

School guide to parent complaints

Your checklist to resolving issues quickly,
easily and positively with your parents



Working together to resolve issues

Parents and schools share the same goal: supporting children's education. Sometimes questions or issues arise. This guide gives you clear steps for listening and responding with empathy and understanding

Why this matters

We know you value constructive partnerships with parents, yet **87%** of parents would like to see improvements in how their child's school handles parent complaints and **95%** of teachers have never had formal training in how to resolve them.

This could indicate why there were **5 million formal parent complaints** made to UK schools in the last year.

How this guide helps

Most queries that come into school can be resolved quickly and with minimal effort. Some complaints require a more structured response and can define future relationships with those parents and the wider parent community.

This guide holds practical advice to support school staff to resolve parent issues when they arise.

Are you parent complaint-ready?

Your critical first step -how your school sets expectations and enables parents to raise and resolve issues

Being open

School websites can bury complaint policies, sometimes taking parents up to six clicks to find them. Make it easy and set the tone of being open to feedback.

Tip! Have a dedicated page on what you expect from parents, including when things go wrong.

Being accessible

School policies can often be written in an inaccessible or overcomplicated way. This can leave parents feeling frustrated and pushed out of their child's school life.

Tip! Give parents insider information and context into school processes by sharing our parent guide to school complaints.

Being personal

Schools can inadvertently set written complaints as standard through their policy and communications, making the process impersonal and encouraging parents to vent their frustrations via written complaints.

Tip! Pop a video on your parent page of your school team speaking with empathy on partnering through issues with an open door.

Being transparent

It is hard to build trust with parents when everything feels like it is behind closed doors. This may lead to misinformation and can shut down communication.

Tip! Go on the front foot and report on how many parent complaints have been made and how quickly they were resolved.

Your parent complaint mindset

Parents can feel high anxiety when it comes to issues involving their child. As schools, we have to meet them where they are to help power partnership

Respond with care

Parents may feel they have raised a complaint, even if the staff member did not interpret it that way. Always assume this is the case and respond with care.

Acknowledge their perspective

Even if a concern seems inaccurate or unlikely, your response should acknowledge their perspective rather than force your own.

Tune into feelings over facts

Even if a parent's facts are incorrect, pointing this out does not address their underlying issues with the school and can intensify the situation.

Emotions will be charged

Emotions may be heightened. Parents may have sat with an issue for some time, building anxiety and protective instincts before raising it, sometimes unexpectedly.

Be aware of uncertainty

There can often be a lack of clarity in a parent's issue through politeness, layered issues, unknown context or emotion.

Tone carries best when live

However you receive an issue, resolve it in-person or with a call. Go back on their email with the offer of a call to discuss.

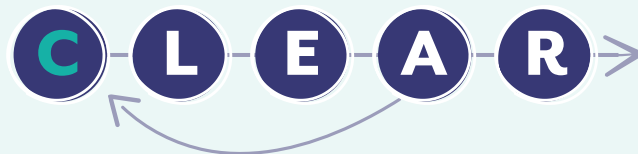
Five steps to resolving a parent complaint

Your guide to addressing parent issues immediately with five easy steps to partner in the resolution, together

Relationships between parents and schools last for several years. Ensuring mutual trust and respect is essential in maximising the potential of strong parent partnerships. Many relationships can be made stronger by how you recognise and resolve the issues.

The best way to resolve issues is with a CLEAR approach to parent issues.





Categorise What type of issue is it?

Not all issues from parents are complaints, but should be given the same care. Taking a moment to categorise the issue can help prevent unnecessary escalation by focusing on what outcome the parent needs

Is it feedback?

The parent needs to be heard

Sometimes parents will want to share their voice with you and they expect you to listen and take it on board. Finding a way to close the feedback loop and showing how you responded demonstrates your value of their views.

Is it a concern?

The parents need an answer

Sometimes parents have a worry or doubt about an important issue and are simply seeking reassurance. These informal concerns should be taken seriously, as a timely response can prevent escalation.

Is it a complaint?

The parents need you to act

Parents may be dissatisfied with an action taken or not taken and seek change. They may have a desired outcome in mind, even if it is unreasonable. Staff should take time to explore expectations and negotiate an appropriate path forward.



Listen Why is this an issue?

When building a partnership, listening is the essential foundation on which trust is formed. Take the time and create the space to listen fully to a parent's concern, no matter how big or small it may seem

Give time to listen without judgement

It can be tempting to respond immediately when a parent raises an issue. Pause. Listen. Give them time to share the full story before offering a response. Listen without judgement, bias or defensiveness—simply to understand their perspective. They chose to bring this issue to you, so give it the time it deserves.

Ask big, open questions

Parents often come prepared with what they want to say. Your role is to help them explore further by asking thoughtful questions that show you are actively listening. Ask things like, "Tell me more," or "What did your child share with you?" Encourage them to explain, giving plenty of space and patience for their response.

Reflect back what you heard

Often parents need reassurance that what has been said has actually been understood, particularly when its emotionally charged. Repeat back what you feel you have heard from the parent, encouraging them to clarify if you are mistaken.



Empathise

How does this feel?

This step is an essential intake of breath as you consider the parents' feelings, motives and needs. Help them release the emotion in their issue by authentically sharing a human moment of empathy

Assess emotions

Don't simplify parents' emotions - anger could actually be frustration or fear from their own school trauma or their protective instincts.

Consider intentions

Keep intentions in mind. Most parents act with positive intentions and hope for a constructive outcome, even if their approach doesn't come across that way.

Decode motives

Read between the lines of what is being said, and how it is shared, to work out what the parent truly needs from you.

Acknowledge emotions

You can validate the emotions without validating their issue, "I can see you're frustrated and I would be too."

Empathise on their issue

"If I heard that from my child, I'd also be worried," or, "I am worried too, as this is not what we would want."

Project positive emotions

Your emotions should remain steady, guiding the interaction — not mirror the parent's. Resist the urge to match their emotional intensity.



Ask Where can we agree?

The best outcome is a shared agreement on what will happen next. Take the time to check that your proposed solution aligns with the parent's perspective. Together, you co-own the resolution and formalise it as a shared commitment

Decide on your response

Consider the school's policy, any other parties involved, and frame a response that best addresses the situation. You may not be able to fully meet the parent's request immediately, but exploring the issue further is still an action you can agree on together in the moment.

Your suggestion as a yes/no question

Giving the parent a choice is honouring them coming to you with this and empowers them with shared responsibility. Handle carefully and say "If I were to do [insert action], would that help?" or "If I were to share more on what happened, would that help?"

Be ready to be clear again

Sometimes a parent may be unclear, your suggested action may not fit or there may be a misalignment. Go back to 'Categorise' the issue and work through the model again, peeling back another layer to ensure you are fully aligned.



Respond

When can we action?

The quickest way to damage trust and provoke a stronger reaction is to fail to keep your word. Take the time to document the discussion, follow through on your actions and close the loop with the parent

Document and share the issue

If this has been a call or a meeting, now is the time to document all CLEAR stages in writing for the parent. This is another key step in building a partnership and gives the parent an opportunity to refine or add any details that may have been missed. It also enables other members of the school team to continue from where you left off.

Set the timeline and deliver the action

Schools should have service level agreements and policies outlining when a parent can expect a response. Be clear about this timeframe in your written communication and make sure to stick to it. When possible, under-promise and overdeliver when implementing the action, while keeping the door open for adjustments if circumstances change.

Close out and celebrate

With busy school workloads, it can be hard to make time to fully close out an issue. However, if parents hear about the outcome from their child instead of you, the next issue may be sharper. Call the parent to explain what happened and celebrate their role in partnering with you to create positive change.

The foundation of thriving schools is strong parent relationships

Parent complaints are on the rise for the majority of schools

Share this guide with your school team to ensure everyone who interacts with parents can strengthen their ability to partner with purpose. Organise team training on handling parent issues collaboratively. We have free CPLD resources to support you. You can also use our parent guide to school complaints to encourage your parent community to approach the school openly with their concerns.

When we get it right, it powers stronger school results

National research shows that when we have strong parent participation it can lead to real results for children, equivalent to four additional months of academic progress per child per year.

Effectively resolving issues with parents is an investment that directly benefits school outcomes.

Get more insights, resources and support

Parent-Friendly Schools

Supporting UK schools to raise parent practice and policy, partnering together to raise outcomes for children. With a range of accreditation, training, advisory and parent services, we support all schools to make change, for good.

www.parentfriendlyschoools.org

References:

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/school-complaints-report-2025>

This guide is not legal advice and is subject to future change.