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The Fear Equation

Michael Thompson



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Fear infects the relationship between independent school teachers and independent school parents — a fear that is often denied and only painfully approached. I see evidence of this fear throughout the independent school world, no matter how much a particular school may say it is a "community," or "like family." Parent-teacher relationships, even when good, are less than they could be because of the latent fear between the parties. Heads of school often feel caught between the two, criticized by teachers for favoring parents, criticized by parents for being insufficiently responsive, or too protective of mediocre faculty. Parents often feel subtly — or not too subtly — excluded from schools. Teachers feel chronically on trial in front of parents, and worried about what is being said about them in the parking lot by members of what has been called "the Volvo caucus."

After a decade of school consulting I think I have come to understand something about the roots and dynamics of this fear. Last year I was called by three different heads of school, asking me to run a professional day workshop for their faculties. All three asked me what subject was currently of particular interest to me. I answered that I wanted to run a joint faculty-parent workshop to improve communication. The three heads of school immediately demurred and one exclaimed, "Whoa! We're not ready for that!" His vivid response made me wonder what he — or any of us — is doing to improve parent-teacher communication.

I asked that head of school — I will call his school Sunnybrook — for permission to meet with a group of his parents two days before my scheduled workshop with the faculty and he readily agreed. I had a two-and-a-half hour coffee with some twenty-five parents on a regular school morning. They were delighted to describe the history of their communications with the Sunnybrook faculty. The verbatim notes I took eventually filled five single-spaced pages, which I photocopied and brought to the faculty workshop. Holding the stack of parent comments in my hands I said, "Before we start our workshop I would like you to read what the parents said about you."

The faculty pulled back visibly, as if I were holding radioactive material in my hands. They received the handouts extremely warily. And as they read, they were bewildered to find that the parents' observations were overwhelmingly positive. There were perhaps five very critical remarks in five single-spaced pages. This faculty, and all faculties that I know, half expect to be roasted by parents if parents really tell the truth. That was not the reality at Sunnybrook; it was the mythology.

At another school, which I'll call Mountain View, we were working on difficult parent-teacher conferences. I asked for a volunteer to role-play a conference that had gone very badly. A veteran second-grade teacher, a marvelously honest and open person, offered to replay a conference that had gone disastrously. Two of her colleagues offered to play the parents, who were a typical independent school family: a physician mother and an attorney father. The second-grade teacher described a boy who had difficulty sitting in his

chair, who couldn't complete projects, was constantly interrupting, and often got up and wandered around the room. As the teacher knew, she was drawing a classic portrait of a boy with Attention Deficit Disorder, but she also knew that it was not her place to diagnose. She stayed with a teacher's great strength: description. And she did a beautiful, thoughtful, compassionate job of it. When she had finished, the physician mother said, "Well. Aren't there some things that you could do in the classroom that would make things easier for him?" The mother wasn't rude or critical, but there was something resistant in her response.

What happened to the teacher was striking. She launched into her description of the child again, basically repeating everything she had said before, except that her language became more vague, tentative, and plaintive. When she had finished her second description of the child the attorney father said, "Yes, yes, but don't you think you could do some things differently in the classroom and make life easier for our child?" At this point the teacher began to retreat psychologically. She repeated all of her points about the child; however, her language began to fall apart; she became euphemistic and vague. It was hard to tell what she was saying and the parents reacted by attacking her: "Exactly what are you saying?" "What do you mean by that?" they insisted.

We stopped the role-play at that point. The teacher admitted that our reenactment had been extremely realistic and she asked for suggestions as to how she could have responded more effectively. As we discussed them, I asked the Mountain View faculty: "Why are teachers so afraid of parents?" The answers I received were straightforward, yet somehow unsatisfactory, and I pressed again: "Why can't teachers be their best, strong selves when they are challenged by parents?"

The workshop ended without my ever getting a satisfactory answer to my inquiry. Immediately after the official end of the workshop, however, a teacher came up to the podium and said, "We couldn't really answer your question with administrators here."

"Oh," I said, surprised, knowing that this particular school had a very supportive administrator. "What would you have said if the administrators were not here?" The teacher said, "Teachers can never be sure that the administration will back them in disputes with parents, so you are always afraid."

I asked whether any teacher at the school had ever gotten into trouble or been fired due to a dispute with parents. No one could give me an example. When I pressed, they said that there had been speculation that a teacher who had left in the summer eight years before had been the victim of parent complaints. That was mythology. I have discovered that there are similar myths in many faculty rooms.

The business of fear is a two-way street. Parents often fear teachers, too. A couple of years ago a parent called me at a school where I was the consultant and said, her voice full of fear, "Oh, Dr. Thompson, I need to talk to you about my son. He is suffering so at school and I cannot talk to anyone about it."

"Really, how?" I asked.

"Well, he has a mild learning disability and he is completely overwhelmed by the quantity of reading in history. I cannot persuade his history teacher to reduce the reading in any way. I have even sent him some articles from the library on teaching kids with mild disabilities. But he thinks of me as the 'nag' mother of all time and he doesn't want to hear from me again." (Indeed, I had heard this mother joked about in the faculty room.)

"But that's not why I'm really calling you," she went on. "I'm calling because Johnny is not getting any playing time in basketball. I mean, he's not a great basketball player, but he should at least get some time at the end of games they're winning."

"Have you talked to the coach about that?"

"No, I can't. At the beginning of the season, he said to the kids, 'Don't have your wimpy parents call me to beg for more playing time for you.'"

I had no doubt that the basketball coach might have said exactly these words. I suggested that she speak to the head of school, assuring her that the head was trustworthy and saying how interested she would be in the mother's story.

"Oh, I can't do that," the mother said. "If I talked to her about the basketball coach, she would talk to him and then he would retaliate against my son. Johnny would never see the floor of the basketball court for the rest of the season."

"Well," I said, "Why do you keep your son in this school if he suffers so and you don't trust anyone here?"

"My son would never leave," she replied. "All his friends are there, and he does love his biology teacher."

Parents and teachers bring many fears to their relationship. Some are rational, others highly irrational; some are conscious, others latent and unconscious. All these fears are at play in the interactions between teachers and parents, and they can make what should be a strong partnership on behalf of children into a situation of mutual threat.

If many of these fears are irrational, what are their sources? I have identified seven different fears that each constituent brings to the parent-teacher relationship.

SOURCES OF PARENTAL FEAR

1) *Parenting is inherently difficult and no one is expert at it.* Every parent is an amateur with their first child. The first child in a family makes her competent parents feel helpless, and every subsequent child challenges parents in various new and unexpected ways. As Anonymous once said, "Anything which parents have not learned from experience, they can now learn from their children." Speaking as a parent, it is my observation that children give you a tour of your inner weaknesses — all of your hot buttons — for which you never asked and which you really do not want. Nevertheless, once you have a child, you get the tour. And when you sit down with your child's teacher you are nervously aware of your amateur status.

2) *Your child-rearing mistakes are on display through your child's behavior in ways that you cannot know.* All parents know they have made mistakes with their children, but they don't always know the ways in which those errors manifest themselves. However, we are all afraid that our characters are on view in the way that our children behave in school... and they are. Whenever I ask teachers whether or not they have drawn conclusions about people's parenting abilities from the way their children behave they acknowledge that they do. And then they laugh. But it isn't funny from the parent's point of view.

When my daughter was not yet three my wife and I attended our first teacher conference with her gifted preschool teachers, Nancy and Vicki. After they had said many wonderful things about Joanna, there was The Pause that all parents dread, and Nancy said, "You know, she is a terrible tease." My wife looked at me, and I looked at my shoes. There was nothing else for me to do. I knew from whom my daughter had learned to tease, because I had learned it from my father, and here was evidence that I had teased Joanna despite promising myself I would never tease my children as I had been teased. My character was on display in front of my child's teachers: a very exposing moment.

3) *Every parent is trapped by hope, love — and anxieties.* Parents are so vulnerable with respect to their children. Or as Balzac put it: "A mother who is really a mother is never free." I had an anxious friend who, after the birth of her first child, called her pediatrician constantly, sometimes several times a

day. After a couple of months of this, he asked to see her. This is what he said: "Mrs. Smith, you have given birth to a child. You have opened yourself up to a lifetime of worry. You have to *pace* yourself." All parents are nervous; all parents are pacing themselves. And at times your worry breaks through in ways you cannot control.

4) *In important ways, you may not know as much about your child as his or her teacher does.* As children grow and become more complex, they do not reveal all facets of their personality to their parents. When they become adolescents they may intentionally hide aspects of themselves from their family. As a parent, when you go to talk about your child with the teacher, you may be aware that there are things that you do not know about your child. However, for the most part you do not know what you do not know — and you have no idea what your child's teacher knows that you don't! It is always a shocking moment for a parent when a teacher sees his or her child in a strikingly different way than the parent does. Who is right? And what is the impact on the parent if there is something about the child that he or she simply does not see?

5) *Teachers have immense power over children's lives.* Teachers often spend many more waking hours of each day with a child than do the parents. Teachers have the power and opportunity to praise, to support, or to criticize. Parents are keenly aware of teacher power, because as children they had teachers who made them feel wonderful or terrible. Indeed, when parents sit down with their child's teacher they are often in the grip of a transference feeling that relates not to this teacher in the present, but rather some frightening teacher from their own past. It is a commonplace fact of psychodynamic psychology that we confuse the present and the past, that we confuse our own feelings with those of our children. These transferences can grip parents and make their responses to teachers childlike and irrational.

6) *Parents may feel trapped by and with their child's school.* Schools are not commodities and they are not easily changed, even when things are going badly for the child. For reasons of geography, lack of good public school options, lack of places in other independent schools, the child's friendships and commitments, there may be no other option for parents and child. When a parent believes that a particular teacher is not effective or kind to their child, he or she may not be able to do anything to change the situation.

7) *Parents bring their professional skills to bear on their relationships with teachers even though they may not be helpful in a school situation.* If, as I have outlined above, parents can sometimes come to their child's school feeling amateurish, anxious, ignorant, and trapped, they are naturally going to reach for the set of skills that make them successful in the "outside" world. Independent school parents usually have such skills in abundance, and they are often not helpful in a school context. Even when parents sense that their approach is ineffective, they cannot stop. I have seen attorney parents treat their upper school directors as if they were opposing counsel; mental health professionals analyze the motives of a teacher, child, school head, and every other child in the class. It was no help; they just couldn't stop analyzing. Recently, I had an entrepreneurial parent who had come to me for help make a business presentation of his child that took up the entire hour we had together. It was an articulate, polished, forceful sales presentation; however, it did not help the situation, because I was not "buying" his son, I was trying to help a child who was already in the school and already annoying many teachers there. Even when parents know they are intimidating teachers, they cannot stop exercising their strongest muscles, the ones that make them powerful in their own professional lives.

All of these fears are, I believe, latent in every parent. What it takes is a child in behavioral trouble, a child failing, a child who does not like him or herself, to ignite these fears and bring them into the discussion that parents have with teachers in their children's schools. And the schools to which parents bring their deepest concerns are not fearless, nondefensive places. Schools are tender places, full of teachers who have latent fears of their own.

SOURCES OF TEACHER FEAR

Teachers also bring seven fears to their encounters with parents. (Since humans are afflicted by many fears, this is not an exhaustive list — neither for teachers nor parents!)

1) *Teaching, like parenting, is an inherently difficult job: organic, hard to measure, and intensely personal.* A former president of Stanford University once wrote that there are three allied professions: medicine, education, and farming. They all, he said, involved bringing out the best in biology. The doctor tries to elicit the strongest immune response of the body, the educator attempts to coax the desire to learn out of children, and the farmer is trying to get the best from the seeds he plants. A farmer can be very good but in any given season there may be too much rain, or too little, or an infestation of unexpected insects. There are too many variables to be able to predict that a good farmer will always produce a good crop. So it is with teaching. A teacher can have brilliant ideas, design the best lesson plan, arrive at the classroom full of energy and have the class destroyed by an angry boy whose parents are getting divorced or by a clique of children trying to act "cool" by opposing the teacher. The best teacher in the world is not immune to the infinite number of personal agendas that children bring to bear on the learning process. Yet teachers know they will always be held accountable to the old adage: "If the student fails to learn, the teacher fails to teach."

2) *Teachers are always seen by parents through the distorting eyes of children.* Teachers know, although they might not want to think about it, that they are discussed in the homes of their students most evenings. These discussions are not always complimentary and at times they are downright distortions of what occurred in school that day.

Many years ago, when I was in the middle grades at the Collegiate School for Boys in New York City, I had a music teacher named Mrs. Mutch. Mrs. Mutch was a gifted teacher who got me to sing, put together memorable Christmas concerts, and took a group of boys, myself included, to Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts at Carnegie Hall on Saturday mornings, a cherished memory of mine. Did I cherish Mrs. Mutch at the time she was my teacher? I did not. All my brother and I did was ridicule her voice, her big size, her dresses, her problems with discipline. Indeed, we could rhapsodize for hours on what we perceived to be her faults. On a summer driving trip, my exasperated parents put a ten-minute limit on our discussion of Mrs. Mutch.

In short, teaching is a public and exposing job and the child audience is not always appreciative or kind. So when a set of parents come to talk to a teacher, the teacher has no idea what the parents have heard about her from their children, but she can be sure that it is not always an accurate picture of what she might regard as the truth.

3) *If you teach well and effectively, you do not always get the credit.* Good teaching is like stage-managing. A good teacher creates a setting in which the children star. When graduation time comes and the parents are sitting in the audience watching their daughter walk across the stage to receive her diploma, they are not usually thinking, "Isn't it amazing what those gifted teachers did with the misshapen lump of clay we sent them many years ago?" More likely the parents are sitting there thinking, "Isn't she fantastic and talented and beautiful... just like us?" I have heard about graduations where the parents have risen en masse and given the teachers a standing ovation. Such occasions are the exception rather than the rule.

4) *Teachers are not accorded enough respect in our culture, and it puts them at a psychological disadvantage.* There is a mythology in our culture that teaching is a career for second-rate people who cannot make it in another job. The bitter old adage is, "Those who can, do, those who can't, teach." (And Woody Allen's unjust corollary, "Those who can't teach, teach gym.") Just the other night I talked with a salesman on a plane from Washington who said, after hearing that I consulted to schools, "Don't you think teachers are kind of down-in-the-mouth people, not the same quality as people you find in business?" (His business, by the way, was selling armaments.) My answer is that I most emphatically do not think teachers are second-rate people. Man and boy, a very high percentage of the most wonderful people I have known in

my life have been teachers — including Mrs. Mutch. However, because I am close to many teachers, I know that the disrespect of the culture weighs heavily on them.

The fact that teachers are so underpaid relative to the other professions is a tangible sign of cultural disrespect. Many independent school teachers have to sit across from parents who make two times, or four times, or fifty times more money per year than they do. It makes them doubt themselves and their value. A school head made the observation that much of the conflict between parents and teachers is class warfare. One of the things that teachers say to me to explain their fear of parents or their fear of lack of administrative support is, "The customer is always right."

Many independent school parents, whatever their income, are high-status in a variety of ways that can be intimidating to teachers. When I was a twenty-five-year-old psychology teacher at the Cambridge School of Weston in Massachusetts I had an eleventh-grader in my Child Development class whose last name was Brazelton. On parent conference day, into my classroom walked Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, certainly the most famous pediatrician and child development researcher and writer in the United States. He must have seen a look of terror on my face, because he graciously reassured me by saying, "Don't worry, I know everything about infants and nothing about adolescents. In fact, my analyst says I'm still an adolescent myself. Please tell me about my daughter." (A story about one's analyst is a great social leveler in Massachusetts.)

What Dr. Brazelton did is what many independent school parents need to do when they come into contact with teachers: level the playing field, accord respect to the teacher, indicate that you can and want to learn from them. Jacques Barzun has written, "Teaching may not be a lost art, but regard for it is a lost tradition." Teachers feel the loss of the culture's regard every day and it makes them vulnerable. Individual parents can restore, for a moment at least, that respect as a basis for their relationships with teachers.

5) *Every teacher has been scarred by at least one threatening out-of-control parent.* A veteran teacher said to me, "Every time a parent comes through the door I wonder, 'Could this parent be one of those?'" Five percent of intimidating, impossible independent school parents ruin it for the ninety-five percent of reasonable, loving parents because teachers who have been scarred by a parent become wary or withdrawn from all of them. Worse yet, frightened teachers keep their important development knowledge and insights into children to themselves. I am constantly urging teachers to be more honest with parents about children. Routinely, teachers tell me, "You cannot be too honest. They will attack you or sue you." The feeling is largely irrational, but it is widespread, and parent lawsuits against independent schools, which are rare and rarely successful, keep teacher fear alive.

6) *Teachers fear that parent influence with school administrators means their jobs could be at risk.* Not only is the "customer always right," in the minds of many teachers, the customer — if he or she is wealthy, powerful, or on the board — can have you fired. This irrational fear is not helped by the occasional parent who threatens, "I'll have your job." In *Saying Grace*, Beth Gutcheon's recent novel about life in private school, the board chair constantly wants to have a teacher fired and the head has to protect her faculty from these predations. Many teachers fear that their administrators cannot really protect them against the demands of the tuition-paying parents — especially in schools that are tuition-driven.

7) *Good teachers see the world through the eyes of adults and also through the eyes of children.* In order to teach you must be and act adult but also be able to identify with the feelings of children. This unique ability of teachers can sometimes put them at a disadvantage when dealing with people who have a "pure adult" perspective. There are times when parents want answers — adult answers — and teachers are seeing things from the perspective of the child. A second-grade teacher in Washington told me that a father asked her in September, "Where's my son going to be by December?" She replied, "He's going to be just where he needs to be." The answer made the father think the

teacher was mocking him. He wanted answers, a bottom-line response. She was giving him an empathic developmental response.

At times when parents are confrontational, critical, or anxious, teachers often react in identification with the feelings of the ages of the children they teach. Elementary school teachers sometimes react to anxious parents by experiencing them as frightening and overwhelming. Seventh- and eighth-grade teachers often use sarcastic humor to describe parents: "They're so out of it. They're clueless." And upper school teachers often imagine that the solution for the marvelously talented student with whom they have a good relationship is for the student to have a parentectomy. "Great kid, if only she could get rid of her parents." These are the solutions to parent problems used by children of these respective ages. Being able to think like children you teach is essential for teachers; it puts you at a disadvantage in dealing with the parents of those children.

PROBLEMS IN THE SYSTEM

There are some systemic problems in independent schools that contribute to the fear that exists between parents and teachers. First of all, power relationships are not always clear in schools. Who does run the school, really? Is it the head? Is it the teachers, the professional educators? Or is it really the board (and especially the parents on the board)? When the lines of authority are not clear — as they can never be in schools — it allows people to project their fears onto the uncertainty and get a fearful answer back, as teachers do, i.e., the parents have the ultimate power.

Second, heads cannot always resolve parent-teacher disputes satisfactorily. Parents often come in with compelling complaints about a teacher. Indeed, the teacher doesn't do X and Y very well, and the head knows it. At the same time, the head knows that the teacher does many things very well and on balance is an asset to the school. But the head cannot openly acknowledge the teacher's weaknesses to a parent without betraying the teacher. At the same time heads often have knowledge about parents' personal lives and stresses that would help explain their sometimes irrational behavior — but they cannot share that information with teachers.

Most importantly, however, the culture of perfectionism in independent schools makes it difficult for both teachers and parents to admit error. If this potentially brilliant child of marvelously caring parents is going to the very best independent school in the city which has enthusiastically admitted the child, then where is the room for teachers to say: "I've made contact with every other child in the class, but I just haven't found the key to your child," or for parents to say, "We know that the difference in our parenting styles are having a negative effect on our child's work, but we don't know how to change ourselves and we wish you could provide the clarity of direction we're not able to provide." These honest conversations may be exactly what are needed to help a child; however, it is very difficult for parents and teachers to achieve this high level of openness and self-disclosure in school settings with such high expectations in the air.

ON BEYOND FEAR

Children flourish when the adults in their lives agree on them. Children do not have strong identities of their own. They see themselves through the eyes of the adults who love and teach them. For that reason it is important that the adults in their lives see them in a unified way. If parents and teachers are on the same page with respect to children, it is much easier for the children to feel whole and understood, and to succeed. That is why it is essential that parents and teachers move beyond the fears that afflict their relationship and create a sturdy alliance between them.

How can teachers and parents get beyond their mutual fear? Schools need to train teachers to work with the vast majority of well-meaning parents, and they need to give specific training in the management of difficult and attacking parents. Teachers thus trained will feel more courageous, more competent, and will, as a result, be able to be more honest and effective with parents.

Parents need to disarm the power differential inherent in the situation of parent-teacher communication by demonstrating that they want to learn from the teacher. Teachers need to remember that parents are afraid. Parents need to remember that teachers feel vulnerable. Both need to act accordingly.

Michael Thompson is a psychologist and school consultant based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Promoting Successful Parent-Teacher Conferences

* Developed by the faculty of the Bancroft School, Worcester, Massachusetts *

Tips for Parents

- 1) Be on time for conferences and respect time limits.
- 2) Be honest with teachers and make your own concerns known.
- 3) Show appreciation for teachers.
- 4) Ask in advance who will attend, so you are not surprised.

National Association of Independent Schools
1620 L Street, NW, Suite 1100
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