

CHAPTER 4: HELPFUL HINTS

Although there are basic procedures that can be followed in any dispute resolution situation, a successful outcome depends on the attitudes and skills that people bring to the table. These are some hints and suggestions that might help guide the process.

Be flexible: Consistency is important, but so is flexibility. Schools, school divisions, communities, and families operate according to certain systems. Decisions, policies, and procedures are often made for the benefit of the group at large, but within that group there must be a place for each person to thrive. Flexibility means being willing to respect each other's positions, suggestions, and points of view. It also means being willing to consider a variety of possible solutions to a problem. In the co-operative environment of informal dispute resolution, there is nothing wrong with changing your mind. Sometimes there is nothing more productive or positive than knowing—and admitting—when you are wrong.

Be timely: When a dispute arises, the goal is to resolve it quickly and fairly. But it is also important to have time to gather information and prepare. In some situations, emotions may be high, and a “cooling off” period may be helpful. On the other hand, don't leave things for too long. A situation left too long may prove unproductive or even counterproductive. The opportunity for exploring a wide range of possible solutions may have passed.

Create a comfortable meeting environment: In dispute resolution situations, tensions can be high and people are often uncomfortable. This tension may not disappear completely, but there are many ways to help make one another more comfortable. For example, when setting up a meeting, the time should be convenient for everyone. The room should be comfortable without being distracting. Everyone should be able to see and hear each other easily. People should sit facing one another without things like desks between them. An offer of coffee, tea, or water might be a good way to begin. It is important to think about things that set the tone of a meeting, like addressing each other by first names or by formal titles (Mr. Ms/Miss or Mrs.). Humour can be a good way to “break the ice” and put each other at ease, as long as it does not cause offense or make the situation seem trivial.

Deal with anger: Anger can be expressed and understood in constructive and positive ways. But if you or another party are feeling angry, it may not be the best time to try resolving a dispute. If you are in a dispute situation with someone who is angry, you may choose to play the role of the patient listener. This could allow that person to “vent” or voice the anger until he or she is calm enough to proceed. If you choose this approach, it is important not to take these comments personally, feel like you must defend yourself, or become hooked into an argument. An acceptable option is to calmly explain that now may not be the best time to be having this conversation, and suggest another time.

Deal with issues: It is normal for people to have disputes. The goal of informal dispute resolution is not to avoid all disputes, but to deal with issues positively and productively as they come up. Ignoring or avoiding decisions that need to be made could cause more problems in the long run. Don't let little things become big things. Any time is a good time to encourage open, honest communication and co-operative problem solving.

Diagnose the situation: It is important to be able to define and describe the nature of a dispute as well as your feelings about a dispute. But it is also important to be able to know when you are no longer in control, or no longer wish to be in control of a situation. Sometimes people reach a point where they are unwilling or unable to resolve a dispute without outside help. If this happens, it may be necessary to move to a more formal approach. It is important to keep in mind that if anyone becomes upset or uncomfortable, the meeting can be stopped and rescheduled.

Establish ground rules: It is always a good idea to establish "ground rules" at the beginning of a meeting. These may involve a discussion about "rules" of behaviour and communication, and the kinds of things that could be grounds for stopping a meeting. If, for example, someone becomes overly emotional, disrespectful, or unco-operative, if the meeting becomes hopelessly sidetracked, or if it becomes bogged down in details and progress is not being made, it may be a good idea to reschedule the meeting. If a meeting does have to be stopped and rescheduled, it is important to think about why the meeting did not succeed. There may be ways you can contribute to a more positive meeting next time around. You can only control your own attitudes and behaviour. It is important to go into all meetings with a co-operative attitude and an open mind.

Explore training options: We all benefit from learning more about dispute resolution. It is advisable that anyone who deals with differences of opinion, disputes, and co-operative problem solving on a regular basis learn more about the dispute resolution process. Even for those who do not deal with disputes on a regular basis, the skills that are developed in dispute resolution training are the skills that benefit every aspect of positive living. (Please see "Suggested Resources" for more information.)

Focus: The best way to keep a meeting productive and focused is to be clear about the purpose of the meeting, the key issues that are being discussed, and the motives and the goals of the people involved. The purpose of the meeting will likely have to do with a student or students. This means the meeting should be about working together in the best interest of the student. A good way to keep a conversation focused is to state the purpose of the meeting at the outset, and remind each other of that purpose if the meeting becomes sidetracked. This could be done, for example, by asking a question like: "How does this relate to the purpose of our meeting?" or "How will this benefit the student?"

Follow-up: No matter what the outcome of a dispute resolution meeting, it is necessary that communication lines are kept open and one or more follow-up meetings take place. These meetings may be about evaluating the success of a dispute resolution plan, discussing further steps an individual may take, or they may be “touching base” and agreeing to move on.

Share information: It is important to be honest, open, and forthcoming with information. It is also important to realize that confidentiality and privacy must be respected. In some situations it may be wrong to share information. It could be against school or school division policy or even the law. (Student privacy is protected under *The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* [FIPPA] and *The Personal Health Information Act* [PHIA].)

Work together: One thing that can make it difficult to understand another person, or to make ourselves understood, is to assume that there is a right and wrong position in a disagreement. Creative problem solving depends on letting go of this way of looking at things and being open to the possibilities of working together. People in a dispute resolution process are not opponents; they are partners.

Learning how to resolve disputes positively is an ongoing process. Please consider using this handbook as a guide. If you are interested in learning more about dispute resolution, there are resources available in your community and training opportunities available to you as a parent, educator, administrator, or member of the community.

Informal dispute resolution is about more than dealing with problems or putting out fires on a case-by-case basis. It is about building bridges between and among our schools, families, and communities. It is about creating a caring, productive, and co-operative environment where our students receive positive messages and learn positive habits set by positive examples.

Informal dispute resolution is about our schools, families, and communities working together to build relationships that support learning.

