

WORST-CASE SCENARIO®

HOW TO SURVIVE A MEETING WITH THE PRINCIPAL

1

Dress appropriately.

Dress neatly and conservatively: a dark suit and solid or wide-striped tie for men, a dark suit or a dark skirt and neutral color blouse for women. Shoes should be clean, with laces tied. The principal is likely to make judgments about your parenting skills (and your child's behavior) based on your appearance.

2

Use proper salutations.

If you know you are in the right, call the principal "Principal" followed by her last name. Using the title will appear to show respect; you are not challenging her authority, you just happen to be in the right. If you are in the wrong, do not mention the title when addressing her. Call her "Miss" or "Ms.," which levels the playing field.

3

Observe the principal's reaction to meeting you.

If the principal comes around her desk and sits near you, this is a sign that the meeting is not likely to be confrontational. If the principal takes her place behind a desk, suggest moving the meeting to a more "comfortable" site, away from her home turf, such as a faculty break room, cafeteria, or a nearby coffee shop.

4 Mirror the principal's body language.

If the principal leans to the right and cocks her head to the right, lean left and cock your head to the left. Mirroring nonverbal behavior—also called matching and pacing—is an effective way to put another person at ease and make them more amenable to suggestion. Avoid crossing your arms, which connotes defensiveness.

5 Keep your story short and to the point.

The principal may try to interview you and your child separately, turning one against the other. Confer with your child before the meeting to get his side of the case. Make sure your claims and excuses are consistent and brief. The longer the justification or explanation, the more guilty you seem, and the more likely you are to contradict yourself or your child.

6 Take notes.

Make sure the principal notices you are keeping a written record of the conversation. This conveys that you are a serious and conscientious person. Do not tape-record the meeting, however, since the machine will create a barrier, defensiveness, and formality, at the same time that it implies you will lose and need the tape later.

7 Ask open-ended questions.

Questions that begin with words like “what,” “how,” “why,” “could,” and “would” encourage the principal to offer longer, more expository answers, which serve to give you more information about the situation. Avoid asking questions prefaced with words like “do,” “did,”

“is,” and “are,” which encourage shorter answers, and call for conclusions that might put you on the defensive.

8 When you get the answer you want, move on.

If the principal agrees with you on a point, don't rehash it or continue down the same path; switch to a new topic. Later, you can use any information gained to your advantage: “But didn't you say a few minutes ago that she's an excellent student?”

9 Concede meaningless points.

Do not admit to anything major, but make the principal think you are on her side by agreeing to tangential arguments. Say, “Yes, you are right, my son is bigger and stronger than most of the other children in his class.”

10 Create the impression you're all on the same side.

Do not make the meeting seem adversarial: You, your child, and the principal are trying to solve a common problem. If necessary, create understanding and a shared-problem bond with the principal and distance yourself from your child, or from children in general. (“Kids will be kids.”) If the principal has a rapport with you and trusts you to supervise your child, your child is more likely to get off easy.

Be Aware

Even if you feel your child has been wrongfully accused, fighting the principal may be a losing battle—and you don't want to make things worse. Besides, it's your child who will face the consequences, not you.