

## Elements of an Adversarial Relationship

What is the hope and dream of every authentic Christian school? It basically desires its students to be well grounded in biblical principles, effectively taught in the academics, and closely tuned to the will of God. So what is it that causes schools to alienate parents unintentionally? Generally, the school or parents draw conclusions or take actions with inadequate communication, thus leading to contention. According to Proverbs 13:10 (KJV), “Only by pride cometh contention.” At the heart of controversy is pride, which must be identified and managed. Once a positive union between school and home becomes negative, a downward spiral commences, and an adversarial relationship forms.

What areas of school operations often cause the school and home to cross swords? In 38 years as a Christian school administrator, I have found several scenarios to be the most prevalent.

Parents accept the behavior policies written in the school handbook. However, these parents then question the actual implementation of the policies because their student’s version of a misdemeanor is different from the teacher’s. A conference doesn’t settle the issue. Ill feelings on the parents’ part start to take shape.

Parents can take violations regarding their student’s inappropriate dress as an insult. They feel that school personnel are rejecting their judgment.

Tuition payments are late, so the school takes initial steps to inform the parents.

However, the parents become irritated, expecting the school to understand why there is a delay, even though they have not communicated a reason to the school.

To remedy these situations, the school must make a major effort to have follow-up conferences. In these conferences, the parents can gain a more thorough understanding about school decisions. Most of the time without a conference, the controversy widens because additional communication does not take place between home and school. The school generally moves on with its operations, but the parents' negative feelings fester.

Adversarial relationships seem to ignite more often when parents clash with the classroom teacher. This happens, at times, when parents question certain rules of the teacher. The parents discuss them with the teacher and sometimes have legitimate points, but the teacher does not adhere to the parents' position. Then the parents harbor negative feelings. By making an objective decision, administrators may be able to help.

Recommendations from the teacher can also create another field of land mines. Asking the parents to pursue psychological or emotional counseling for the student, finding a tutor for a certain subject, and recommending a section change or a retention can all be explosive. It is of utmost importance for the teacher to know the standards of the parents and their level of commitment to Christian education. This knowledge will aid teachers greatly in making recommendations. A basic way to know parents well is to be in contact with them as often as possible by conference, phone, and notes.

The spiritual makeup of the home can cause a negative relationship with the school, but this situation is difficult to assess. Since biblical considerations and principles govern many of the schools' policies and procedures, the climate for conflict is ever present. A number of school parents today like the well-organized and enriched academic programs their children's school provides. As a result, they tolerate the biblical standards to a degree. However, when students or parents disagree with a practice, the family may start negative confrontations with the school. The home may even have two Christian parents, but they may not be walking close to the Lord. When people are not in close fellowship with Christ, they tend to be more prone to finding fault and being uncooperative with the school.

In order to cope with problems resulting from spiritual disagreements, teachers must try to evaluate the makeup of the home. Teachers can conduct this assessment, especially early in the school year, through conferences and classroom surveys. Tactfully determining the parents' views about sports, music, drama, and other types of school practices prepares the way for planning. Then as teachers forecast possible difficulties, they can pray about how to avoid potential conflicts.

Another common school experience that may lead to adversarial relationships is an "unsolved crime." A theft, a cheating episode, a classroom fight, vandalism, or some other misdemeanor occurs with no clear culprits. Students are interviewed to no avail. No one admits guilt. Some parents become upset because their student was questioned.

Subsequently, since no one was declared guilty, an air of suspicion lingers, especially over the students questioned. A few parents strongly resent the school's insinuations and thus start to nurse a grudge.

Yet another scenario may occur during any of the typical occasions of selecting students, ranging from athletic teams to musical productions. Competition is often keen, and the judging process not perfect. Hurt feelings are very common when the announcements come about the chosen ones. Feeling the hurt of their children, parents often adjust, but some become angry with the school.

The final area that often precipitates the creation of adversarial relationships is the plain old, "I don't like my teacher" syndrome. The teacher and student, from opening day, are at odds with each other. After heart-to-heart conferences, including prayer, the division remains. The rift may even grow to the point that the home declares war on the school!

The Bible states plainly that we are to pray for wisdom often (James 1:5) and to "love one another" (1 John 4:7, NIV). The path to reconciliation is clear—not easy, but clear! We present the entire situation to God, asking fervently for His wisdom, which brings harmony. Our next step is to exercise love. In a conference, agreeing with the parents as much as possible and apologizing will often soften feelings.

Even if a school is not responsible for creating the adversarial climate, it must take the initiative to resolve it. We learn from Matthew 5:23–24 that if we know that someone has

a problem with us or is angry with us, *we must go to that person!* And in Matthew 5:9, we read that blessed are the peacemakers.

God will honor all efforts of a school to reconcile with parents. Administrators and teachers must be challenged and encouraged to go the second and third mile when they sense a disgruntled parent. Most of the time, the tendency is to forget the conflict and move ahead. Remember, when Jesus was asked the greatest commandment, He said, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (Mark 12:30–31, NIV). A school must obey God’s Word by exercising all its spiritual muscles to create, maintain, or reestablish unity.

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