

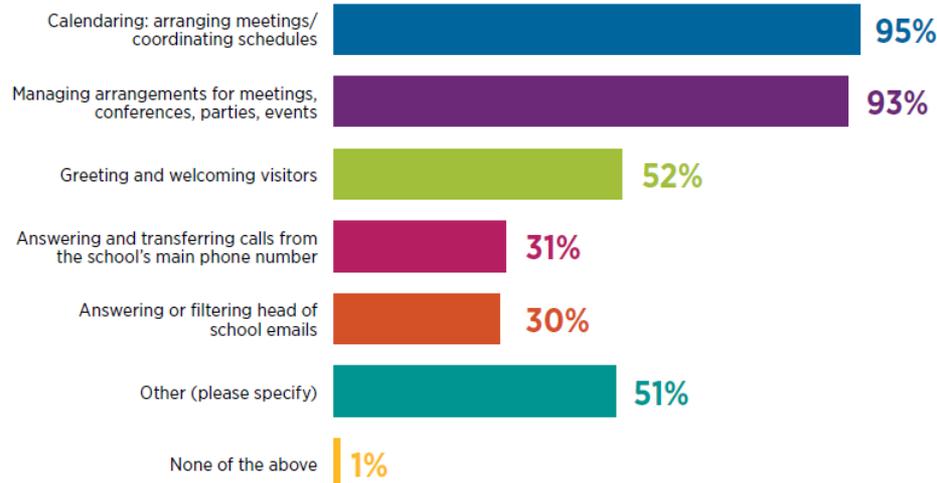
ADVIS – Administrative Professionals' Retreat,
Behind Every Great School

Dealing with Difficult Interactions

Erica Zematis, NAIS Executive Assistant
February 2026

2024 NAIS EA Survey

What are your main administrative responsibilities or duties?
Please check all that apply from the options below.



n=647

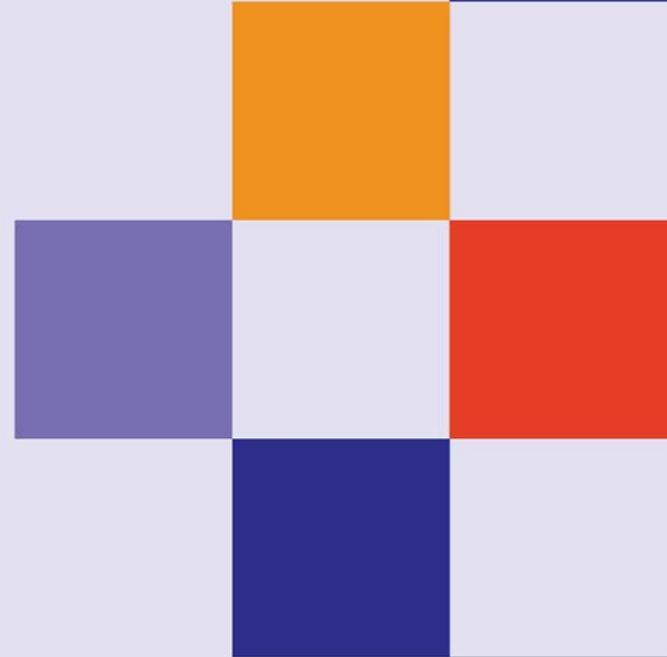
52% of respondents greet and welcome visitors

31% of respondents answer and transfer calls from the school's main phone line

Communication skills were listed as the top skill respondents would like to improve to better support the school (tech skills and time management closely followed)

**Who do you interact with
on a day-to-day basis?**

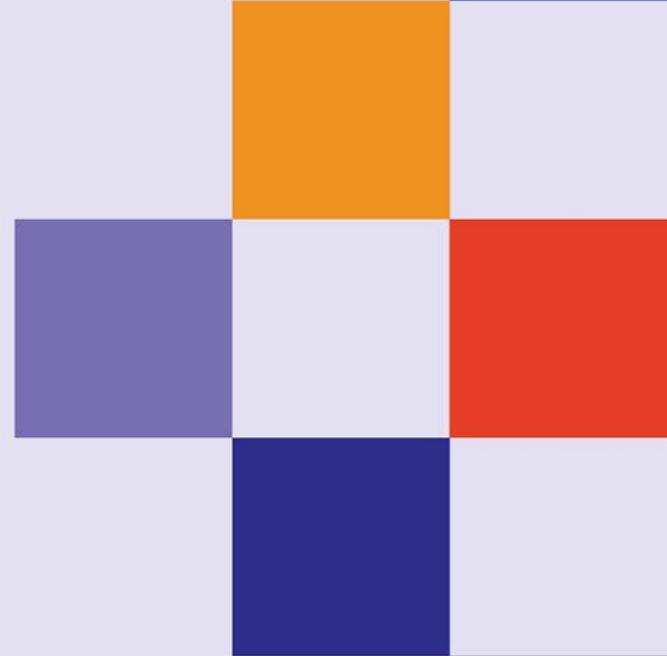
**Are any of those
interactions less than
positive?**



Scenarios

Scenarios

- 1) **Role Play in small groups. Switch roles to experience both perspectives.**
- 2) **Pause and reframe. Create a script for a positive, constructive interaction.**
- 3) **Act out your reframed scenario using the agreed upon script.**



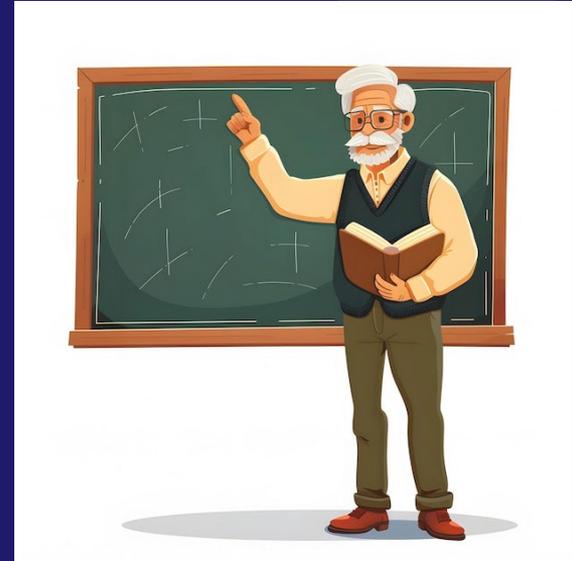
Scenario: The Upset Parent

Setup: A parent has been trying to reach the Head of School for three days about what they consider an urgent disciplinary issue involving their child. The Head is at a conference out of state. The parent calls the main office, and you answer.



Scenario: The Unresponsive Faculty Member

Setup: You've sent three emails over the past two weeks to Mr. Thompson, a long-tenured history teacher, asking him to submit his field trip permission forms and budget for an upcoming trip. The deadline was yesterday, and the finance office needs this information to process payments. Mr. Thompson walks past your desk.



Scenario: The Protocol-Breaking Board Member

Setup: Your school has a clear policy that all visitors, including board members, must sign in at the front desk and wear a visitor badge for security reasons. Board member Mrs. Chen has walked past the front desk without signing in for the third time this month. You need to address this while maintaining the relationship and respecting her position.



For all scenarios:

The “Pause” Technique – When someone is upset or dismissive, resist the urge to respond immediately. Take a breath. This gives you time to choose your words and shows you’re taking them seriously.

Your Tone Matters More Than Your Words – Stay calm, warm, and professional even when they are not. Your emotional regulation can help de-escalate.

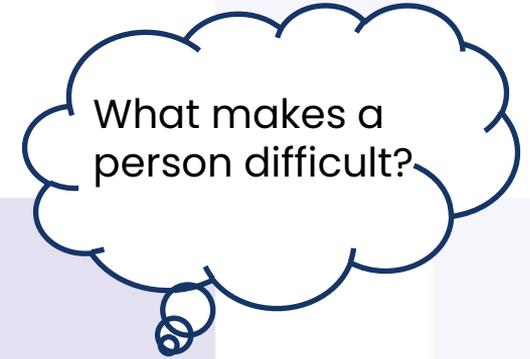
You Are Not Responsible For Their Emotions – You can be empathetic without taking ownership of their anger or frustration. Their reaction is about them, not you.

Escalate When Necessary – Some issues cannot be resolved without your Head or leadership team stepping in. Often the other person will insist on speaking with them – and that’s ok! But schedule a time for that meeting, try not to blindside your leader with it when emotions are high and before they’ve been briefed on the situation

Document Difficult Interactions – Brief notes protect you and help track patterns, especially with repeat offenders.

So many people and personalities...

[how-to-deal-with-difficult-people-at-workplace-12-638.jpg \(638x479\)](#)



[Image source: six-types-of-people-1.jpg \(1024x768\)](#)

Connection before correction!



Hopes and Fears



Hopes and Fears

Working with
Today's
Independent
School Parents

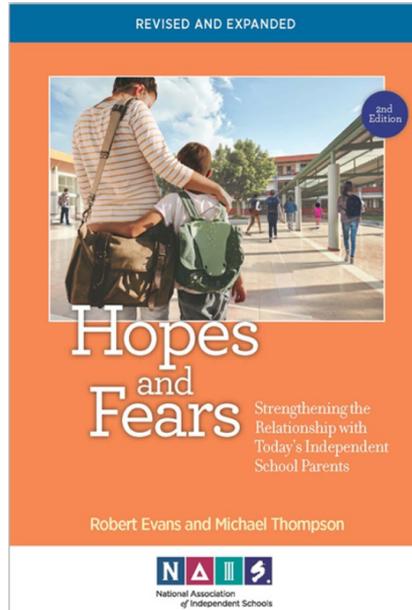
Robert Evans and Michael Thompson

“Independent Schools exist because of the hopes and fears of parents.”

Both parents and teachers want what’s best for the student, but their different roles and perspectives can cause them to disagree about precisely what is best.

“If independent schools exist because of parental hopes and fears, they run every day on the hopes and fears of teachers.”

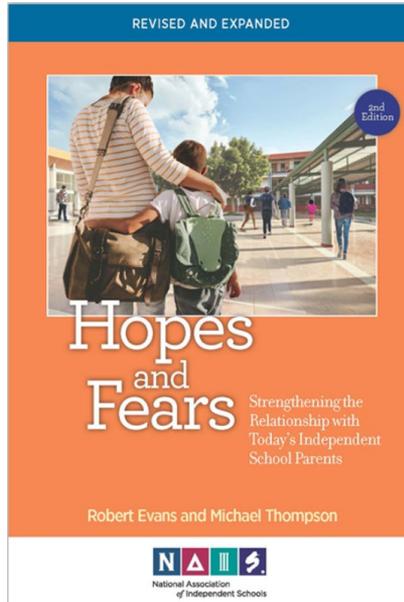
Hopes and Fears: Assumptions



Assumptions:

1. Parents are sincere and anxious.
2. Problems are inevitable and often valuable learning opportunities.
3. The educator is the senior partner and can apply with parents the very skills that work with students.

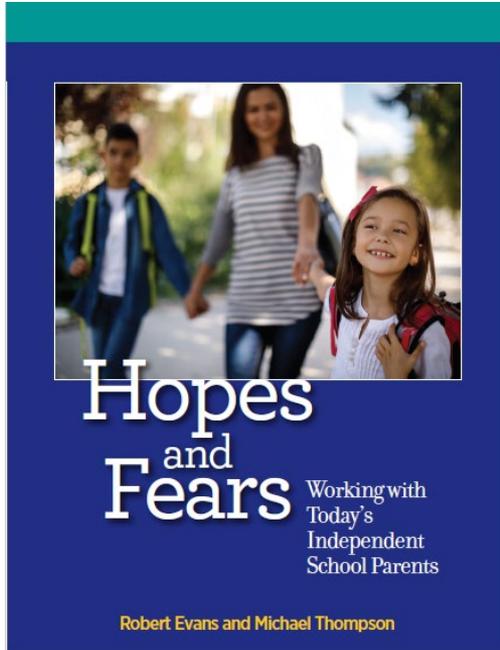
Hopes and Fears: Skills



Skills Every Teacher Needs:

1. Active listening
2. Ask questions about parents' hopes and fears
3. Claim the child: be interested and invested in their learning
4. Straight talk: speak direct, candid, and concerned

Hopes and Fears: 95 vs 5%



95%ers vs. the 5%ers: – the authors draw a fundamental distinction between the vast majority, who can be worked with (we call them “95 percenters”), and the small minority (“5 percenters”), who often have personality and other disorders that incline them to violate the school’s behavioral norms and boundaries. The 5 percenters behave in ways that disrupt the school community and cause anxiety, fear, and frustration in teachers.

Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Interactions

What are some strategies for dealing with difficult people?

1. Lead with Empathy
2. Active Listening
3. Stay Calm
4. Set Boundaries
5. Avoid Personalization
6. Seek Support



Sources: [How to Deal With Difficult People — Without Harming Your Mental Health](#), [20 Expert Tactics for Dealing With Difficult People | Psychology Today](#), [10 Tips To Deal With Difficult People](#)

Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Interactions (cont.)



Try to use empathy because you don't know what is happening in their lives.

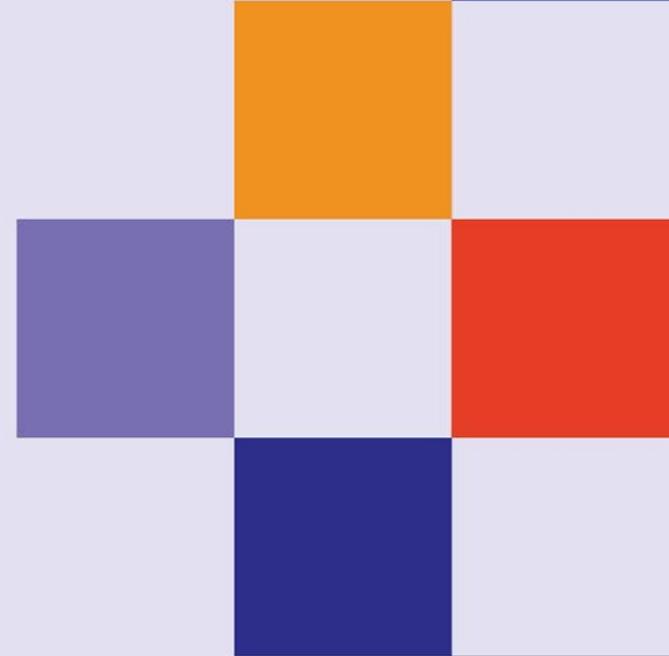
Don't take it personal!

You have control over your own attitude and the way that you react.

The goal is to resolve the problem, not to win.

Phrase Bank

- 1) **When someone is angry.**
- 2) **When someone resists policy.**
- 3) **When you need to set boundaries.**
- 4) **When you need to escalate.**



Phrase Bank

When someone is angry.

- “Let me make sure I understand your concern...”
- “Here’s what I can do right now...”

When someone resists policy.

- “What if I did X – would that save you time?”
- “Help me understand what would make this easier for you.”
- “It’s actually policy for everyone, including staff.”

When you need to set boundaries.

- “I appreciate your understanding on this.”
- “This helps us keep students safe, which I know is important to you.”

When you need to escalate.

- “I want to make sure you get the answers you need. The best person for that is...”
- “Thank you for giving us a chance to address this matter. Mrs. Walker will get back with you.”

Helpful Phrases when Dealing with Difficult People

(Source: *Perfect Phrases for Dealing with Difficult People* by Susan F. Benjamin)

Acknowledge Feelings – “I see you’re upset. Here, tell me the problem.” “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. Here is what I meant.” “Try to relax, I’m here to help you.”

Get Some Space – “Let’s step over here where it’s quieter and I can hear you better.” “Why don’t you come to my office where we can talk.”

Give Thanks – “Thank you for letting us know about this situation.” “I appreciate you sharing your concerns.” “Thank you for giving us a chance to address this matter.”

Sympathize – “I know that must have been difficult for you.” “I’m sure the steps we took to reach that decision must seem complex.” “I’m sorry to hear about that experience.”

Maintain Control – “Instead of arguing the point, let’s look at steps to move forward.” “Let’s talk about solutions to the problem.” “Do you have any ideas about how we can fix this?”

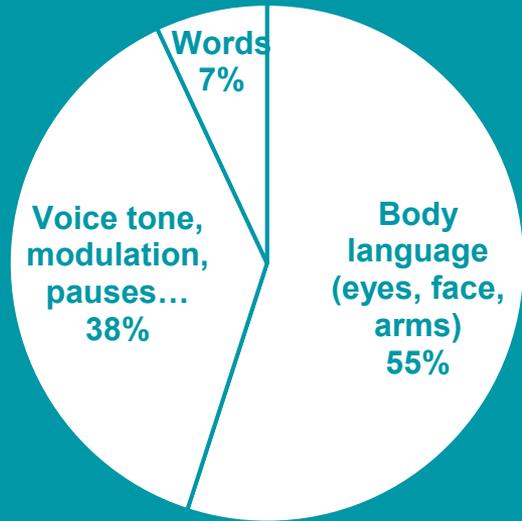
Be There to Help – “I can explain that to you.” “I can show you where this is located on our website.”

Next Steps – “We will focus on getting this done.” “The HOS will follow-up with you with a call tomorrow morning.” “You will receive the refund in approximately 7-10 days.”

End on a Happy Note – “I apologize again – and thanks for your understanding.” “We can assure you that we will look into this matter.”

Unspoken Communication

PROF. ALBERT MEHRABIAN'S MEASURING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION



Words matter,
but so too does
your body
language!

Over 90% of our
communication
is non-verbal.

Manning the Main Office

Follow Rules and Policy – your role is to enforce the rules. They are probably there for a reason, and if they are outdated, work to bring up the need for a policy review.

Enforce Across the Board – reacting fairly and consistently will help everyone know what to expect.

Be Kind – don't let your emotions run high. Always be kind and respectful. Allow the other person time to reflect and cool down. Be professional, listen, and seek to understand.

Explain the Why – you've heard their perspective, now explain yours/the school's.

Escalate When Necessary – Some issues cannot be resolved without your Head or leadership team stepping in. Often the other person will insist on speaking with them – and that's ok! But schedule a time for that meeting, try not to blindside your leader with it when emotions are high and before they've been briefed on the situation.

And Remember...Self Care

It is important to find time for self care – especially after an emotional or difficult interaction.

Simple things like taking a walk around campus, getting a fresh cup of coffee, refilling your water bottle, or concentrating on your breathing can help you reset and refresh your mindset.



Questions/Comments?

Resources

- NAIS book: *Hopes and Fears: Working with Today's Independent School Parents* by Rob Evans and Michael Thompson
- [How to Deal With Difficult People – Without Harming Your Mental Health, 20 Expert Tactics for Dealing With Difficult People | Psychology Today, 10 Tips To Deal With Difficult People](#)
- *Perfect Phrases for Dealing with Difficult People* by Susan F. Benjamin