routines very early in the school year.
Procrastination	Telling parents that you will do something about a problem and then failing to do anything is a biggie that bugs parents. Promising to call a parent back and then misplacing the message is another “no no.”
Stereotypes and biases	Putting labels on parents or assuming some character flaw because of their marital status, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, color, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status makes parents angry, and justifiably so. Whether these labels are unspoken or blurted out in a momentary slip of the tongue, your body language often speaks louder than words.
Defensiveness	Becoming defensive whenever a parent questions your actions or motives is a natural but highly unwise reaction. Your behavior will surely escalate what could have been a calm discussion into a heated exchange on both sides.
Overuse of educational jargon	Your inability to explain what you are doing and why in plain language that parents can understand gets them very upset. The use of jargon and acronyms is often pervasive in parent meetings for students in special programs or in meetings to decide where a student with special needs should be placed.
Dishonesty	Teachers don’t tell outright lies very often, but when they do, usually to cover something clueless they did, the parent-teacher relationship can be irreparably damaged.

Type of Teacher Behavior	Description
Unwillingness to admit mistakes	All teachers have done their share of inadvisable things. After all, we are human. We are not the paragons of virtue we might pretend to be. Parents and even your administrator will usually forgive a mistake, bad judgment, or a momentary lapse of common sense. But what neither parents nor your supervisor can abide is an unwillingness on your part to admit the mistake and apologize.

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Consider a scenario in which a set of biological parents with a rocky marriage are attending a meeting to hear the results of the special education team's evaluation of their child. They have brought a parent advocate to be their voice in the meeting. There are at least six other individuals around a long rectangular table: the classroom teacher, a school psychologist who assessed the student, a speech therapist who has participated in some RTI instruction, the principal, and the special education resource teacher. The silence in the room is awkward, and the educators are glancing at one another, obviously wondering who will chair the meeting. The first person to speak is the father, who is obviously growing more irritated at what seems to him to be a poorly organized meeting. In his business, someone would have greeted the parents and introduced all of the participants in the meeting. He is obviously going to reach his boiling point, and the meeting has not even started.

If you were observing this meeting to figure out the communication dynamics, you could check off multiple types of behavior that were slowly irritating and inflaming the father. The parent advocate may be the next meeting participant to feel some anger at the way her clients are being treated. This brief snapshot illustrates how easily teachers (and other educators) can do things that irritate and inflame parents.

Contributing educator Justin Gremba had a surprising answer when asked about what he wished he knew then (after an encounter with an angry parent) and what he knows now:

The answer may surprise you, but nothing. I truly believe that a lot of this job deals with hands-on experiences. Experienced teachers are extremely helpful, but living through these experiences is a necessary part of the job. What I wish is that every one of my colleagues would actually learn from their experiences and continue to improve how they deal with angry parents.

Avoid writing terse emails that contain “deficit” language that immediately upsets parents. Consider this example of a real email from a teacher to a parent: “Your child is struggling with understanding division. Your child did not complete the in-class assignment. Please make sure your child completes the catch-up assignment tonight.” This sounds like a charging document for a court case rather than an email from a caring teacher. Unfortunately, the educator couldn’t take the time to plug the child’s name into the email template she was using. It sounds to the parent like the teacher is offloading her responsibility for explaining division in a way that her daughter can understand it to the parents, who may not have been briefed on the newest approach to teaching division. What if Emily has piano lessons after dinner? There is trouble brewing on the horizon. The entire family will be up until the wee hours deciphering the math assignment. The sound you are hearing in the background of this scenario is daughter Sarah having a meltdown: “My teacher doesn’t like me. Do you think I’m still a good person because I can’t do math?” This teacher has just lost the trust of both the parent and the child by suggesting that whenever she can’t teach your child, you will have to take up the slack or pay for pricey math tutoring.

FACET 5: A VARIETY OF TYPES OF PARENTS

Figure 1.5, Typology of Parents, describes in great detail the variety of types of parents whose paths may well cross yours. Sometimes the type of school can dictate the type of parents you will encounter.

FIGURE 1.5 Typology of Parents

Type of Parent	Description
Entitled	These parents see the school system as another service they are “hiring” for their student, similar to the way they hire a cleaning staff at their home or how they pay for a club or a sport. As such, the relationship between school and parent becomes one of service provider and client rather than institution and participant. These successful parents are very used to having employees and organizations cater to their needs; throughout the day they may be in professional situations in which they are constantly telling people what to do, with the expectation that their needs will be met. That sort of worldview doesn’t fade away when it comes to their child’s schooling. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Jillian D’Angelo)

Type of Parent	Description
Paragons of parenting	<p>The most culturally relevant trophy or award that adults can present to verify their success in life is a successful accomplished child. Parents' self-esteem and self-worth now rest heavily on their child's "value" in society, and that value can be measured in various ways depending on what is a priority for the given parents. Some parents measure it with athletic dominance, some with academic prowess, still others with social status. As a result, it can become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for parents to hear that there may be any flaw, problem, or abnormality with their child. Not only is this a blow to their image of who their child is, but it is a direct blow to the parents' own feelings of self-confidence and self-worth. Very few humans can absorb such personal attacks without some psychological protections. The easiest protections to adopt are denial and transference. And so, you often see parents who think their children can do no wrong, and who struggle to hear feedback from teachers. Rather than address problems their student might be having (either academic or behavioral) and give the support the student needs to feel success, the parents deny the problem exists and lash out at the teacher, blaming the problem on the teacher's decision making, education experience, or instructional expertise. It can't be my child that's wrong; it must be the teacher. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Jillian D'Angelo)</p>
Perfect all-purpose parent	<p>These parents don't hover or hang around school. They likely have full-time jobs. However, they always show up for parent-teacher conferences and accept feedback and suggestions from teachers. They trust that if someone reports to them that their child has broken a rule, they will fully agree that consequences are necessary. They sign every form, contribute to every fund-raising drive, and show up at school board meetings to lobby for smaller class sizes.</p>
Prone to anger when aroused by teachers	<p>These parents <i>could</i> be perfect all-purpose parents, but they do have their limits. Life is stressful for them, their time is valuable, and they deserve to be treated with respect. They may be single parents, work two part-time jobs, and have at least one child with a learning difficulty. They are especially prone to anger when they experience a teacher's inappropriate behavior and there is no forthcoming apology.</p>
Unprepared parents	<p>These parents struggle with knowing what to do with their children when academic or behavioral issues are brought to their attention. Seemingly from the moment of birth, there is less interaction between these parents and their children. The reasons are numerous. Many parents work long hours, and relationships with their children aren't as strong as they were in the past. Children spend more time on their own and with technology than with playmates, which can inhibit their development of appropriate social-emotional skills. As each generation passes, our societal trends have caused extended families to be less cohesive, offering fewer</p>

(Continued)

FIGURE 1.5 (Continued)

Type of Parent	Description
Unprepared parents (continued)	role models for children. This demographic impacts the conversations we have with parents. In earlier generations, parent-teacher contact focused primarily on academic concerns or serious behavioral issues. In contrast, these parents need guidance with problem solving for a wide range of issues with their children, and they often need it frequently. These parents need as much support as their children do. (Adapted by permission from material contributed by Joelle Wright)
Missing in action, uninvolved, uncommunicative	These parents are difficult if not impossible to engage in their child's learning and school experience. This attitude has a detrimental effect on both their student's academic growth and their behavior. If parents don't care about their child's education, this attitude rubs off on the student. The uncommunicative parent can be the most difficult to deal with, especially if the child involved is struggling academically or behaviorally. Look for ways to help that child be successful, but if you don't have the ability to communicate with the parent about what factors outside of school may be impacting the child, or ideas for how interventions might work or be received by the family, making gains that last from day to day is difficult. Missing-in-action parents may be homeless or living in poverty and have few options for getting to your school. They may be addicted to drugs or alcohol and may be too incapacitated or embarrassed to make it to school for a conference.
Disadvantaged	Disadvantaged families often appreciate the value of education and are supportive of teachers and all of the sacrifices they make. These parents may be struggling with poverty or immigration issues, and they are under the constant pressures of finding suitable housing. They will need a variety of support services, including free and reduced-price lunches, school breakfasts, and possibly translation. Although they are disadvantaged in many material ways, these parents have children who will work as hard as you expect them to work and achieve to levels you never thought possible.
History of educational trauma	Although these parents will not likely discuss their history with you, some have experienced deep-seated trauma from an earlier encounter with an ineffective teacher, a bully administrator, or a sexual pervert who has been abusive. This whole package of past traumas can explode on you in many ways, but trying to convince parents that you are different and you really do care will consume far more of your time than you likely have available.
Dysfunctional	These parents have a variety of mental illnesses: depression, bipolar disorder, personality disorders. These problems make it very difficult for them to work with educators, and as soon as you seem to get one problem solved, they pop in your door with three more.
Mentally ill, addicted	These parents need very special handling and as much professional assistance as you have available.

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The effect of divorce rates is noted by contributing educator Andrew Lucas:

Another factor that makes today's parents more difficult to deal with is the higher frequency of divorce. This has a huge effect on the child, and the first place you see it is in the classroom. These days I'm more surprised to find that a struggling student is from a home where the parents are still together (though that could just be me glorifying the past). Over the past five years, in particular, we've seen some very messy divorces, where parents are fighting over the kids and trying to get the children to take sides. Small wonder these children can't focus in school.

Contributing educator Nancy Adamson shared this observation:

Twenty-five years ago, mothers stayed home or worked part-time so they were more involved with their children's education. The parents of today put most of the responsibility for their child's education on the teachers. When problems arise, parents find it more convenient to blame the teacher. As a result, parents who don't support what the school is trying to do are often completely oblivious to either the capabilities or problems of their children.

There is a one-liner that used to be heard in many classrooms on back-to-school nights: Teachers jokingly would say to the parents seated before them in too-small desks or unstable tables: "I won't believe what your kids tell me about you if you won't believe what your kids have to say about me." That tired wisecrack may be completely out of date today. Contributing educator Kathy Hoedeman relates a rather disturbing trend in her middle school:

There is a common feeling in my school, especially regarding behavior and discipline issues. Parents have become less willing to accept the views of educators regarding their children. Many faculty members have had the experience in which parents just cannot accept the fact that their child is in the wrong. The side of the child is taken over that of the adult teacher. Our middle school building is now full of video cameras and more than a few times our principal has had to refer to taped "proof" of behaviors in order to get parents to accept the fact that their children are guilty and must accept the consequences of their behaviors. Some teachers feel that this attitude on the part of parents has caused our administration to fail to pursue some issues with the seriousness they deserve simply because they don't want to deal with argumentative parents.

Contributing educator Robyn Ross finds the missing-in-action parents to be the most troublesome for her.

I will never understand the parents who choose to avoid me and direct every communication (no matter how large or small) to the principal. When parents effectively shut me out of the communication loop by responding to my phone messages, emails, and notes by ignoring me, I can't help but wonder what I did to deserve this shunning. No matter what avenues my principal or I have tried, they refuse to communicate with me as the classroom teacher. Parenting styles and interactions have run the gamut during my teaching career but in the past five years I have noticed a definite trend toward the uninvolved/uncommunicative parent. Granted, there are many factors that come into play, but it has become more and more difficult to engage parents in their child's learning and school experience. This has a detrimental effect on both a student's academic growth and their behavior. If parents don't care about their child's education, this attitude rubs off on the student. I find that the uncommunicative parent can be the most difficult to deal with, especially if the child involved is struggling academically or behaviorally. I am constantly looking for ways to help that child be successful, but if I don't have the ability to communicate with the parent about what factors outside of school may be impacting the child, or ideas for how interventions might work or be received by the family, making gains that last from day to day is difficult.

There are five chapters ahead with pages and pages of ways to deal productively with angry parents. Figure 1.6 contains a handy organizer to help you remember the big idea of this chapter: *Just when you think you have a handle on how best to deal with angry parents, two or three unexpected variables will make your task infinitely more challenging. Be prepared for anything.*

For example, here are just a few of the variables that can derail your attempts to soothe and calm an angry parent:

- Parents who are unprepared for the tasks you expect them to undertake with regard to supporting their students
- A school culture that is in transition from an influx of students who have experienced a weather trauma in another state

FIGURE 1.6 Quick Start Chart for Dealing With Angry Parents

The Root of the Anger	Things to Do	Things Not to Do	Exacerbating Variables
<p>A situation that involves or concerns their children</p>	<p>Remain calm. Apologize if appropriate. Offer to hold another meeting. Offer to invite a specialist or someone who has answers for the parents' questions. This type of anger can often be resolved very easily if you keep your cool; don't become defensive; offer a quick apology even if you're not at fault for anything, and throw in a compliment about their child and an affirmation of their great parenting skills.</p>	<p>Don't interrupt. Don't become defensive. Don't argue. Don't raise your voice. Don't fidget. Don't furrow your brow. Don't squint your eyes. Don't cross your arms. Don't try to convince the parent that you can fix the problem.</p>	<p>A low-performing school that promises improvement but never delivers leaving parents with frustration. Teachers make promises and then never deliver on those pledges. The parents are in the middle of a messy divorce and are so busy fighting with each other that they take out their anger and rage at teachers. The dysfunctional school culture fails to support effective teachers, and the low expectations nearly always result in low student achievement.</p>
<p>A serious dysfunction in their life that is exacerbated by a problem or concern with their child</p>	<p>Remain calm. Employ active listening. Give the parents enough time to exhaust their ranting and raving. Remember that they have the problem, not you or the child.</p>	<p>Don't interrupt. Don't try to come up with a solution. Don't get restless or look at your watch.</p>	<p>Unprepared parents who are unable to follow through on any suggestions or help you offer. The school is in transition after an influx of students from another state who have undergone a weather trauma.</p>

(Continued)

FIGURE 1.6 (Continued)

The Root of the Anger	Things to Do	Things Not to Do	Exacerbating Variables
Genuine mental health issues that you are likely not ever going to understand or ameliorate.	Invite a specialist or an administrator to sit in on the meeting.	Don't overwhelm the parent with more than two other participants. Don't give the parent the feeling that you are ganging up on him or her.	The school is stuck, and there are few resources to support struggling students and novice teachers.
Past experience with another educator, another school, or their own failure at some point in school.	Empathy is your best strategy in this situation. Who wouldn't empathize with a horrendous school experience that has left someone with trauma, illiteracy, and low self-worth? Listen to the story the parent is telling. It may inform.	Don't interrupt while this parent is telling his or her story. If you must give advice, make it wordless.	Fearful parents who are convinced that their child will experience the same school failure that has traumatized them.

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- Fearful parents who are convinced that their children won't have the opportunities they need to be successful
- A "stuck" school that covers up the poor performance of a struggling school with a majority of higher-achieving students
- Lack of trust between parents and teacher

Use Figure 1.6 to review what to do and what not to do when confronted with an angry parent. You may not achieve a perfect score the first time around, but hopefully your recognition and understanding of the many exacerbating variables will increase your empathy, care, and concern for the parents and students with whom you work.

SUMMING UP AND LOOKING AHEAD

The challenges in education (whether in public or private settings) today are enormous, and the need for teachers who have character, communication skills, and empathy has never been greater. More parents than ever are angry, troubled, afraid, or even crazy. In the face of this onslaught, you must be calm, thoughtful, caring, intelligent, articulate, direct, and honest. In a nutshell, you've got to walk on water *and* leap tall buildings in a single bound.

If you feel unprepared to handle the challenges, don't be alarmed. Help is just ahead. Chapter 2 presents more than two dozen actions you can take at the beginning of the school year to become a proactive teacher—an educator who foresees where the problems and roadblocks may lie and develops routines, procedures, and policies to forestall disaster and engage proactively with parents.

Just when you think you have a handle on how best to deal with angry parents, two or three unexpected variables will make your task infinitely more challenging. Be prepared for anything.