Despite what some people may think, not everyone can be a teacher. Teaching is a challenging but rewarding career, one that actually makes a difference in people’s lives. But it takes skill, commitment, and courage.

People become teachers because they love working with kids. They have spent 4 or more years becoming experts in one or more content areas: reading, math, physical education, music, English, science, special education, foreign language, or social studies. They have learned how to plan a lesson, create valid tests, diversify instruction, and run inclusive classrooms. They have practiced effective teaching strategies and classroom management techniques during their student teaching or internship experiences. In short, they arrive at their first teaching jobs eager to embrace the challenges of the profession.

If they are lucky, they will be among the 200,000 new teachers hired each fall across the nation. They will enter the field with high expectations and a willingness to work hard to improve their skills.

In 2 years, 10% of them will quit.
In 3 years, about 40% will quit.
By the end of 5 years, about 50%—fully half of those new, optimistic teachers who have spent so much time, money, and effort to prepare themselves for their careers—will have left the profession, according to studies conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics and the National Education Association in 2006 (see National Education Association, 2010).

Some new teachers who leave find student discipline overwhelming. Others point to a lack of administrative support. But one of the main reasons for leaving the profession, according to the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (Plecki, Elfers, Loeb, Zahir, & Knapp, 2005), is this: Teachers are unprepared to work with difficult parents.

**TEACHERS ARE UNPREPARED TO WORK WITH DIFFICULT PARENTS**

Despite all of their training, new teachers often lack the skills needed to handle the demands of some of today’s parents.

There’s Justin’s mother, for example, who thinks that it’s okay for her son to stick mozzarella sticks up his nose during lunch (“He’s such a character!”).

There’s Samantha’s stepdad, who says it’s the teacher’s fault that Samantha cheated on her social studies test (“Why weren’t you watching her more closely?”).

Keisha’s mother did her daughter’s science project for her and then complained that the work only got a B (“Do you have any idea how much time this took?”).

Bradley’s father threatened to have the teacher fired if she didn’t change his son’s math grade (“It will be your fault if he doesn’t get into his first-choice college!”).

And Lee’s mother’s boyfriend says Lee doesn’t deserve detention because fighting is what boys do (“I’m the one who taught him to fight!”).

Dealing with difficult parents isn’t the only reason that teachers abandon the profession, but the stress of doing so remains one of the top reasons teachers cite for leaving the ranks.
TEACHERS NEED TO LEARN PARENT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Teachers who remain in the classroom discover that, in addition to classroom management skills, they must develop parent management skills if they want to be successful. Without such skills, an adversarial relationship between a teacher and a parent can take its toll.

For example, when teachers know that a child’s parent stands ready to challenge them at every turn, they can become reluctant to confront inappropriate student behavior or lack of effort. When they know that a dreaded “helicopter mom” is always hovering nearby, ready to swoop in at a moment’s notice to protect her child, teachers may feel that it’s not worth the personal stress to stand up for what they know is in the child’s best interest. When they know that a student’s father will go directly to the principal if he’s unhappy with his child’s grade, they begin to feel perpetually defensive. In short, dealing with difficult parents can have a demoralizing effect on the individual teacher and even on the school as a whole, particularly if teachers feel that they have to fend for themselves without administrative support or a comprehensive school policy for working with parents.

Let me hasten to point out that I am not talking about all parents. Most parents are supportive, helpful, and realistic. They volunteer as band
boosters and help with bake sales. They attend their kid’s performances and vote for the school budget. They take an interest in their child’s progress, work with teachers as partners, and communicate with them respectfully and civilly. Although they sometimes disagree with the school’s position, it is their right to do so. (It’s fine for parents to disagree. It’s not fine for them to be disagreeable.)

Let me also agree that, yes, difficult teachers exist in every school system, creating their own set of problems. However, even the best and most reasonable teachers around the country report that a growing number of parents make excuses for their children, refuse to allow them to take any responsibility, and believe that every wish their child makes should be granted. Teachers who refuse to accept excuses, insist on student responsibility, and aren’t afraid of saying no are bound to find themselves in eventual conflict with parents who make unreasonable demands and criticize or even threaten their children’s teachers when those demands aren’t met.

**All Teachers Can Learn to Handle Parents More Effectively**

What can a teacher do when faced with a problem parent? No single strategy will work for all situations. However, any teacher can develop an array of strategies that will prove successful a great deal of the time.

In the following chapters, you’ll find plenty of effective techniques, including what to say and what not to say, and how they can be used in specific situations. You will find them helpful whether you’re a new teacher or a veteran.
Chapter 2
A Short and Subjective History of Parents

THE ANCIENTS

In 1900, Mark Twain, in an address to the Public Education Association, observed that, “Out of the public school grows the greatness of a nation.” The waves of immigrants to the United States in the first quarter of the 20th century resulted in legislation making public school attendance compulsory for children for the first time. Compulsory education not only “Americanized” the younger generation, but it also kept them out of the factories where children had previously competed with adults for jobs.

During those years and for many years that followed, parents went to work and their children went to school, the children often moving well beyond their parents in terms of formal education. Few parents questioned how the school was run or whether their children were being taught well or treated fairly. They believed school was their children’s responsibility, just as work was theirs.

When my brother, sister, and I were children in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, our parents did not contact our teachers if we didn’t like an assignment. They did not call the principal to complain if we got detention.
They did not believe that we never lied. They did not care if we were bored in school, and they did not accept being bored as an excuse for poor grades. They did not believe that children had “personality conflicts” with teachers because children’s personalities had little standing in their book. They did not tell us that we should respect teachers only if they respected us. They were wise enough to know that our version of what happened at school that day was just that—our version. They did not know what our math homework was, and they didn’t care. Whatever it was, they expected us to do it. In some ways, we had a freedom that today’s children can’t even imagine.

Our parents’ disinterest in the details of school did not mean they were bad parents. In fact, they were great parents. They were very clear, however, about their expectations for us in terms of school. Like the parents in every other family we knew, their expectation was this: “If you get in trouble at school, that’s nothing compared to what will happen when you get home.”

I don’t want to give the impression that my parents didn’t care about us or about our education. They did. They made sure we reported to school every single day unless we were running a fever, had spots, or were throwing up. They knew when report cards were issued, they reviewed them, and then they signed them. They went to all of our concerts, plays, and awards programs. (The only things they didn’t attend were our summer baseball or softball league games. Watching us do the same thing we did in the middle of our street, except on a field where first base was a sack instead of the sewer cover, was not a reason to take off work. In truth, the only parents who ever watched us play ball in the summer were dads who were out of work for one reason or another.)

They were just busy—busy attending to their responsibilities of working hard, raising a family, and paying the bills. We were expected to attend to our responsibilities—going to school every day, staying out of trouble, and paying attention. In a sense, they had their jobs and we had ours.

We did not feel deprived.

Kids who had formerly been described as “lazy” (a word we teachers were now forbidden to use) were now “bored.”
THINGS START TO CHANGE

I became a teacher myself in the late 1970s, and it seemed to me that parents of that era were, for the most part, similar to my parents. They still expected their kids to do their job while they did theirs. They were still suspicious of their children’s renditions of what happened in school that day, and they still expected their children to behave. Here’s a typical conversation from that era:

**Teacher:** Tommy swore in class today.
**Mr. Smith:** I’m sorry. We’ll take care of it at home.
**Teacher:** He’s going to need to serve a detention.
**Mr. Smith:** That’s fine with us.

Here’s another example:

**Teacher:** If Madeline can stay after school on Thursdays, I can help her with spelling.
**Mrs. Torres:** She’ll be there. You hear that, Madeline? Every Thursday.

However, by the early 1980s, I began to see a slight abdication of parental authority. Typical conversations of that era tended to sound more like this:

**Teacher:** Mrs. Jones, I’m having a little trouble getting Jack to do his homework.
**Mrs. Jones:** If you can’t make him do it, what do you expect me to do?

Or:

**Teacher:** Mr. Fazio, Jennifer really needs to stay after school for extra help.
**Mr. Fazio:** Well, she’s a lot like me—doesn’t like to be told what to do.

Around this time we began to hear about “bored” children. Kids who had formerly been described as “lazy” (a word we teachers were now forbidden to use) were now “bored.” Reading bored them. Math bored them. Writing bored them. Homework especially bored them. The reason for all this boredom? These kids were way smarter than the other kids, according to their parents.
Of course, these students typically didn’t demonstrate their boredom by staring out the window, doodling, or coming up with creative solutions for problems. Instead, they did no work at all or disrupted the class. This, according to their parents, was because they weren’t being sufficiently challenged.

No one I knew when I was a kid ever admitted to being bored. I learned early in life never to say to my mother, “There’s nothing to do around here,” because she would quickly find something for me to do: vacuum, pick beans, take out the garbage, clean the garage. It never would have occurred to her (or to me) that it was her job to entertain me if I was bored.

However, as a teacher, I began to feel that was exactly what some parents expected me to do with their kids—entertain them. If their children weren’t doing anything in class, it wasn’t because they were lazy or because they had legitimate issues like learning disabilities. It was because they were so smart that the work in class was beneath them. The “challenge” they needed was really mine: to motivate them or perhaps . . . to entertain them.

By this point, I had kids of my own. Watching Sesame Street with them, I began to see how they could grow up believing that all learning could be fun. Number facts should be set to music, and letters could sing and dance!

Well, I wanted learning to be fun, too, but I knew that was not always possible. Although my 1980s hairstyle made me look like one, I was not a Muppet.

THE DECADE ENDS

At the beginning of the 1990s, I began to see a big difference in the attitude of some parents
toward schools, teachers, and their own kids. By then, I had become the principal of a middle school/high school, and many conversations with parents began to sound like this:

**Principal:** Mr. Yung, Jeremy was in a fight this afternoon, and I am going to have to suspend him for a day.

**Mr. Yung:** What about the other kid? He started it! He better be getting 2 days!

Or:

**Principal:** Mrs. Golden, Ann was disrespectful to her physical education teacher this afternoon.

**Mrs. Golden:** How was she disrespectful?

**Principal:** She told the teacher that she wasn’t going to do any f-ing push-ups.

**Mrs. Golden:** So what did her teacher do to provoke her?

Unfortunately, this trend continued over the next years, headed steadily, in my opinion, downhill. Today when a student has a problem at school, there’s a much greater chance that the parents will not accept the consequences of their child’s behavior without argument.

When a child gets in trouble today, conversations are more likely to sound like the one I had not long ago over an incident involving a middle schooler:

**Principal:** Mike, whatever made you think that mooning the other team from the bus was a good idea?

**Mike:** (shrugging his shoulders) I dunno.

As a middle schooler, Mike probably *didn’t* know. (It’s a given that middle schoolers sometimes don’t think before they act.) But when told that Mike was being suspended for a few days to ponder the question, his father gave this response:

**Mike’s dad:** You’re overreacting. Didn’t you ever do something like that?

I wondered briefly what there is about me that would make Mike’s dad think that I too mooned an opposing team when I was 13. The fact that I was still alive should have convinced him that I would never have done that!
So here’s what I said to him:

**Principal:** Oh, for Pete’s sake. Gimme a break. No wonder your kid thinks mooning someone is okay.

I didn’t say that, of course. I thought it, though. Here’s what I really said:

**Principal:** Mike may return to school in 3 days.

There have always been demanding parents. However, demanding parents of earlier times were more likely to demand that their *kids* do what they wanted them to do, not the *teachers*.

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*What best describes parents today? In my opinion, it is a belief that their kids should have anything their little hearts desire.*

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**The Moderns**

What best describes parents today? In my opinion, it is a belief that their kids should have anything their little hearts desire. Unfortunately, schools may have contributed to this notion. That wasn’t the intent, of course, but the result of a good idea run amok.

Starting in schools in the early 1990s, and continuing into this century, was a belief in the importance of self-esteem. It was deemed more important than reading and math, more important than discipline, more important than problem solving, more important than just about anything. At its worst, though no one actually said so, it took the form of, “Well, if little Mikey can’t read, at least he can feel good about himself as an illiterate.”

Competition became inherently bad because if someone were first, someone else would have to be last. The dodge balls were put in the closet, and instead we played cooperative games like grasping the edges of a silk parachute and watching the wind lift it up.

All too often, everyone got a ribbon just for participating. Perfect attendance awards were given out for near-perfect attendance as well (absent fewer than 15 times!). Ten kids in a class received the “Most Improved” award at the
end of the year. “Inventive” spelling sometimes lasted far beyond elementary school and didn’t need to be corrected before the written piece was displayed on the bulletin board. The “math minute” became the “math 6 minutes” so that no one would feel bad about not finishing the 10 problems required for a star.

Everyone was special in his or her own way. There were no “wrong” answers. Conversations often went something like this:

Teacher: How much is 6 times 8?
Student: 36?
Teacher: Good try! What else could it be?

Grades of A, B, and C on elementary report cards often changed to new, inoffensive letters that carried no baggage—like N (needs improvement), M (making progress), and S (sometimes gets it). Kids needed to “construct” meaning at their own pace, even if it meant drawing for most of the time instead of learning number facts.

All right, I’m exaggerating, but there was a tendency to believe that raising self-esteem required lowering our expectations. We began to believe that children should be rewarded not only for doing something good, but also for not doing something bad:

Teacher: Because no one hit anyone today, tomorrow we will have a popcorn party!

Raising a child’s self-esteem also meant asking rather than telling children what we wanted them to do. Teachers needed to give children choices.

Old way: Class, get out your spelling books.
New way: Class, would you like to work on spelling now?

Or:

Old way: If you can’t share, we’ll put those toys away. And stop that pinching immediately, or you’ll find yourself in the time-out chair!
New way: We need you to share those toys, okay? And no more pinching, all right?

Or:

Old way: Put the balls away now.
New way: We need to put the balls away now, okay? Is everybody ready to put the balls away? Okay, let’s put them all away, all right?

Of course, children were smart enough to sense that putting the balls away or not was not a real choice like, “Do you want mustard on your hot dog?” or “Do you want to go swimming or go to the mall?” They knew instinctively that responding with a resounding “No!” to “Is everybody ready to put the balls away?” would simply result in more wheedling from the adult. Although they knew that playtime would eventually end, they also knew they didn’t have to do what was asked the first time or maybe even the fifth or sixth time. They would be able to tell when the teacher actually meant what she said because then she would go back to the old way of giving directions:

Teacher: “Put those balls away NOW!”

SELF-ESTEEM ISN’T RAISED BY LOWERING EXPECTATIONS

All of this is not to say that self-esteem doesn’t matter. It does. No one should have to be picked last in a gym class. There are dozens of ways of choosing up sides without making a kid feel like a loser before the game even gets started. And there are hundreds of ways, maybe thousands of ways, maybe millions of ways of helping kids grow, learn, and make good mistakes on their way to discovering how to make good decisions.

Our intentions were good, but we unwittingly bought into what turned out to be the myths of self-esteem. Here’s one example of the myths:

Myth: Low self-esteem is the primary cause of low academic achievement.
Fact: It’s the other way around.
In our eagerness to help kids feel good about themselves, we overlooked the one thing guaranteed to achieve that result: actual accomplishment. Even a kindergartner knows when he’s done something really worthy of praise. In our rush to enhance self-esteem, we underestimated how important real accomplishment is to kids.

Kids want to do well, and they want to please. They want to know what the target is so they can try to hit it. They also want consistent adult guidance and direction as they learn how to do things. Here’s another myth:

**Myth:** Self-esteem predicts success.

**Fact:** Self-control and the ability to delay rewards are the strongest predictors of success.

With the emphasis on self-esteem, teachers often soft-pedaled criticism and lowered their standards in a misguided attempt not to harm the child’s delicate psyche. Kids discovered to their initial delight and later dismay that even their smallest efforts were rewarded. All of those trophies and certificates really didn’t mean anything if everyone got them. (Have you ever noticed at elementary awards ceremonies where everyone gets a certificate of some kind that many kids leave their awards on the floor under their chairs when the ceremony is over?) So, being kids, they began to test the limits to see how far they had to go before an adult would actually step up to the plate.

Lowering expectations often meant adults responding quickly to find some kind of amusement if a child complained about being bored. Instead of insisting that children behave and control themselves, adults looked for reasons to excuse bad behavior—the child was overly tired, had consumed too many sweets, it was too hot outside, or she didn’t get to wear her favorite shirt. Of course, some of these issues can contribute to poor behavior, but after a certain age—3 or 4 maybe—kids shouldn’t automatically get a pass because of them. Sometimes kids act out because they want to! Because they’re kids! Which brings us to one more myth:

**Myth:** Low self-esteem causes aggressive behavior.

**Fact:** Bullies and other aggressors have been shown to have higher than average self-esteem.
Numerous studies have shown that bullies are bullies because they feel they are stronger than those they bully and that they can do it with impunity. Teachers often console the victim of a bully by saying, “You know, he just doesn’t feel very good about himself, and he’s taking it out on you.” I have to admit I said that myself as a teacher, and it wasn’t much of an intervention or a consolation. (Happily, we’re taking a much different and assertive approach to bullying these days.)

For a period, schools abandoned high standards for behavior and academics in the hopes of developing happy children. It didn’t work.

PARENTS JOIN THE SELF-ESTEEM MOVEMENT

Taking their lead from school, parents also began to believe that a child’s self-esteem could be damaged easily if any of his or her actions or ideas met with disapproval. For far too many parents, the word “no” became both rare and negotiable.

Parents momentarily forgot who was in charge:

Mom: (to her 5-year-old) Mommy’s tired of the escalator. Aren’t you tired of the escalator? Okay, one more time. But then we need to go home, okay? Well, just one more time after that. Then that’s it, okay?

Parents forgot that actions speak louder than words:

Parent: Johnny, don’t make me come over there. Johnny, I mean it. Don’t make me come over there. Stop that now. I don’t want to have to come over there. You hear me? I mean it. Don’t make me come over there.

For far too many parents, the word “no” became both rare and negotiable.
Parents forgot that they were older and more experienced than their kids:

**Dad:** *(to his 9-year old)* How many times do I have to tell you not to pee on the rhododendrons? Look! They’re all dead. I’ve told you a dozen times. How long are you going to keep doing that?!

And some parents seemed to have momentarily lost their minds:

**Mom:** *(to her toddler, at the grocery store)* I know you’re angry, and you can hit Mommy, but not too hard.

At a restaurant one morning, a little boy wearing a beanie with a propeller attached was allowed to scream and race around the restaurant, annoying other patrons while his father smiled indulgently. When the family finally left, one older diner said loudly, “The wrong person is wearing the beanie in that family.”

The result of the self-esteem movement was that kids’ self-esteem stayed the same but adults’ self-esteem plummeted. Kids began to believe that if nothing was actually required of them, they must be entitled to do whatever they wanted. For a while there it wasn’t pretty.

Eventually, however, most teachers and parents got tired of asking kids a dozen times to do what they were supposed to do. When many of them came to their senses, they began to remember that when a child misbehaves, it doesn’t necessarily signal a lack of confidence, but instead a lack of discipline. Or maybe a lack of clear expectations on the part of the adult. Or maybe (gasp!) a lack of consequences.
THE PENDULUM SWINGS

Of course, keeping with education tradition, schools didn’t just recognize the error of their ways. They overcompensated. The pendulum swung w-a-a-a-ay to the other side. Today, instead of making excuses and indulging kids’ errors in judgment, we have embraced the equally ridiculous idea of “zero tolerance.” Today the operative concept in education isn’t self-esteem, but assessment—a test for everything.

And not long ago kids got ribbons just for running around the soccer field in the summer or remembering their lunch money for a week or learning their five weekly vocabulary words. Now we test them in every class, at every level, in every subject. Kids can forget about ribbons for participation. Either they can pass the test or they can’t.

What happens to a child’s self-esteem when a low test score lands her in third grade for a second time? Or when a 10-year-old with the ability of a preschooler is forced, because the state mandates it, to sit for a 2-hour test? Or when a high school student with superior computer programming skills can’t pass the required foreign language test? Self-esteem is no longer the major concern. Test scores are. No Child Left Untested.

As for zero tolerance, of course no child should bring a weapon to school, and the consequences must be serious. But is a spork a weapon? Are toy soldiers with plastic guns a weapon? And I agree with a zero tolerance for drugs in school, but aspirin?

Wouldn’t a little thoughtful moderation be nice for a change?

High-stakes testing makes parents nervous for their children, and rightfully so. All parents want their children to be successful, and not just so Dad’s car can sport a bumper sticker proclaiming, “My child is on the Supreme Deluxe Honor Roll,” as if his kid were some kind of taco. Parents want their children to have friends, to get good grades, and to like school. It may not always seem that way to the teacher, but parents really do want their children to have a positive attitude toward teachers and toward learning.
THERE ARE VARIABLES IN EDUCATION, AND THERE ARE CONSTANTS

One thing that hasn’t changed in all of the history of parents is that kids do better when there is mutual support and respect between home and school. Hot-button issues in education come and go, but a strong connection between home and school remains one of the most reliable indicators of a child’s potential for success. In developing strategies to work with parents, it is crucial that teachers never forget this important idea—that when teachers and parents work together, the child benefits.

*When teachers and parents work together, the child benefits.*
Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, Pinocchio’s Mom insists that her child doesn’t lie. It is hard to tell whether she actually believes this or is foolish enough to think that others will actually believe it. She makes a teacher want to jump up and scream, “Liar, liar, pants on fire!”

There are more professional ways of handling this, however. Pinocchio (or Pinoccia) is usually well aware that his mother will believe whatever he says. He is also often smart enough to take advantage of her readiness to defend him. If he gets in trouble in school, he understands that his best course of action is to get to his mother before the teacher does and spin his version of what happened.

**Mom:** *(on phone)* Pinocchio came home today and said that a boy in his class tripped him on the playground. He says you saw it and didn’t do anything about it. He has a red mark on his forehead.

**Teacher:** That’s not exactly what happened.
Mom: Pinocchio said the boy hit him, too. And you didn’t do anything about it.
Teacher: As I said, that’s not exactly what happened.
Mom: Are you calling my son a liar?
Teacher: I’m not calling anyone a liar. But what happened was that Pinocchio pushed Anthony off the swing.
Mom: That’s not what Pinocchio said. And I know my son doesn’t lie.

We all know where this is going—around and around and around. Pinocchio’s Mom would much rather focus on what the teacher did or didn’t do than on what her child did or didn’t do. The teacher needs to help the parent refocus on the child’s behavior.

Mom: Pinocchio came home today and said that a boy in his class tripped him on the playground. He says you saw it and didn’t do anything about it. He has a red mark on his forehead.
Teacher: Well, we all know what a little liar your son is.

Ha ha! Just a little joke there. The teacher may want to say that, but of course she wouldn’t unless she plans on leaving at the end of the year. Or sooner.

Here’s another possibility:
Mom: Pinocchio came home today and said that a boy in his class tripped him on the playground. He says you saw it and didn’t do anything about it. He has a red mark on his forehead.
Teacher: Yup, that’s me. I let them do whatever they want.

Gotcha again! Remember that the first rule when dealing with irate parents is, “No sarcasm!” (It should also be parents’ first rule in dealing with teachers, of course.) Got that? No sarcasm!

Here’s a more productive way of handling the conversation:
Mom: Pinocchio came home today and said that a boy in his class tripped him on the playground. He says you saw it and didn’t do anything about it. He has a red mark on his forehead.
Teacher: Did he give you any more specifics?
Mom: No, just that the boy tripped him.
Teacher: Did he say which boy?
Mom: (shouting to Pinocchio) Pin! She wants to know which kid tripped you . . . (to the teacher) . . . Anthony. He says a kid named Anthony tripped him.
Teacher: And when was this?
Mom: After lunch. Today.
Teacher: And he says I saw it?
Mom: Yes. And you didn’t do anything.
Teacher: Did he tell you where on the playground this happened?
Mom: (to Pinocchio) She wants to know where it happened. (to the teacher) He doesn’t remember.
Teacher: Well, we had a small incident on the playground today when Pinocchio pushed Anthony off the swing, I did see that.
Mom: (a little doubtful) That’s not the way he tells it.
Teacher: Well, you may want to ask him about that. And I’ll be happy to talk to him about it tomorrow.

Focus on specifics: who, what, when, where, and how. Even the most gullible parent does not want to be made to look like a fool. Refuse to be sucked into a debate about who is telling the truth. It isn’t about who’s lying, the teacher or the student, but about what actually happened.

Let’s try another example:
Mom: Pinocchio says you gave her a zero for her research paper.
Teacher: She didn’t hand anything in.
Mom: Pinocchio says she left it on your desk when you were out of the room.
Teacher: I didn’t find a paper on my desk.
Mom: Are you saying my daughter is lying?

Okay, what’s the teacher’s next response?
a. Yup, like a rug.
b. Lying? Just look at her nose!
c. When exactly did she say she left it on my desk?

Refuse to be sucked into a debate about who is telling the truth.
You’re right. *Think* the first two, but *say* the third. Also keep in the back of your mind that, despite evidence to the contrary, you could be wrong. Try to keep an open mind and follow up with questions like these:

- What was the title of her paper?
- Did it have a cover?
- Why didn’t she hand it in when I collected the rest of the papers?
- Why didn’t she tell me she left it on the desk?

If this is the first time Pinocchia has tried this trick, or if there is even the slightest possibility in your own mind that she could be telling the truth, you will probably end up accepting a late paper. Raise enough questions, though, so that there is significant doubt in the parent’s mind that Pinocchia actually did what she claimed she did. You also need to make it clear that this is a one-time ploy for Pinocchia. Use the magnanimous approach:

**Teacher:** I suppose it’s possible that a paper could have been left in the room, but I just don’t know how that could have happened. However, what I will do is allow Pinocchia until Friday to turn in another copy.

Some teachers may think that this response is caving in and “letting the kid get away with it.” Well, maybe. But it’s important to keep your eye on the prize: Pinocchia still has to do the assignment. She also knows not to try this trick with you again.

In my experience, there is a greater likelihood of a positive outcome in conversations with Pinocchia’s mom if the student is present. If she is, I recommend that you talk directly to the student. I have a theory that it’s easier for a student to lie to her mother than to you.

**Pinocchia’s Mom:** My daughter said you wouldn’t help her after school.
**Teacher:** *(directly to student)* I said I wouldn’t help you?
**Pinocchia:** You said you didn’t have time.
**Teacher:** *(to the student)* When was that?
**Pinocchia:** Last Tuesday.
**Teacher:** Oh, I remember. I told you we had a faculty meeting.
**Pinocchia:** *(silence)*
**Teacher:** Do you remember I said I’d help you the next day?
**Pinocchia:** No.
**Teacher:** You don’t remember that I said to come by on Wednesday?
**Pinocchia:** (silence)

**Teacher:** (to the parent) I always offer extra help sessions on Wednesdays.

**Mom:** Pinocchia, is that right? Were you supposed to go on Wednesday?

**Pinocchia:** Maybe . . .

On occasion, Pinocchia will have already gotten herself in so deep with her mother that there is no way she can retreat. Kids often start out with a small lie and then for one reason or another—most likely just poor judgment—dig themselves a hole and can’t find a way out.

**Mom:** Pinocchia said she didn’t know she was failing.

**Teacher:** (to Pinocchia) You and I talked about this last week.

**Pinocchia:** You didn’t say I was failing.

**Teacher:** I told you that you had a 52 average.

**Pinocchia:** But you didn’t say I was failing.

**Mom:** I just think that you weren’t very clear to Pinocchia.

At this point the teacher will want to say, “What do you think 52 means? That you’re on the honor roll?” Instead, she will understand that Pinocchia is in over her, ah, nose.

**Teacher:** Well, then let’s be clear now. You’re failing math because you don’t do your homework. You’re a smart girl, but you don’t do the work.

**Mom:** Pinocchia, is that right? You’re not doing the work?

**Pinocchia:** Well, I do some of it.

**Teacher:** Some of it isn’t good enough. You need to do all of it. Now, how about coming in after school on Wednesday?

**Mom:** She’ll be there.

With younger children, it still helps if the child is present, but you have to be careful not to look like a bully:

**Mom:** Pinocchio says you said he cheated on the spelling test. Pinocchio would never cheat.

**Teacher:** Pinocchio, tell your mother what happened on the test.

**Pinocchio:** I already told her.

**Mom:** He said he was just asking for a tissue.
Teacher: Is that right? Is that what happened?
Mom: He has allergies.
Teacher: There are tissues on my desk. Pinocchio, you know that, right?
Pinocchio: (He nods.)
Teacher: So you don’t have to ask anyone for anything during a test, right?
Pinocchio: (He nods.)
Teacher: So how about if you study, and we take the test again tomorrow?
Mom: It doesn’t seem fair, but okay.

Watch for signs that the parent or student is allowing your point.

This technique is something I call, “delivering the message.” Sometimes teachers make the mistake of believing that they have to get a complete confession out of a student. They seem to think it’s not over until Pinocchio screams, “Okay! Okay! You got me, copper! I lied! I cheated!” Then he’s cuffed and led away.

There’s no need for all of this drama nor for students to be completely humiliated when they make the kinds of mistakes all youngsters make. (Of course, I’m talking here of errors in youthful judgment, not the serious kinds of mistakes that end up with kids being suspended from school or worse.) When you focus on delivering the message, all you need is acknowledgment that the message has been received. For example, in the previous conversation Pinocchio tacitly admitted his error with a nod, and the teacher let it go. She avoided putting the child in a place where he had no choice but to continue to lie to save face.

Here’s another example:
Mom: Pinocchio said she didn’t know the project was due Friday.
Teacher: Pinocchio, were you here on Monday?
Pinocchio: Yeah.
Teacher: That’s the day I went over the assignment.
Pinocchio: I don’t remember.
Mom: Five days doesn’t seem like a very long time for the assignment.
Teacher: Well, I have to tell you that most students got it done.
**Pinocchia**: I didn’t hear you.

**Teacher**: So what do you need to get the project finished?

Watch for signs that the parent or student is allowing your point. When Pinocchia says, “I didn’t hear you,” in the previous example, the teacher moves on to resolution. Pinocchia doesn’t dispute what the teacher says, and, in actuality, subtly accepts some of the blame. The teacher doesn’t have to add, “As usual, you weren’t paying attention,” or, “Everyone else seemed to hear it,” or, “Maybe you were talking instead of listening,” or any of the other things that teachers have been saying to kids for 100 years or so, with the same dull effect. None of those observations will help and will only push Pinocchia and her mother further away.

The teacher simply makes sure her message is delivered and understood: “The assignment was clear and you, Pinocchia, didn’t do it.” There is a much greater chance of amicable resolution to a problem if the teacher can recognize when the message has been received and leave it at that. Remember, you should be looking for changes in behavior, not punitive damages.

Of course, there are serious situations that do require the student to admit to wrongdoing—fighting, bullying, harassment, and so on. Delivering the message is a technique for garden-variety misunderstandings. However, any time a student’s lie impugns your professionalism, ethics, intelligence, or morals, you have the obligation and the right to defend yourself.

One other thing: You only deliver the message once. If a student does the same thing a second time, all bets are off.

**Mom**: *(a month later)* Pinocchia didn’t know that the test was Friday.

**Teacher**: Pinocchia, how did it happen that you didn’t know?

**Pinocchia**: I don’t know. I just didn’t.

**Teacher**: I announced it in class and it was written on the board.

**Pinocchia**: I didn’t see it.

**Mom**: Is there some way she can retake the test?

**Teacher**: I’m sorry. She will have other opportunities to improve her grade. As you know, we’ve dealt with this issue before. Pinocchia needs to write down her assignments. Maybe you could check at home to see if she does that.

**Sometimes teachers make the mistake of believing that they have to get a complete confession out of a student.**

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Here are a few points to keep in mind when dealing with Pinocchio’s Mom:

- Keep focused on specifics: who, what, when, where, how. Don’t allow charges to go unquestioned.
- Have your own data clear and handy. If it’s a problem of assignments not being completed, know what was assigned and when. If it’s a question of a grade, have ready the rubric you used or a copy of the test. Although there are times when a teacher can be completely caught off guard by a parental complaint, most teachers have a pretty good idea of what an issue is going to be when a concerned parent calls.
- If the student is present, talk to him or her directly in front of the parent. The older the student, the more direct you can be. With young children, it doesn’t take much for the teacher to look like a bully. With older students, you can exert a little more pressure, but you’ll want to be sure that your goal is fact-finding, not defending yourself.
- Refuse to be sucked in to a confrontation over the child’s truthfulness. If the parent asks an inflammatory question like, “Are you calling my child a liar?” ignore the challenge. Instead, focus your response on the issue: “We’re trying to find out what exactly happened here.”
- Remember that you can “deliver the message” without getting a full confession and still get the results you want.

Pinocchio’s mom will rarely admit that her child, like most, sometimes lies. She doesn’t know that for kids it’s a survival skill, not necessarily a character flaw at this point. Nearly all of them will grow out of it. Those who don’t will have bright political futures.

Refuse to be sucked in to a confrontation over the child’s truthfulness.