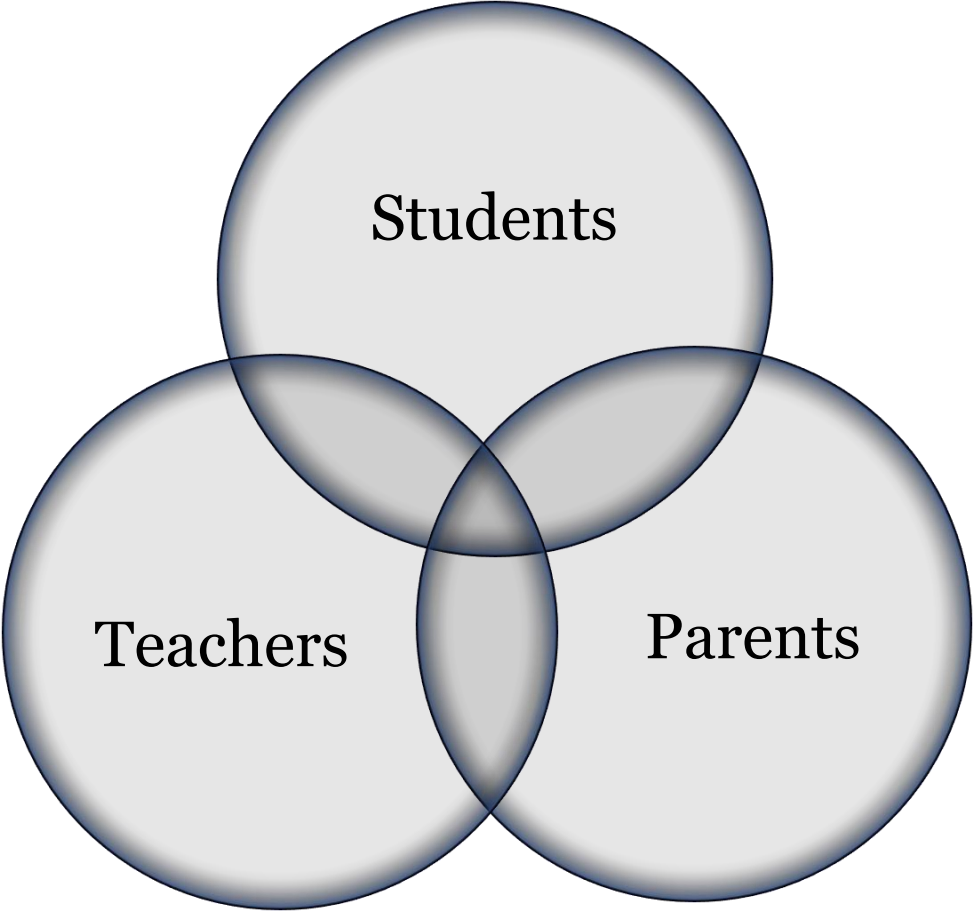


# Effective Communication with Difficult Parents For Teachers

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Hong Kong Children & Youth Services  
5 November 2018



# Mental health status of teachers

- More than eight in 10 teachers admitted they face considerable or extreme pressure at work.
- Nearly 30 % of the teachers have medium or worse depression symptoms, and some of them even had once thought about hurting themselves.

(The Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union and the Hong Kong Psychological Society, 2018)

# Survey interviewing 500 teachers

- 93% discussed work with their colleagues outside school hours via instant messaging tools (*WhatsApp, WeChat & Facebook*)
- 51% answered parents' enquiries on these platforms
- 48% answered pupils' questions relating to their studies
- 27% even counselled their students

(The Federation of Education Workers, 2017)

- 72% of teachers believed such interactions improved the flow of information, **but...**
- 67% felt the messages had affected their private life
- 61% said the after-work communications had intensified their job pressure

(The Federation of Education Workers Jan2017)

# Current Educational Context

- School life is more than books & examinations.
- Teaching is not the only duty for teachers.
- School is accountable to multiple stakeholders in the current setting.

# Multiple stakeholders in school setting

School  
organization

Government

School Personnel

Teachers

Students

Alumni

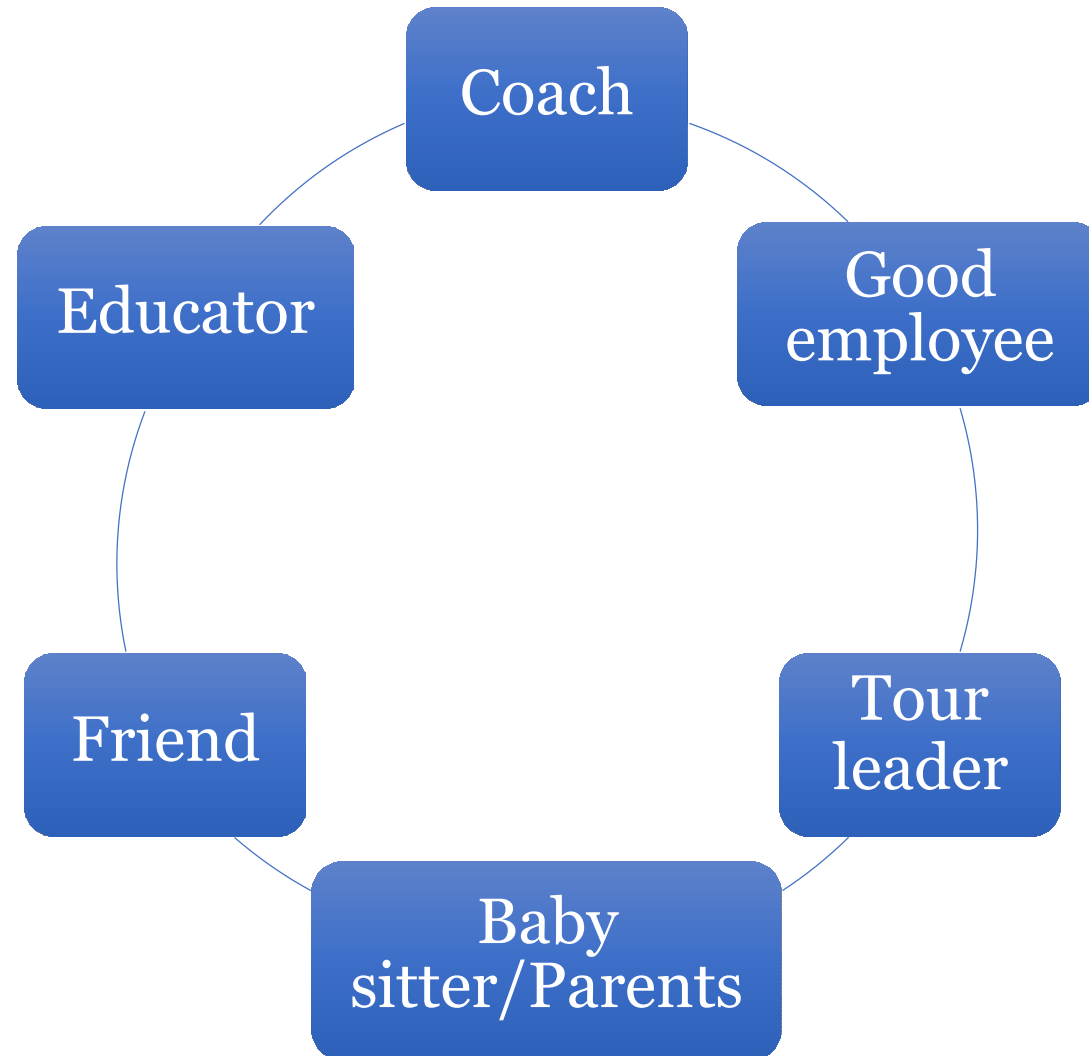
Parents

# Teacher-parent relationship

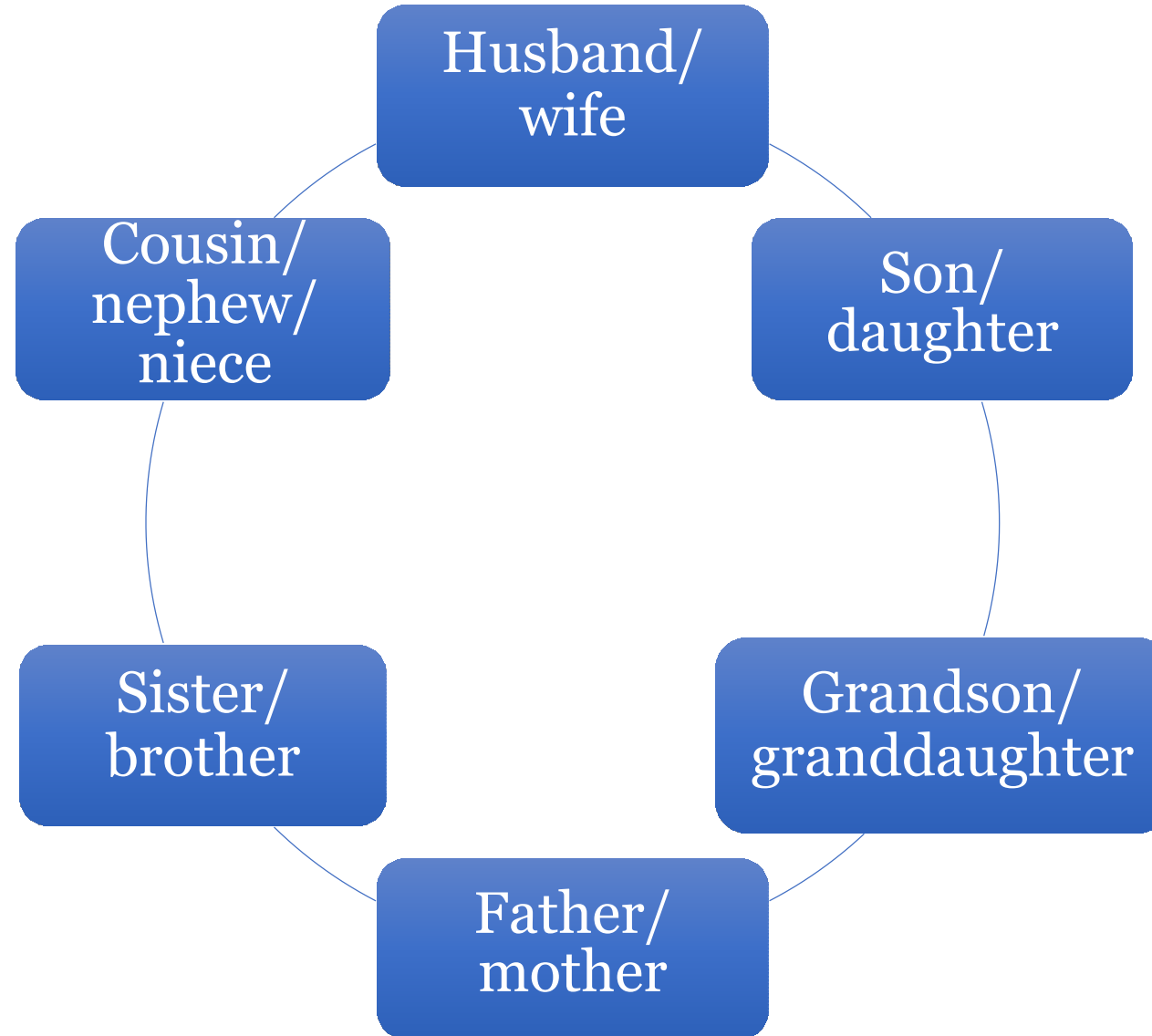
- Parents are increasingly playing a significant role in the trend of home-school co-operation.
- One of the prevailing challenges teachers face is working with parents.



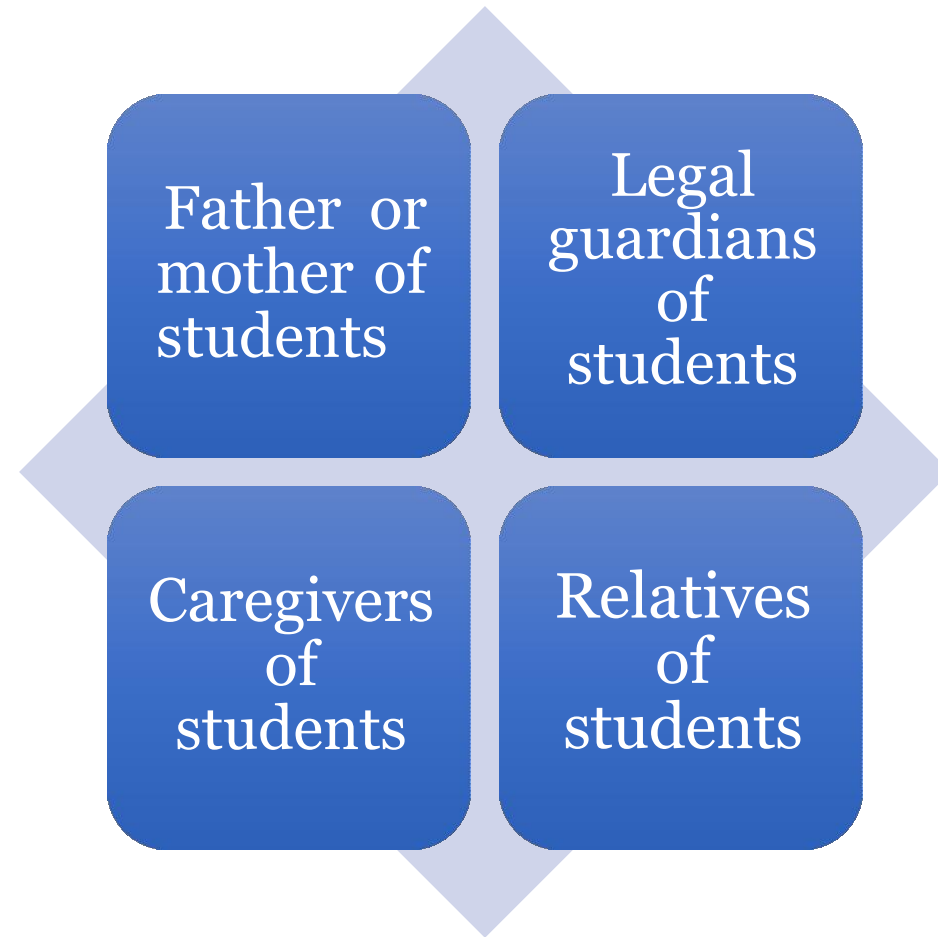
# Roles of teachers (School context)



# Roles of teachers (Familial context)



# Roles of parents (School context)



# Roles of parents

## Familial context

Father /  
mother

Husband /  
wife

Son /  
daughter

Grandson /  
Granddaughter

Brother /  
sister

Cousin /  
nephew / niece

## Social context

Employee of  
a company

Superior

Subordinate

Member of  
professions

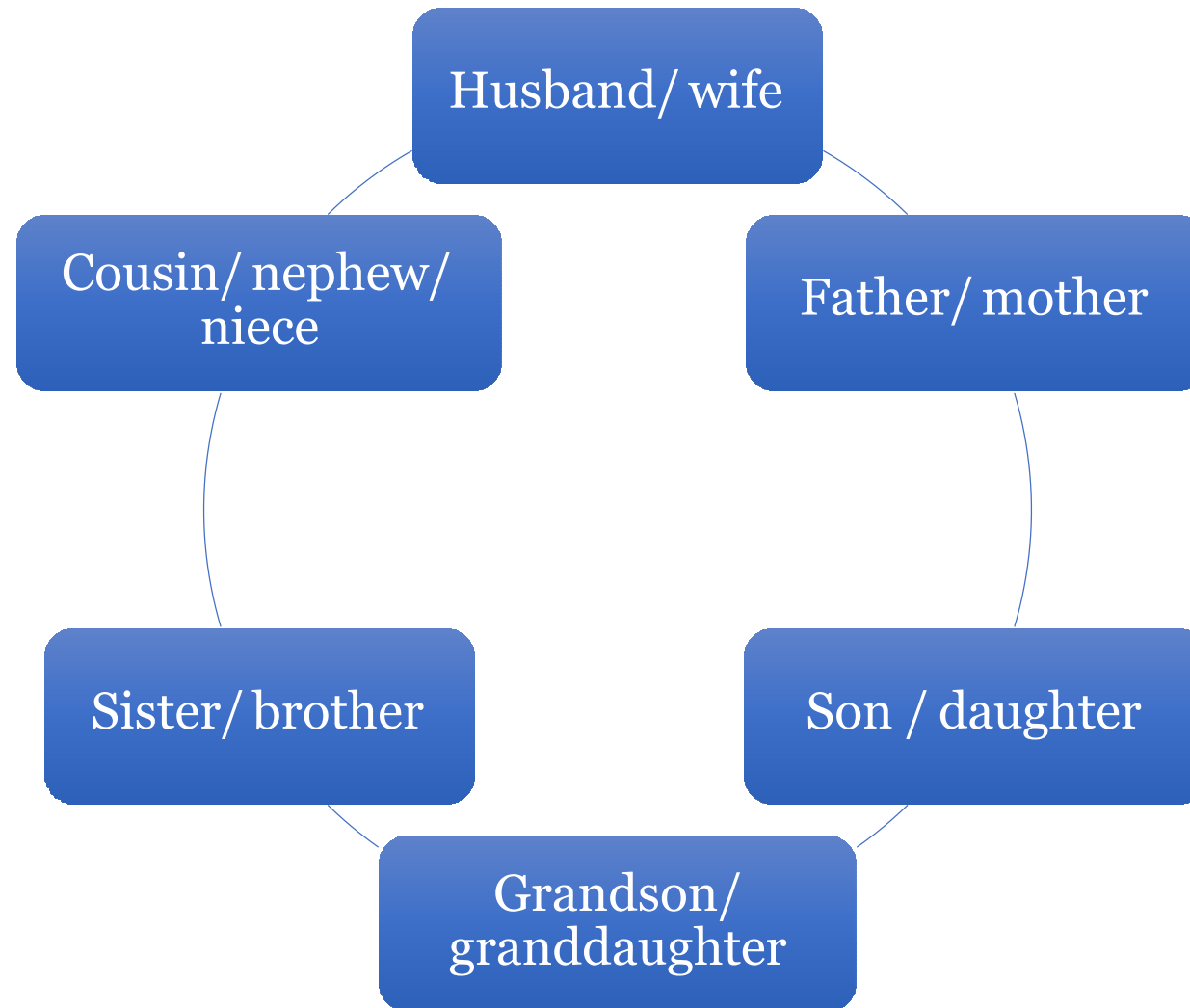
Members of  
social groups

Volunteer of  
community  
groups

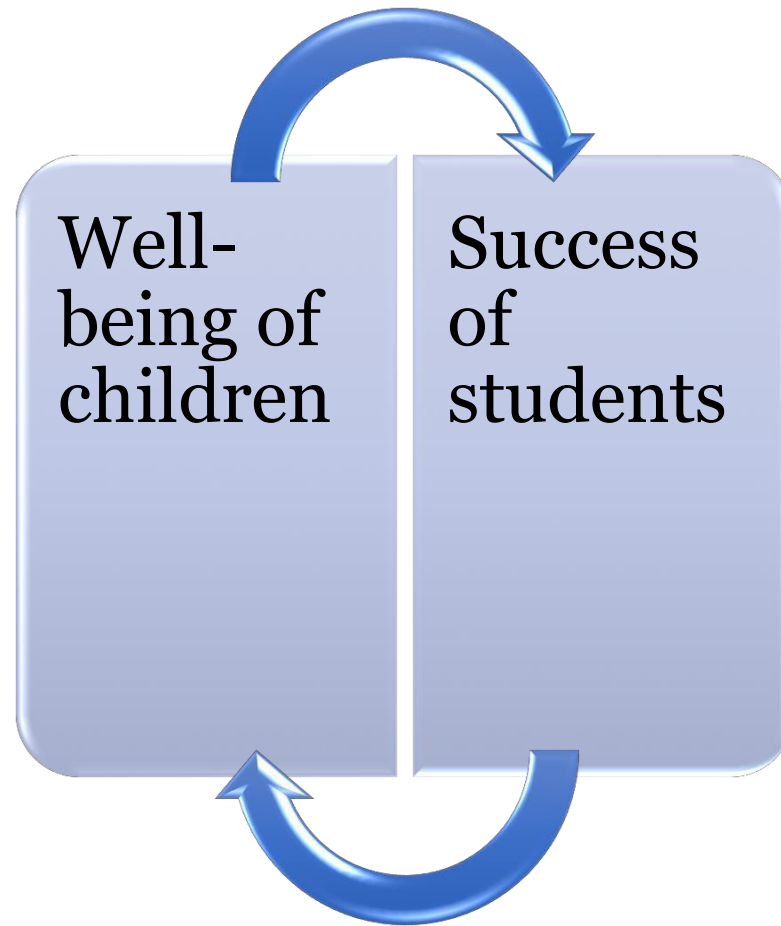
# Common roles & concerns

*Teachers' Familial context*

*Parents' Familial context*



# Common Goal

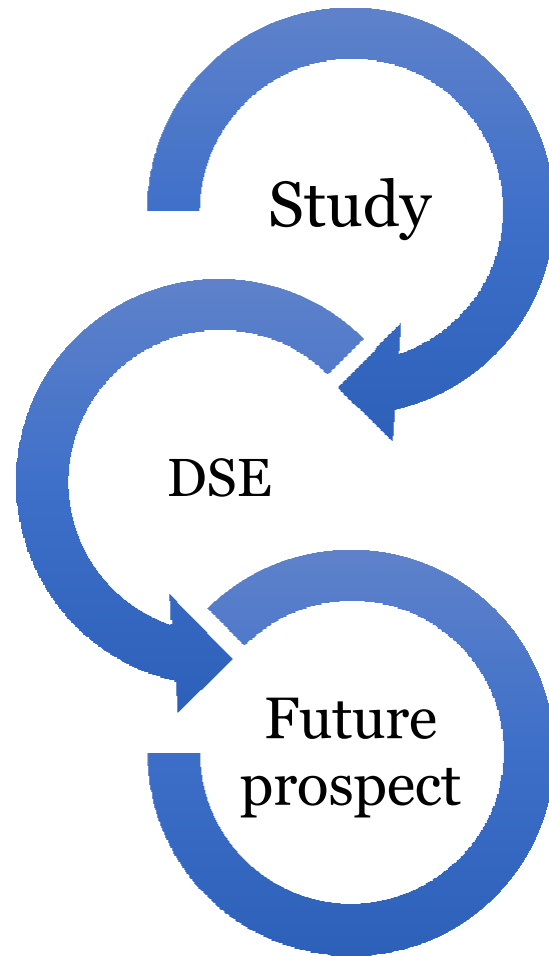


# Mental health status of secondary students

- 51% of 7,500 pupils polled from 21 secondary schools had developed signs of depression
- 25% displayed signs of anxiety
- 4.1% should receive medical treatment

(Baptist Oi Kwan Social Services, 2018)

# The most distressing aspects

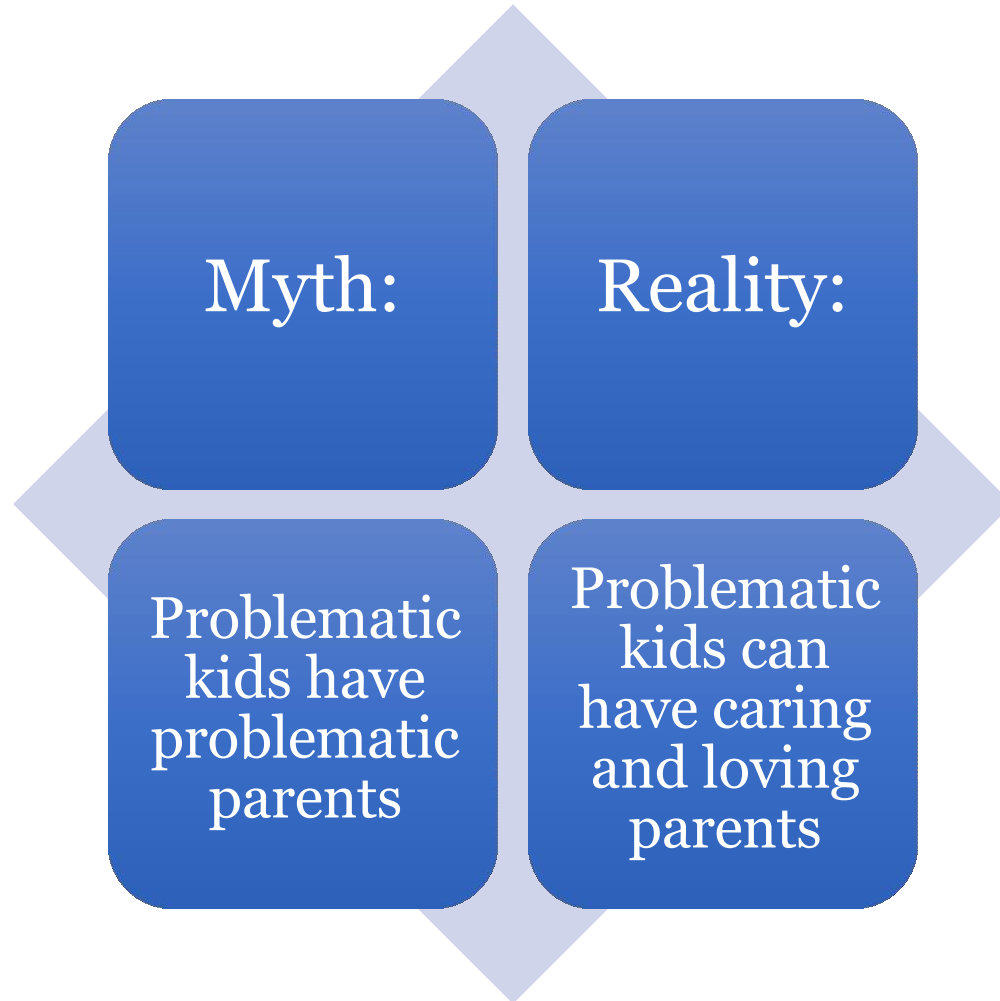




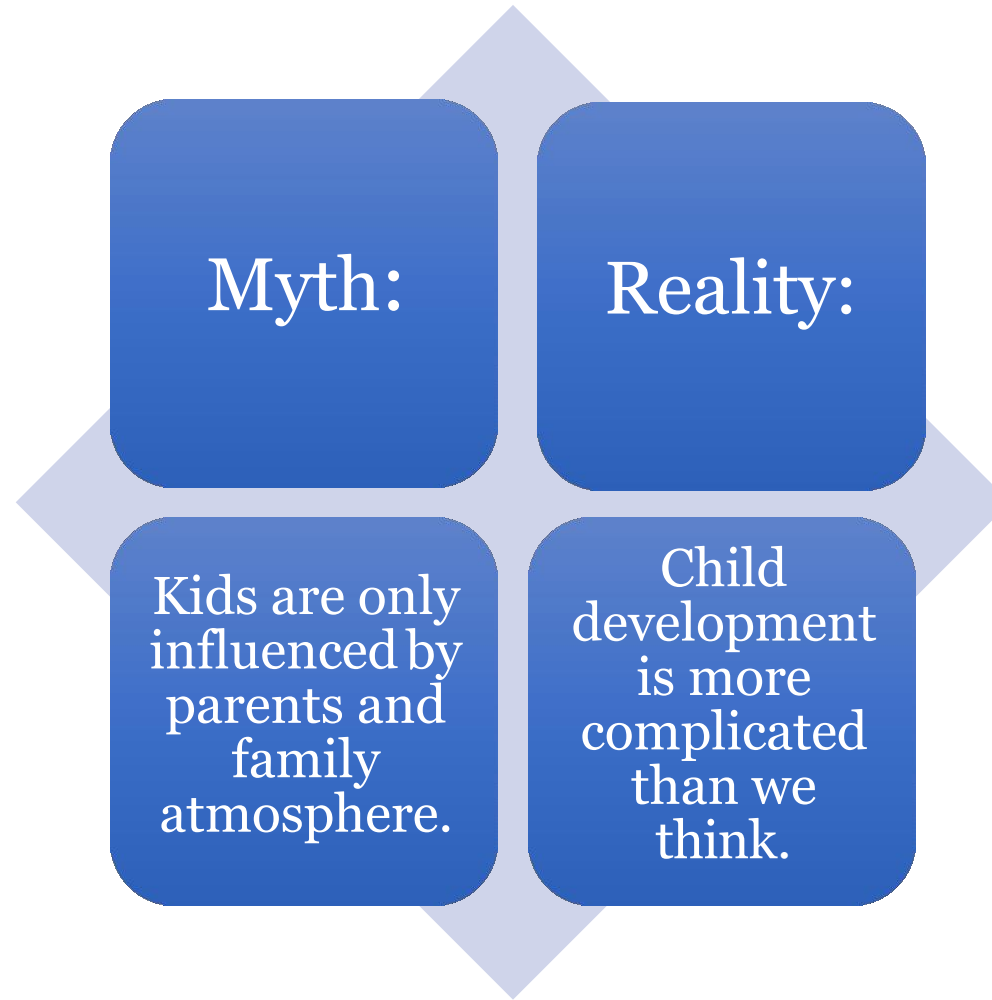
# Challenges of being a good parent

- Parents are more than breadwinners.
- Parents are resource providers for sustaining academic competitiveness.
- Parents are both “bystanders” and “comforters” in children’s ups & downs
- Parents are architectures for children’s life planning.

# Myths & Realities of parenting



# Myths & Realities of parenting



# Myths & Realities of “difficult” parents

## Myth:

- Difficult parents have a static perspective. They are not ready to listen to teachers’ views.

## Reality:

- Difficult parents can be open for dialogue and are ready to listen for the best interests of children.

# Myths & Realities of “difficult” parents

## Myth:

- Difficult parents are unreasonable and uncooperative, and always “protect” their children.

## Reality:

- Difficult parents first receive prior knowledge from children, but they may want to find out the other sides of stories told.

# Myths & Realities of “difficult” parents

## Myth:

- Difficult parents are child-centered and sometimes not rational enough for the truth.

## Reality:

- Difficult parents are concerned with maintaining good parent-child relationship, and want to safeguard children’s future prospect.

# Resistance of “difficult” parents

- Some parents may have underlying presumptions about the school life, roles and responsibilities of teachers.
- Some parents may have their prior experience and encounters with teachers
- Incidents related to their children may trigger a manifestation of unresolved emotions.

# Types of “difficult parents” (a closer look)

- Some parents spontaneously display certain type of behavior related to their character and disposition.
- Some may display a combination of types of behavior related to the specific incidents in the context.



# Absent parents

- Parents are physically absent due to different physical locations, incarceration, loss of contacts or death.
- There are parents who are not responding to teachers' calls and who are hard to be reached.

# Absent parents

- *How to proceed and find out more from the students about the current status of parents?*
- *Are parents overloaded with other responsibilities?*
- *Any significant others?*

# Angry parents

- Parents are easily agitated when teachers discuss the academic and behavioral issues of their children with them.
- Parents put the blames on teachers and insist on the school's responsibilities to teach their children well.

# Angry parents

- *How to help parents understand their unique roles and significant impact on the success of their children?*

# Demanding parents

- Parents are only concerned with the academic performance regardless as to children's capability.
- Parents are critical of the assessment criteria in study and conduct (reluctant to accept a lower grade).
- Parents are either unaware or unacceptable of children's anxiety, frustration and depression.

# Demanding parents

- *How to provide concrete examples of children's current status and potential risks?*
- *How to help parents understand the negative impact of the discrepancy between unrealistic expectation and actual ability?*

# Defensive and offensive parents

- Parents firmly believe the children's story and escalate the action to the School principal or other stakeholders in the school setting.
- Some parents pursue disciplinary actions for respective teachers.

# Defensive and offensive parents

- *Who will be the appropriate person to be the mediator in these scenarios?*
- *Senior staff members, School principal or others?*



Unmasking what is underneath  
is  
the first step  
to build rapport

# Personal Iceberg

## Behavior

Coping

Feelings

Perceptions

Expectations

Yearnings

Self

(Satir, et al., 1991)

# Unmasking the “difficult” parents

Anger

Hurt

Feelings

Fear

Sad

# Unmasking the “difficult” parents

Beliefs

Assumptions

Perceptions

Subjective reality

Mindset

# Unmasking the “difficult” parents

of self

of children

Expectations

of teachers & school

from others

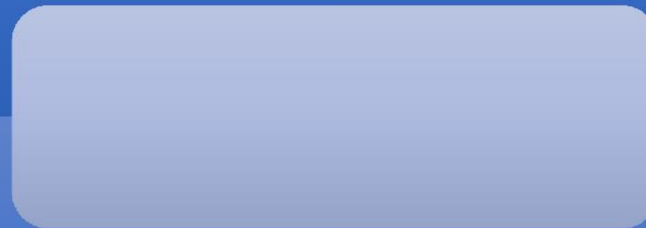
# Unmasking the “difficult” parents

Recognition

Acceptance

Love

Meaning



# Building rapport with “difficult” parents

- Parents can be a source of support for teachers in helping students succeed.
- Parents can also be a nightmare for teachers when the mutual trust breaks down.
- Parents and teachers are in the same team when it comes to helping students achieve.

# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 1. *Communicate from the heart*

- Humans by nature enjoy giving and receiving compassion
- The obstacles that block compassion are:
  - Moralistic judgments
  - Making comparison
  - Denial of responsibilities

(Rosenberg, 2015)



# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 2. *Avoid surprise to parents*

- Timely communication for parents' concerns
- Record of teachers' initiatives

# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 3. *In person contact with a human touch*

- Face to face communication can avoid occurrence of unintentional miscommunication and misunderstanding

# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 4. *Listen empathetically to parents*

- Do not minimize parents' concerns
- Accept parents' feelings, though you may not agree
- Listen to the messages underlying the words

# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 5. *Always look for common grounds*

- Help parents understand and feel your genuine care for their children
- Let parents understand your aspiration to help their children to do better for success

# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 6. *Let someone have your back*

- Seek the support of senior staff and Principal
- Take the proactive role in seeking advice  
(School may not welcome surprise)

# Effective strategies to build rapport

## 7. *Accept limitations despite your best efforts*

- Do not let the undesirable outcomes undermine your commitment and passion as a teacher

# Practice wisdom with “difficult” parents

1. It takes time to change the mindset of difficult parents.  
(One step at a time)
2. It is tempting to “pacify & please” difficult parents but the issues will remain unresolved.  
(It takes courage and wisdom to speak the truth)

# Practice wisdom with “difficult” parents

3. It is not the teachers’ full responsibility for the well-being of students.

(Having done the best is good enough)

4. It needs genuine partnership with parents to come up with the best option for students.

(The option is for the best interests of students)



*Parents don't care  
how much teachers know  
until  
they know  
how much teachers care.*

# Effective Communication among stakeholders prevails in school

- when students find learning a *joyful* experience
- when teachers find teaching a *noble* mission
- when parents find genuine *partnership*

Questions  
&  
Answers