

PINOCCHIO'S MOM

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 Pinocchia) 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?

The “broken record” technique—repeating the same thing in different ways and staying on message—isn’t new, but is still effective. It requires self-discipline. The teacher must refuse to be drawn into battle over whether or not the student has been singled out.

Here’s another example:

Teacher: We can’t tolerate Brian’s use of the *F* word.

Parent: He’s not the only one who swears.

Teacher: His language isn’t appropriate for school.

Parent: Other kids swear.

Teacher: He will not be allowed to use language like that in my classroom.

Parent: What about all the other kids?

Teacher: I don’t want any kids swearing in my classroom, and that includes Brian.

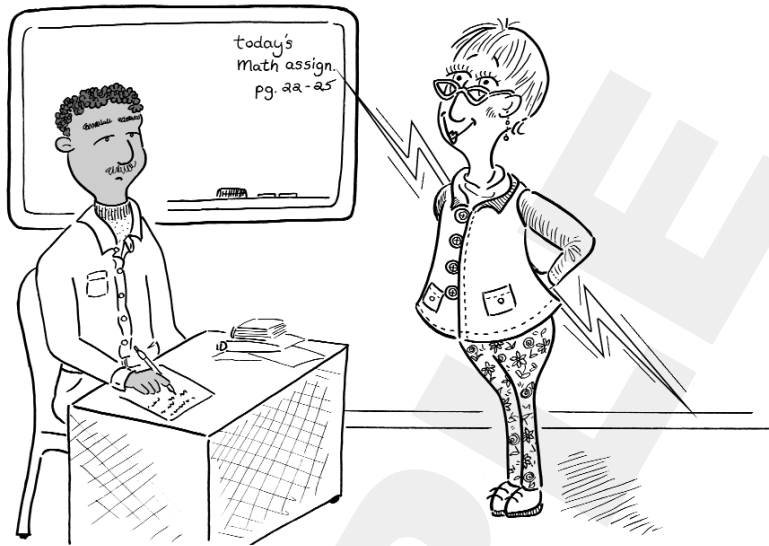
I have to admit that some parents have a point when they wonder whether a school rule is being applied equally to all students. What they don’t understand is that it is tough, if not impossible, to catch every dress code violation or to discipline every student who uses foul language. Also, like it or not, some kids develop a track record that makes them more likely than others to be cited for yet another violation.

That being said, teachers need to be vigilant about applying the rules as equitably as possible. However, let’s face it: even the most “objective” rules are open to interpretation. Here’s another version of the conversation between Amanda’s mother and the teacher:

Parent: I understand you told Amanda that she couldn’t wear her T-shirt to school again.

Teacher: Yes, that’s true. Our school dress code says that students may not wear T-shirts with messages or pictures that are suggestive or offensive.

Teachers need to be vigilant about applying the rules as equitably as possible.



THE STEALTH ZAPPER

Unlike the Intimidator, who lets you know exactly where he stands and what he wants, the Stealth Zapper gently implies that you (or maybe a colleague) aren't quite up to snuff. Her comments and criticisms fly so low under the radar that you may not realize you have been zapped until you stop to consider what she has said. She may appear innocent, but her words and actions can sting.

The Stealth Zapper can appear to be a big supporter of the school, but only if it enhances her child's opportunities. She works hard to ingratiate herself with teachers if she thinks it might give her child an advantage. For example, if her child tries out for the musical, she will volunteer to be the accompanist for auditions. If her child gets a big part, look for this parent behind the scenes building sets, making costumes, and selling tickets at the door. If her child gets a smaller part, she will still be there, but she will probably be pointing out the director's mistakes at every opportunity. Conversations are likely to go something like this:

Stealth Zapper: It's too bad that Marion is so much taller than Harold Hill. It's kind of hard to believe they're a couple.

THE STEALTH ZAPPER

Teacher: *(thinking)* This is an eighth grade production of *The Music Man*. All the girls are taller than the boys! *(aloud)* Marion has the strongest voice in the class.

Stealth Zapper: I don't think you gave Brooklyn a chance to show you what she can really do.

Teacher: We listened to all the students sing at auditions.

Stealth Zapper: Yes, but I think you were talking to someone during her audition.

Generally, the best approach with the Stealth Zapper is to deal with her directly, hold your ground, and be polite.

Unlike the Intimidator, who puts an issue right on the table (or right in the teacher's face), the Stealth Zapper obliquely criticizes what the teacher has done and is more subtle in asking for what she wants. Here's another example of how she can catch a teacher off guard:

Stealth Zapper: Marjorie was so disappointed when you gave her a C- on her project.

Teacher: *(thinking)* What's the right answer to that? That's what she deserved? I'm sorry to disappoint her? She should have worked harder and gotten it in on time? And I didn't "give" her anything! *(aloud)* I'm sorry to hear that.

Stealth Zapper: She really didn't understand the directions. They weren't very clear.

Teacher: *(thinking)* We only went over them a million times! *(aloud)* I'm sorry to hear that.

Generally, the best approach with the Stealth Zapper is to deal with her directly, hold your ground, and be polite. Here's a better approach:

Stealth Zapper: Marjorie was really disappointed when you gave her a C- on her project.