



Q. My son has just entered 4th grade and he complains every day that he doesn't like his new teacher. At first, I thought he would adjust but now he seems to be very upset every day. I don't know what to do. Any suggestions?

A. I know every parent's instinct is to march up to school and confront the teacher and make no mistake, sometimes it is the teacher. However, you should probably do some more probing before going to school. Children can't always find the words to explain exactly what is making them uncomfortable. Is this teacher a no nonsense personality? Is she stricter than any of his previous teachers? Does she require way more work? Is he finding 4th grade work challenging? Is there more homework? Is he responding to peer opinions? Is this teacher really mean? Let's see what some experts say. Stephanie Dolgoff recommends the following steps from Parenting.com with my added advice.

### Step 1: Play Reporter

Sometimes kids will make generic claims, like "The teacher's mean to me." You want to find out what that means. Try to get as much detail as possible. Ask, "What exactly did she say? What was happening in the class when she said it? "Mean" might mean "She makes me do my work," in which case you could explain that the teacher is trying to show the kind of behavior you need to have at school; after all, some things are very reasonable under the circumstances, but they may not seem that way to a 9-year-old. The idea is not so much to uncover "the truth" of what went down but to get a more concrete sense of what your child is seeing.

### Step 2: Play Advocate

Tell your child that you're going to write down what he's saying so you can go have a conversation with the teacher. Let the child understand that you, his teacher, and the principal

are partners working to help make school a great experience for him. This serves several purposes: Your child knows that you care about what's happening, that his concerns are going to be heard, but also that you're not just going to march in and "fix" a problem. It's your child's feelings your dealing with and don't dismiss his feelings. Until you talk to the teacher, you don't have the whole picture. You might also be able to give him some tools to handle the situation himself. Suggest options, such as approaching the teacher after class and pointing out, for instance, that he doesn't think he gets called on very often. Sometimes the teacher may not be aware of how your child feels.

### Step 3: Play the Diplomat

If you decide you need to speak with the teacher, set up a time and go in as someone seeking help in solving a problem. Say something like "I'm coming to you with a problem I don't completely understand, but I'm hoping together we can best figure out Mark's concern." Here's where you explain what your child told you and when, using his words as often as possible. Whatever you do, assume innocence all around. Your child may well have done something to annoy the teacher, who may have reacted with, well, annoyance. Despite your light touch, the teacher might feel criticized—some people are sensitive, particularly beleaguered, tired and underpaid educators who do occasionally deal with parents who are a little overzealous on behalf of their perfect little angels. Do your best to reassure her that you're not blaming her. If she rears up, just stay calm and keep repeating that you're simply trying to understand what's going on.

Ideally, the teacher will shed light on why your child feels as he does, and you can have a mutually informative conversation that will help her teach your child most effectively. If your child says the teacher "never" calls on him, when you talk to her she might tell you that your son often knows the answers, but she's trying to give the shier kids a chance.

Because the truth is, while teaching is the noblest profession, not all teachers are as noble as one would hope.

### Step 4: Play Tattletale

No one wants to go to the principal's office, and that includes parents, but if you've raised your

concerns with the teacher several times and you feel she isn't doing her best to resolve the problem, you have a choice to make: You can decide to turn the unpleasant situation into a "sometimes life sucks and sometimes people just don't mesh" learning opportunity for your child, or you can go over the teacher's head. The first tactic, while perhaps not as just as the second, might ultimately be what's best for your kid. Ask yourself, is he learning what he needs to be? However, if your child doesn't want to go to school, is wetting the bed suddenly, seems depressed and stressed or has upset stomach suddenly, you should not ignore it and seek help from the principal to speak to the teacher or have your child removed from the class.

Tell the principal the steps you've already taken. Bring dates and outcomes. Explain how you've tried waiting and discussing it with the teacher, but what's going on is interfering with your child's education. Depending on the principal's style, s/he either will arrange for you to have another conversation with the teacher with him present or will speak with her himself. When things reach this point, of course, you may not exactly be the teacher's pet parent which may cause problems for your child. Let the teacher and principal know you will not tolerate retaliation.

### Step 5: Play Hardball

If you suspect the teacher is taking her frustrations out on your child, especially after you speak to the principal, that's the time to make it clear to the principal, firmly and calmly, that you're not going away. As a last resort, request a change of classroom. Schools are very reluctant to do that, but may if a child is truly suffering and the situation is unlikely to change. Good luck!

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