Creating a Professional and Personal Relationship with Challenging Parents,
in partnership with Region 9 Head Start Association
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Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Education at continued.com. My name is Jessica Lewis, and I’m extremely happy to welcome you to today’s session, titled Creating a Professional and Personal Relationship with Challenging Parents in partnership with Region-9 Head Start Association. We are excited to welcome Ronald Mah to share his knowledge and expertise with us. Before we get started, let me tell you a bit about him. Ronald Mah is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. He is the author of several books and eBooks on children’s behavior, empowering children and therapy. He has worked in community mental health programs, severe emotional disturbance school programs, vocational and welfare-to-work programs, Head Start programs, supervised a high school mental health clinic, supervised therapists, and worked in private practice and psychotherapy. His education experiences include 16 years in early childhood education. He was the owner of a childcare center that has elementary and secondary teaching credentials. He’s a college instructor, and was on the board of directors for the California Kindergarten Association. He also previously served on the board of directors of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Welcome everyone, Ronald I’m going to turn it over to you now.

Thank you very much, welcome everybody. This workshop topic is about the challenging parents, because just basically understand is that there are wonderful people that we interact with, wonderful parents especially, and sometimes among those wonderful parents are people with a lot of anxiety, and sometimes they can be actually quite difficult. Sometimes you meet and see the family and your internal sense is like, there’s something going on here, which makes the whole thing very difficult. And as much as we’re professionals, we’re still people and as people we react to the cues that we get and sometimes increase of a fair amount of anxiety and with that then that’s the real challenge. So we have our learning objectives. And then learning objectives is after the course, we’ll be able to identify key characteristics of a professional, personal relationship. That’s very purposeful that I’m saying is calling a professional personal relationship, because is our professional relationship is important, and a personal relationship is also important, ’cause essentially we’re still talking about, we’re doing Human Services. We’re working with people and we’re relating. But to do that we also wanna identify four communication process to connect and to validate. And identify ways that despite sometimes knowing what we should do, to identify ways that professionals might self-sabotage the communication process. So, I’m gonna start off with a story because this not about those wonderful field trip driving, cookie giving, the ones, people who smile at you and say, "How was your weekend? "Your hair looks wonderful, "and how are your kids," and so forth. This like talking and dealing with some people who are more like what I call the thorny man. And thorny man was just one type of person. Now I owned and I ran a preschool and daycare program myself for many years. I directed somebody else’s for many years. And there was a kid, who was a very active kid, who was very challenging. And he had a dad, who I facetiously called thorny man. And one day things got really difficult. But see that the day it got difficult, it wasn’t in isolation. There had been many things going on beforehand. He was the guy that would bring his son to the school, and tell his son, "Put your lunchbox down over there, "put your jacket there. "Mom will pick you up this
afternoon." And he would stop and he would look at all the rest of the school, and the teachers and so forth with this frown on the face. And basically the teachers response kind of like, "Oh my goodness, this a little bit scary." He was not fun. He was thorny, abrasive, and people because of result of that, they didn’t wanna talk with him. They didn’t wanna interact with him. We're human, we like to interact with the people who are friendly, who bring us cookies, who smile at us and so forth. But so they kind of avoided him, and then he would walk out. The thing that’s really important to recognize is someone like that, if someone's gonna cause you problems, it's not gonna be the person who’s open and caring and communicative. It’s gonna be someone like thorny man. A person who is gonna be, who’s already guarded in his own process or her own process and careful, maybe a little bit anxious, maybe a little bit suspicious. So, how do you prepare for that? So what I did was that me being, and some aspect of it was because I was a man, I’m a man too, and that we’re in the this San Francisco Bay Area East Bay, and one day he comes into the school and he’s wearing a black satin San Francisco Giants jacket. The interesting thing is that in our community in the East Bay where we lived, people tend to be more Oakland A’s fans. So, immediately I looked at him and I said, Hey, what you doing wearing San Francisco Giants fan? Essentially the tone of it was, and as child development people you understand that the tone of it was, Hey, I'm inviting you to play. It was a tone of that which is a little bit of mocking tone, a little bit of teasing tone, and maybe some of the characteristically a male style of invitational play, I said, hey, why you wearing a Giants jacket. And immediately he got into it with me, and he goes, "Ah forget the A's, I'm a Giants fan from way back." And then we started talking about the Giants. You know, Willy Mays, and Juan Marichal, Gaylord Perry, and things like that, and it was kind of fun. And we started talking very stereotypically about silly stuff about baseball. The interesting thing about it was that we did it over, and over, and over when he came in. Now often times people would hear that and go, that's so shallow, that’s kinda dumb, especially that guys talk sports all the time.

If you remember that movie with Billy Crystal called "City Slickers", there’s a really wonderful scene where they're sitting around the campfire, and the guys are getting all excited talking about baseball. And Helen Slater who is one of the actresses she played a super girl in one of the movies. She says, "What is this about guys and talking baseball, "that's just you know so silly you guys love baseball, "what’s that all about?" And she didn't get it, and Daniel Stern gave a beautiful eloquent explanation. Daniel Stern, the actor, he's the tall guy in "Home Alone", Joe Pesci and the other guy who gets all beat up by the Macaulay Culkin. But he says: Baseball is different. There was a time when I was a teenager, when I was a teenage boy. And my dad and I because just what happens with a teenage boy as he grows up, we just couldn’t talk anymore, we just couldn’t communicate and we felt, and as painful as it was it was still something that we couldn’t break through. But through that time despite all those difficulties, the adolescent-adult problems and so forth, either one of us could say, "Hey how about them Yankees, "how about them damn Mets, "and we could talk baseball." And maybe it’s just to understand is that if you are somebody who’s more conversant, who is able to connect with people on these deeper emotional levels, this might seem shallow. But
you have to considerate, there is some amount of arrogance and maybe dismissal to say that what somebody has as eager as that might seem to you, is not unimportant it's very, very important. And I connected with him that way. So Thomy Man and I would talk, and every day he would come in I would chat with him, I would tease him a little bit, you know. And one day I was actually outside, and as I was about to walk inside to the building, he pulls up in his truck, and it's a big, big rig truck, and his son climbs down off the truck, and I go, whoa what's going on here? And he says, "Oh yeah this one of the trucks "and sometimes at night when I drop off a load, "I usually bring the rig back to the yard, "but sometimes if it's kinda late I just take it home, "park in the street, and then bring it back afterwards." I said, well that's really cool. He goes, "Yeah I guess so," he goes, "No that's really cool your kid gets a ride in a big rig. "the other kids would really love that. And he goes, "Really?" I go yeah, the kids would just love it. Then he goes, "Really?" I go, no, they absolutely love, they would be so jealous of your son. And then he looks at me he goes, "Bring them out." And next thing you know we have 50 kids lined up on the sidewalk, each taking turn to climb into this gigantic big rig truck, we have the steering wheel and drive, like they pretended they're driving and everything. And every single one of them, I made sure to tell them to say to him, thank you Johnny's dad for letting me drive the truck. And Johnny got to see his father be a hero for the day. So you know this going on and on, and on, and then one day I noticed that he comes in. And he comes in and there he is, and he doesn't see me because I'm on the side. And before he tells his kid put your jacket away, put your lunch box away, mom's gonna pick you up, and instead of looking around with his fierce, frown on his face, he kinda looks down with his open eyes like this. Well what's he looking for?

He's actually looking for me. Because he is a thorny person, because he is abrasive. he probably doesn't have that much intimacy, he does repel people because of his anxieties, his frustrations or fears. So he doesn't have that much human connection. And it might have been that I was a rare person in his day, in his life who bothered to reach through, work my hands through the thorns, and touch the little boy, the little person inside who still wants connection. So that's the background, and the background was, and then awesome one day, I'm coming into the school and he comes up, and he catches me on the sidewalk and he says, "I wanna talk to you." I say, oh-oh, he's angry. And he says, "My kid got bit by a two-year old last week, "and three days, and the other week "some kid three-year old threw sand in his face "and a four-year old punched him "and this after school kid kindergarten knocked him over." And I thinking to myself, a two-year old, three or four-year old, and after-school kid, oh I got it, your kid bugs the crap out of everybody. Well, obviously that's not something that's I should tell him right then and there, especially since he was about six foot five and maybe 280 pounds. But I talk talked to him. And I talked to him in a way that is clear, compassionate but remains professional. Remains professional and remains appropriate. And after 20 minutes of conversation we're walking into the building and he says to me, "Thank you, I really appreciate that you take this time." This comes from building that relationship, building the relationship ahead of time, in anticipating the problems that might come up. Now part of that is to understand from the get-go is that
you know we're talking about them. Them and them, and then you and them. But really, as I mentioned about this man, I called facetiously thorny man, is that there's little boy, a little kid inside every adult. And the things that we know about working with children where actually it can be very powerful in terms of working with adults as well. There is an intellectual cognitive, so called mature things, and professional things we do, but everybody's still a human being, everybody's still has simple needs. So doing this ahead of time to invest in this positive relationship. It's a professional relationship with boundaries, but it's also a personal relationship, because I was at that point, by the time he gets me in the street, I'm not just the guy, I'm not just the director of the school, I'm Ronald, this person who talks, smack with him about baseball and shares with him, and lets him be the hero for the day, because he drives up in a truck. So these things are important. So what are we doing when we're investing? We need to invest, and get things out there. You need to invest, and show your integrity, and your honesty. Parents and families need to trust in your words and actions that you won't try and make things sound good when they aren't, that you have the best interest of the child and the family at heart. And you do that with your sincerity by interacting with them on a regular basis. Because you know, and sometimes that's one of the problems sometimes in the anxiety, the difficulty of working with people, sometimes we're not as honest with them as we should be.

We also need to invest and show parents and families to know that you're for them and you're with them. And that you have a connection and a rapport with who they are and where they come from, and what their challenges are. Now, to do that amongst the things that you need to do is you need to show your confidence and your knowledge. They need to know that you know what you're doing, and that you're doing what you know well. And from that they also need to know that you have experience. That you've done it before, and you can deal with the possibilities. What that means oftentimes is what I call the war stories. Stories about what’s happened, what you’ve done before. So a classic example of that is, you might have a child, who has some separation anxiety. Who has difficulty you know letting their parents go. If you tell the story to the kids, if you tell the story to the parents, these kind of war stories of experience it helps them a great deal. For example, I'll tell them that, when you bring your child in they're leaving and what happens is you're leaving, they're leaving you, and they need to do it in a timely fashion, 'cause you need to get to work, but at the same time it's a transition. So what you can do is when you come in you come in and expect to maybe spend maybe five minutes or so, five minutes to create a transition ritual. What’s that transition ritual? Putting your lunch box down, hang your jacket, going maybe grabbing a book and reading it, sitting the kid down to set them up with a puzzle or a game, connecting them with other kids, or even metaphorically, literally you're handing the kid over to another person to hold because that's the transition. And as they go through the transition they start recognizing, I know where this going. I've been this before, I've done this before. This a type of thing that's really important. So I tell that story, but also tell the story about how kids will have their anxiety, and then calm down afterwards, and other experiences. There's a little boy, this a story that I used to tell right off a kind of fun story. And this little kid Michael, he used to come to
the school, and every day he would have his father go all the way to the back of the school to say hello to the frogs, the frogs that were in the aquarium back there. And his dad who didn't quite understand what was going on, but did understand that Michael needs him to do this. He would walk back to the back room and Michael says, "Say hello to the frogs," and his dad would go, "Hello frogs," and then look back on and says, "Can I go now," and Michael would go, "Yeah, uh-huh it's okay." That was their transition ritual. These are the stories, that show that you have the connection with the anxiety, the difficulty of separation, that you have confidence, you have knowledge, and you also have experience. Now in doing that, and having those conversations what you're also doing is that you're showing that you're available. You need to show you have availability. Parents and families need to know that you're available to them when they have concerns. Now being available to them is more than what people might characterize as an open-door policy. An open-door policy is that, yes I'm approachable, you can come talk to me every time. But also within that is the open door is also a door that is open for you to come out of, and to speak to them. Which means you know that after the weekend, after a day after a holiday you do ask them the social thing of how was your day, how was your weekend, how's your vacation, is anything going on?

But also part of prompting is, is there anything going on that's new or different that's happened that might be important to your kid. You go and give concerns, you show that you're available. One of the things that I think I highly recommend is that when a parent comes to the school to pick up a kid I almost always, what I would try to do is try to think of something that the kids said or did, or relationship, or interaction that happened during the day and right away when the parent comes I say, oh yeah Michael or Suzie did this and made a good friend with somebody. They seem to really like this. Or I tell them something funny that they said and everything else. And in that way I'm reaching out to them, it may seem very perfunctory and minimal, but at the same time it is the availability, I am here, I've been watching your kid, this not just a child parking lot where your kid has been sitting and hanging out for the past several hours, but it's a place where your child's been observed, and interacted with. And important things do happen here, and I wanna let you know about them. One of the things that I instituted at my school something along those ways is, and sometimes people do newsletters, and email and everything else. But in a very simple level sometimes the classic interaction with a child, and a parent, the parent ask the child, so what'd you do today? And the kid goes, nothing, or I played. Well I have each of the teachers with a white board. And on the white board they would write the activities that they did during the group time. So when the parents would come in they'd look up at the white board, and they'd see that oh they did figure paint. And they see that they read Harold and the Purple Crayon. And with that they could actually ask the kids, oh, so did he do finger-painting huh? how was that, was that fun, and show me your finger painting. And it gave him a way to interact with the kids, and it created that link of availability, not only am I available to you as a professional about your child but what we did is available to you knowledge wise. So that can be very helpful. Now all this stuff involves something where it comes down to is that you are creating a personal
relationship, excuse me, I passed that. You’re creating a personal relationship, and it shows that you’re a real person and not just a role. You know, when I chatted and teased throny man about baseball and so forth I was a real person, ’cause baseball wasn’t necessarily relevant to taking care of the kids, but I’m a person who’s like that. Now there’s an aspect of it like I mentioned before tends to be a masculine style of interaction, a masculine style of playing and so forth, but at the same time there are more female styles of it, and then there’s also very other personal styles of interaction, and so forth. But it’s that realness of it all, and that you’re a real person, and you can interact with them based on that realness. At the same time, you know... Excuse me with that. That it’s about professionalism. They also need to know that you’re professional. Now the thing about being professional versus just personal is that oftentimes there’s a question about what should I do? Should I go to the kid’s birthday party? Should my staff be allowed to babysit kids, and so forth. And generally speaking of course insurance companies don’t like that. But the reason why that should be frowned upon, if not outright discouraged, is because what’s primary. The relationship is personal, it can be intimate, but there’s a primary role, a role that involves boundaries. And you treat them fairly, respectfully with integrity within those roles. It’s akin to like my wife and I we have two daughters, and our daughters are young adults now. But all the time growing up we’ve had really great relationships, even now in their thirties, we like to hang out together, we enjoy talking with each other, and we can joke and tell stories with each other and all that. But in that relationship, which is intimate, and friendly, and fun, the main thing that always was important to me, was that what’s my main role with her?

My main role with her, this daughter and that other daughter, was to be their dad, and that’s the primary role. Your role is to be a professional, to be a child development expert, early child education professional, and that’s your primary role. And being personable, being intimate, sharing that way, helps facilitate that. However, if you want these parents to be your best friends, that’s problematic because you need to get your best friends in your other social circle. Now there’s a part of it that in that intimacy people have to deal with issues with boundaries, and then you started getting treated like family. And that’s wonderful but also you gotta remember, it’s like family, you aren’t family. So that means knowing the professional roles, knowing the boundaries, and what you need to do to make them happen. Now expressing all of this, and knowing all of this, the experience, the war stories and so forth, it’s actually about expressing confidence as well. Parents and families need to know that you believe in what you’re doing, and that you know you can do it. Sometimes in the child development field and Human Services people, they try to be humble. They don’t wanna be arrogant, they don’t wanna be narcissistic, grandiose about themselves. But at the same time if you don’t convey a sense of confidence on what you’re doing, it’s how are they gonna feel confident about what you have to say, the recommendations, the feedback that you give them. So conveying that confidence, holding that confidence. How do you develop that confidence, you can develop the confidence by building your experiences, talking to other people, taking classes, doing a lot of different things and when you’re not sure having supervisors, and colleagues work with
you, get confirmation of it. But that confidence is really important ’cause if could come
to the parents with this kind of a mealy-mouthed approach, it doesn’t work very well.
Now, all these things in some ways are very basic, and kind of not controversial per se.
Now the issue is how do you follow through on all that. What’s your ability to follow
through it? Being able to integrate the learning. Avoiding self-sabotage, applying more
adaptive responses, and deepening your self-awareness. Deepening your self-
awareness is really important. That’s my illusion to being humble. It’s a positive thing to
be humble but at the same time just as I’m speaking to you, if I speak to you in this
overtly, overly passive, and humble manner like, I think I have something to say, might,
or want, it's kind of weakening your sense of confidence in me, and then I'm gonna be
hesitant in following through. You probably have seen parents or other peoples, be
very authoritative and appropriate manners with children saying, this what you need to
do, this is important, you need to stop doing that. And then they qualify that with this,
okay, and that subjective okay non-verbally, kind of defeats their confidence, and it
compromises their ability to follow through. Now probably the most important thing
about this kind of an odd statement, which I use this bowl to illustrate. See what
happens is that there's a bowl there, and see that bowl there is, that's a nice ceramic
bowl. It could be a plastic bowl could be a metal bowl, it could be old, it could be new,
it could be cracked or whatever. But essentially a bowl is a container.

A bowl is a container. and the bowl was usually made up of the facts. The fact of the
matter with thorny man for example, was that his kid did have behavior issues. His kid
did aggravate the heck out of a bunch of different kids. However at that particular
moment, as the father presented the facts to me I could have reacted and responded
to the facts but that was worth. Because essentially the facts are like a container like a
bowl, and the container is important not in of itself, but because of what it holds. Of
course you can have a nicer container, or better container but what it holds, and
essentially what I think that’s really important to remember is that the container, the
facts hold an emotional requests. And that emotionally requests is to care. And in the
communication with him I showed him that I cared. Now prior to that interaction which
he caught me out on the sidewalk angry about his kid being hurt at school, I had
already showed him that I cared about him as a human being, I cared about his truck, I
cared about his baseball experiences. I cared about him as a person to play with,
socialize with in an appropriate professional way, but to care. Now the thing about the
facts which is so provocative and so important, is that when someone presents you the
facts, the issues, like for instance that you and your partner, and your partner says to
you, "You're late!", and you disagree with the facts that you weren't late. Or they say,
"You are trying to get away with it." And it wasn't that you were actually trying to get
away with it, it might have been that you were actually just very clumsy. Well, the thing
about it is that when the facts are presented to you, and they are non-controversial,
especially they non-accusatory, it's much, much easier to understand and recognize
the emotional request which is to care. To care that the person's distraught. Because
the man who caught me on the sidewalk, angry about his son, what did he want me to
care about? He wanted me to care that he was worried about his son. He was worried
that he had made a wrong choice about bringing his kid to this school. He was worried

continued
and anxious that he had failed as a parent to protect his child. He was anxious, and he needed essentially for me to care that he was upset. And that’s what I addressed because the facts of the matter I didn’t really address. So I spoke to the care. Now, so when the facts makes sense, someone says, “We had a $1,000 bill for the car “that’s really upsetting.” And that’s the fact, it’s a $1000. The person can say, "Okay that makes sense "and I can do that." The challenge in relationships, and this is beyond what we do in Human Services, beyond what we do in child development education.

The issue is that when the facts don’t make sense, when the facts are impugning, or negative, challenge our integrity or accusatory some how, can you still recognize that the emotional request is there which is to care. Can you stop being defensive, and adjust so you can take care of them. And I’ll prompt you back to being, when you’re with children, maybe your own children experiences with babies. Babies cry, babies cry, and they get upset. They cry ‘cause their diapers are dirty, it’s uncomfortable, they cry because they’re hungry, they can cry ‘cause they’re cold, they cry because there’s a loud noise, and they cry like they’re gonna die. And do you argue with them, hey you’re not gonna die. No, you recognize that the facts as they experienced it in that infantile existential world are not true, they aren’t gonna die, they are gonna be taken care of, things are gonna be okay, they are gonna be cared for. And what do you do, you pick up the child and you care. You do different things, you care give in terms of meeting needs, but you also hold and cuddle and you care. See if that’s what you used to do, when people when they were baby people, you used to do with them, but sometimes as people get older and become adults, we get caught up with the facts.

It’s reasonable to note that some of this orientation can be very male-oriented. Men tend to be drawn to the facts more so, and lose the emotional requests.

And also as you move into your world as a professional, and do more professional work, it may be that you start to also to become as an administrator more fact-oriented. But it’s kind of an odd statement to make, but the same deal that I wanna make to people is that, what’s going on with the other person emotionally is what’s important. And that means a psychosocial, psychological, psycho-emotional diagnosis evaluation, And they often say the facts don’t count. The facts don’t count yet. What the adult is feeling and experience in situation is what matters, just like what the baby’s experiencing, what the kid is feeling. The feeling’s what matters, the facts don’t count yet. And then says yet, because when I got to working with this man about his kid, and his anxiety, and fear about the kid’s behavior, and what’s happening to the kid, and I validated his feelings, his anxiety, his hurt rather than argue the facts which by default seem to argue his feelings. See when you dismiss the facts and you argue the facts what’s implicit is that it seems to say that you’re also dismissing the emotional requests that, I don’t care, which would’ve been really harmful and negative to the relationship. By showing him that I care, which is not admitting guilt, which is not throwing myself with a program under the bus, or my staff under the bus, I validated him. I was a caring, and personal person who is also professional. Then as the facts were basically almost ignored, and the emotional issues were the major consideration, then we start dealing with the other things. So the first thing is, is to connect the cycles of emotional connection validation, which is from their needs. So there’s basically four
simple ways to do it in a sense. And the first is your body language, your nonverbal cues, your facial expression and so forth. So for example, when someone leans forward that indicates interest. If I frown, or if you pull back, or your body is tense that gives disconnected feelings. How do you hold your body? Is it open, is it receptive, what’s your facial expression? And what’s your tone? What’s the tone of your voice? The interesting thing about the gesture and tone aspect of it is that, and a reminder again is that when they were babies, they didn’t understand a thing that you said. So what could you do? What could you do is that you look at them, and you’re gentle expression on your face, your body language, the tone of your voice, and most importantly touch, by touching in a kind way. That’s why picking up a baby is so important and critical to a nurturing process. And in fact those of you who work with young children if you stand over them, tower over them, as you admonish them, as you correct them for behavior and so forth, it’s very intimidating. And if you have a harsh tone and angry tone of voice, you see it’s worse off. However if you hold the child on your lap, or you kneel down next to them, put your arm gently around their shoulders, pat them on the back, and talk to them, initiate touch, the touch is very validating. The touch, the gesture, the tone is very validating. The interesting thing, and we talked about this is a connection, the physical touch is an emotional connection as well. Now, the fourth thing is the validating message which is actually the least important thing, you know, the least important thing. Because I could give you a message that would be otherwise validating, but it doesn’t work if the facial expression, the tone, the touch is not appropriate. Now, backing up a second for as far as touch goes, and this is also in why shaking hands is very appropriate. Interesting metaphor or analogy is that the original message of two men walking up to each other in the forest shaking each other’s hand, is that the two men are often to each other show that they don’t have a weapon in their hand. In other words now we translate that there being respect.

Obviously we always can’t just do touching and everything else, but sometimes a hand shakes can be very appropriate. So now you get to the validating message. You know, the validating message is that I can see that you feel terrible about this. This is not about right or wrong, did or didn’t happen, but validating the emotional content, the emotional experience. If I thought that happened to my child, I certainly be really upset too, Now can you say that with sincerity? Can you say that with honesty? Because again the body language, the tone, can compromise that. These things come first, and these are the most important things in order to communicate. Once you do that, these things are first, and when I said I talked to that guy on the sidewalk before getting in the building, it took about 20 minutes. Because I was insistent on getting to this part, getting this done, making the emotional connection. Because the facts in matter, were not gonna be heard. The facts of the matter was gonna appear as me being defensive, me denying him his feelings, me not caring. So I took the time, and had the patience, and even though it was illogical even from the get-go, ’cause his kid did have some challenges, like there was some behaviors and so forth. But at the same time, what really mattered was that he needed to be honored as an anxious, worried parent. When I did that without compromising the integrity of the school or behavior, then they might say facts don’t count yet, well when you take care of these things first, then they can
start to count. Now once you get to that point, now you can get to the facts, now you get with facts. Now that third step was once you get to the emotional connection, which is I can’t overemphasize that, that is by far the most important thing. You start with a regret phrase, if you disagree with the parent, 'cause they might be saying that the supervision is not bad, or the other kids are being mean, and that's not what you're seeing and so forth. Or that may be in worst case scenario, that you don't like the kids and so forth. You use a phrase unfortunately, the reality is unfortunately, we just don’t have enough time for that. The message is that you wanted to, sometimes they want you to supervise in a way that just doesn’t work for you. Our problem is or challenge is, that would be hard for the teachers if that become the schedule. Hear the messages that although you wanted to, have tried for, they're obstacles. It just as an arbitrary to decide that you don’t care.

So these types of messages are really important, you starting to give them to them. But again after you've made the emotional connection. And then on the other hand sometimes the parent has a legitimate concern. A legitimate concern that or the parent is correct. Then you must acknowledge it, and commit to it yourself. There are people in our society, in our world, who overtly assert that they’re never wrong, or even if they are wrong, overtly assert that the best strategy is to never admit they’re wrong. That’s highly problematic, 'cause that’s insincere, that’s dishonest, and most importantly it’s dismissive. It’s like setting somebody aside, and how can you be connected with somebody, if you’re dismissive. Now, if you’re their boss and you’re the leader in terms of the business sense that have this power and authority, you can get away with that, but you gotta remember, in the child development world, you get to serve them. You get to serve them. They contract agreed to have you work with them, and your obligation is to help meet their needs. You need to do it professionally, but you don’t have this power and domination of that. So commit to it, we should have been on top of that. I’m not pleased with how we handled it, I agree. That’s something I would like us to improve on as well. And maybe there’s a part of that which is as a individual, as a person, do you have the ego strength to own your mistakes? Does the organization as a program have the security in itself to own you know the challenges it has, so they can start working on things to improve. So that’s really important. And then whether or not you agree or disagree, then you must offer what you can do, or willing to do, or going to do, including the alternatives and explain it. The most frustrating thing for all of us in our daily world is that when we run up a conscience against a situation where there maybe is these utilities, banks the organization’s businesses, and basically we get the responses, too bad, you’re stuck. And we feel stymied, we feel blunted, and that creates a frustration and an anger, and it ignites a sense of powerlessness, and the sense of being dismissed and disrespected. So explain what you can do. And it might be limited, it may not be everything, but explain what you can do. We’ll change how we can do that, I’ll make sure teachers understand what you want. A quick example is this father was really overly worried about the kids because they had one bathroom, and the boys and the girls both used it, and he was really concerned about his daughter and so forth. Well, we did have another bathroom, and so what we couldn’t do was you couldn’t ban the other kids from using the main bathroom, when she want to use
it, but what we could do was we were able to let her use this other bathroom. You know, not, the perfect answer but it’s what we could do. And I asked him, what do you think about that? And you know what? He was fine with it. He was fine with it, not because it was such a perfect solution, he was fine with it because we were responsive to him. We cared about his concerns and we adjusted. Whether those concerns are valid I don’t know, I really don’t think so in terms of like, I don’t think it was gonna be difficult, or a problem, traumatizing for the child. But at the same time we heard and respected him. Now with that what you’ve had is that parents brought the problem up. You need to thank them for bringing the problem up. Initially you had made this agreement with them, tell me when they do have concerns. Remember I said the availability thing? Is that you make yourself available but they have to come through the door, and you have to go out, you have to ask. Upfront families, families who are upfront with their issues, or their concerns are so much easier than families who hold in concerns, and get all worked up. People build up anxiety, they build up anger, they build up frustration, and then when it comes out, it comes out in this forceful way that can be very, very, very, very painful. Highly problematic, you do that as well, I do that as well, and that whatever we stew up on we obsess over you know doesn’t necessary come out in a judicial appropriate manner.

Okay now all that I’ve talked about so far, I think it’s really commonsensical, you pretty much you know that. The part of it where I allude to this, and I maybe could add a little bit more to it, is because I am a therapist as well. And this workshop is not gonna be about therapy it might not by doing therapy with you, but the realization that therapy is also speaks to how sometimes there are deeper issues, that cause someone not to do what they need to do. In some sense there’s a difference between counseling, coaching, consulting and some deeper needs or therapeutic issues. Not that you only do it in therapy, but the deep is that counseling, consulting, problem solving, what to do is relatively straightforward. You’re smart people, you have reasonable life experiences but also party life experiences. There may be things that make it hard for you to follow through on that. So what that is about is looking at understanding how you might self-sabotage, how you will mess up what you should do, how you won’t talk to the parent when you should talk to the parent. How you are afraid of an uncomfortable talking with thorny man and so forth. So here are, and we take a little bit more time with that. There’s various typical defensive styles in response to being attacked. And the reason I list these is that, not everybody does all these things, but these are things that are styles, that are common, and I’m prompting you to have this deeper knowledge about self, not about what to do, and not about other people about yourself, is what’s your defensive style. When you are attacked, and that’s something that’s really important to understand, is that when the parents, when some of those parents are really upset, it feels like they’re attacking. It felt like thorny man was attacking, that he was criticizing my supervision, of the entire program. He was supervising the program, he was attacking the quality and the integrity of the teachers, he was attacking the social atmosphere, the other kids and so forth. So it felt like we were being attacked. So what’s your instinct? And this like you speak to yourself, and to what you do. Now, important thing here is not to justify that you do it, just to
understand is this what you do? Is this what you've learned to do? The first thing that people do is they attack back. Well, attacking back would have been me saying to him, well you're the one who needs to supervise your kid better. If your kid had better role models at home, then he wouldn't be doing this at the school. Well, attacking back, well that's not gonna work back, because at that point this an antagonistic oppositional process. Now, some people instead of attacking they get defensive, oh that's not what happened, that would never happen. We don't do that, and becoming defensive. And you already know that when you interact with somebody, and you sense them being defensive, it's very off-putting to you. It doesn't feel good, you don't feel really hurt. Or sometimes people are very placating, I'm really sorry, I'm really sorry. We will never do that. Yeah, we'll do anything we can. Now, I purposely did this with my hands because when you're attacked, you are knocking somebody away. That's not a connection, when somebody's acting seeking connection, seeking validation, seeking for you to care. When you're being defensive, the hand motion is that you're pushing somebody away. When you're placating, you're backing away, which is also not connected. Interesting enough somebody who's placating you, ostensibly they are agreeing with you, and appeasing you but on the other hand it still feels disconnected. Now sometimes people, you know and this pretty relevant to attack for some people, 'cause some of us have experienced high stress, or things have been traumatic. And what happens is that under attack some people disassociate. They go to this other place because it's too scary. Disassociation or a trauma response has to do with, this so scary, this so intense I can't stay here. Since you physically can't leave, people sometimes mentally, emotionally leave, and then kind of disassociate, you know? So and if sometimes you see people kind of glaze over as you're talking to them, or you feel yourself glazing over going to this other place. You kinda hear what's going on, you know there's communication, words but there's no connection.

Now distracting is interesting because distracting as a technique is actually recommended for discipline. I've always found that problematic. 'Cause distracting is, this what's going on for me, like if a kid wants his toy or being frustrated about something, and you distract him with another toy or something else, the problem with that is that, the kid is telling you, I'm upset about this, this is what matters to me, and by distracting then you're saying, well, ignore what you're upset about, and pay attention to that. To me that feels fundamentally disrespectful. And when a parent is upset about something, maybe attacking you if you try to distract him, "Well, but your kid does this great project "and they do have these friends "and they were so good before about that." That's fine but they just gave you their urgency. They just gave you on a platter, their sense of issues anxieties and concerns, and you distracted and started talked about something else. But the reason why this so irrelevant sometimes is that a lot of people grew up with family, parents, teachers who did distracting. Now they're running away, is avoiding. It's like leaving the room, not taking phone calls, avoiding the person when they come in, just trying to avoid the issue or say, oh yeah, talk to my boss, talk to the director. You know, ways to avoid and run away. Now, maybe the most interesting way which is actually seems to be hypothetically a more mature, or skillful way to deal with it, is what I call taking the high ground morally and
intellectually. Men probably have a greater tendency to do this, because of men growing up in a more hierarchical subculture in terms of gender. Administrators probably have more tendency to do this. And taking the high ground means what? Is that you... Basically a stance would be more or less like saying, I can understand how you might feel that way, but you're wrong. You know, 'cause morally you're wrong. Or taking the high ground intellectually is the language of that maybe like, let me explain, or another leaving, you don't understand. What you got to understand about, let me explain, and you don’t understand, is that let me explain implies that the other person's kinda dumb, the other person's intellectually inadequate. Let me explain, you don’t understand, you should understand almost implicitly, you should understand you dummy. And that can be very problematic. 'Cause I’m a relatively smart guy and an intellectual, and so forth, and I'm also male. I have some tendency to do number seven if I'm not careful. Now my other personal experiences have to do with some difficulty, some stressful, traumatic experiences that I had growing up, which is a completely another story, has to do with a teacher, is that I do have a little bit of tendency to disassociate, where I feel like this is too scary, this is too terrifying. The reason that this valuable, is that this not about pathologizing, and blaming yourself but that self-awareness tells you something. See, when I feel myself wanting to take the high ground, morally and intellectually 'cause that’s my defensive style, or I feel myself start to disassociate, as I'm aware of that in a physical, visceral level, I also can be aware of it, and take it to an intellectual level, and say, oh that has to do with this abusive teacher that I had, that has to do with the competition that I felt within certain dynamics, within family or otherwise where people were vying for authority and supremacy all the time, that’s what I do when I’m attacked, that’s my defensive style. With that awareness, with that insight, it’s not about blaming and shaming yourself.

So with that awareness and that insight, then it comes back to, oh I was attacked, this parent is attacking me. And because I was attacked, I may distance myself, and you backtrack, why is this parent attacking me? Why is his parent attacking me? Oh, they’re attacking me because they’re terrified that they have failed to protect their child. They’re terrified, they’re anxious that they might have picked the wrong program for their kid. And possibly at a deeper level, they’re terrified that they have failed to protect their child as they weren’t protected when they were a child. That’s deep, that doesn’t happen all the time, but to whatever degree it does happen, it intensifies things. Because one of the reasons why this intensity is so problematic and so challenging is that, in the bigger scheme of things, it doesn’t seem to make sense to you. As it doesn’t make sense to you because if this ever happen to the kids, this is what happened, that’s just a behavior issue, or a challenge to be dealt with, why is this parent so hot, so angry so animated? And if you reflect upon that, I call it psychological algebra. One plus one plus one doesn’t equal 10. Well, how does one plus one plus one not equal to 10. Or one is that this kid does have some behavior issues, another one is that their discipline and what we do here is relatively consistent, and another one is that these different kids are getting mad at him. That doesn’t equal 10 that we are abusive, and neglectful here as a program. And it doesn’t justify, and it makes sense for the father to be that angry. Well, what’s the X factor? X plus one plus one
plus one, kind of psychological algebra. What’s that X? And that X usually is something really important, which it might be emotional, well it might be psychological, might be from a past issue. It’s not that it’s not logical. It’s not logical given the information you had at hand, but if you incorporate other logic, human logic, developmental logic, logics of stress, logics of trauma, and prior life experiences, then it really does start to make sense. So when you understand that, then now you activate, okay, they’re attacking me, "because of this anxiety, because of this fear. And they’re attacking me, and what do they want? And then you go back to, they gave me the facts inaccurately, they gave me the facts in a problematic way that doesn’t make sense to me. I’m reacting to the facts feeling attacked, but what would we think the facts are a container, what’s in the container? An emotional request, which is to care. An emotional request, which is to care. And that’s when you picked up the baby, that’s when you hold the child, and you give him a little hug, and some reassurances about how they feel, and you create the container for them. A different container, a container of concern, of nurturing and validation, and that’s what the parents also have. And when people feel that you do that for them, the personal relationship deepens, but it also becomes a personal-professional relationship. So in this essence, and let’s say this personal-professional relation, it’s your job to develop this personal-professional relationship. The children are not car parts, or automobiles we parked at the parking lot. They have a developmental process, you are taking over helping them do their own to development, but helping the parents do what they need to do.

So what does that mean? Like I said your defensive style becomes the key to being attacked, becomes the key to recognize the entire dynamic. You've been attacked. They attacked out of fear and insecurity, and you implement the validation process. And when you do that, it’s really remarkable, 'cause the couple things happen with this gentleman that as I mentioned in the story, is that one in the moment, he went from being intense and angry to thanking me, showing appreciation for my willingness to be supportive and help him problem-solve. And we got to the next step, which is problem-solving, the kid’s behavior, what to do to support him. And the other thing that happened as a consequence of that, was that he ended up becoming a major advocate for me as an individual, and for our school, and our program. So, now there’s one other way to look at it, which is not necessary about self-awareness but just awareness that the processes. You know, you realize that the interaction is not working, and it’s getting more heated, it doesn’t make sense. You notice that how you sometimes get into fights with your loved ones, and you end up talking about and arguing about the same thing for the third time, for the fourth time, and they just dang-it, don’t seem to get it, or they’re telling you over and over the same thing. And what it is is that between the two of you, you’re missing the emotional requests. So, somehow it’s not working. Somehow you’re not getting what you want or need. Somehow the other person’s not getting what they want or need. What do they want or need? They need validation, and they need connection. So essentially what does it come down to? It comes down to doing it, transcending the process and being self-aware. In this sense we're speaking of is that, this personal growth process of your own maturity, your own awareness, it makes you better to deal with and support somebody else’s. A
final note in conclusion is that, essentially what we do as Human Services. There’s a wonderful definition of Human Services and that definition is that Human Services, is offering yourself in a human relationship with another person. What is the quality of that humanity, that person that you're offering? This is where your personal awareness, your personal growth, your personal stability increase your capacity to perform the work of Human Services. And as a result you end up turning these challenging situations and these challenging parents to at least people that you can work with, and possibly major significant alliances. And this why one of the references is something from my website about Building Constructive Alliances, with Angry, Insecure, Unhappy, or Suspicious People. Yes, you know, but those are the ones that make work very difficult, and it's not the cookie baking, field-trip driving, you look so great today type people, who challenge the work world, it’s the parents. And last thing about that the parents is that kids who have more challenges. Sometimes the challenges come from the parents' behavior in of themselves, which means intervention with the parents might be really important to get the child to a different better place. And the other thing is that, sometimes children have very challenging issues, and in that case is totally necessary to have a collaborative process with the parents. So that you work together, rather than be antagonistic with each other. So I hope that’s been useful, there is a second part to this training, if you're interested, about having that hard conversation with the parents. And involves all those things that we talked about here, but also takes it to another level in terms of when somebody doesn't want to hear it, how to be a professional, and have that conversation anyway. Thank you very much for your attention, talk to you again hopefully, bye bye.

- [Jessica] Thank you so much Ronald, this was very thought-provoking and so necessary. You don't have all the happy-go-lucky parents that other things like you talked about, you definitely have these other parents that are more challenging, and it is so important to have those professional and personal relationships with them. So thank you for sharing this as Ronald said, there is another course in the library, titled, Having Difficult Conversations with Parents which is also in partnership with Region 9 Head Start Association. So we encourage you to check that one out as well, if you enjoyed this. Thanks everyone for your time, have a great day.