

# Sharing Concerns with Families in Early Years Settings

“and it’s not just a sentence, every word is important because you are hanging on to everything they say, it sticks in your mind. They need to really plan their sentences and their words because this is going to stay with you for the rest of your life”

Parent, Informing Families Focus Group  
([www.informingfamilies.ie](http://www.informingfamilies.ie))

**Before the Meeting** Parents’ reactions vary enormously when you raise concerns about their child and cannot be predicted. It is therefore helpful for practitioners to plan carefully for the meeting but be flexible. Here are some things you need to consider:

**Where?** Discussions of a sensitive nature with parents should always be conducted somewhere private and not within earshot of other parents or children. The room for your discussion should be as comfy as possible and arrangements should be made for there to be no (or minimal) interruptions. You may wish to offer refreshments and always have a box of tissues handy!

Suggest a time you can talk to a parent on their own as discussions should not be in the presence of their child. Although their child may be very young, and it is tempting to think they do not understand what is said, it is surprising how much children pick up from adult conversations – especially if it is about them! Suggest that the parent may want to have someone to accompany them such as a partner, family member or friend.

**When?** Whatever time you arrange to meet parents it is vital that enough time is allowed for the meeting. Very sensitive issues, which could be upsetting, cannot be discussed in 10 minutes and 30 to 45 minutes will be needed to fully discuss your concerns and answer parents’ questions. It may be that a first meeting is somewhat shorter than expected and parents can be invited to have a think about any other things they would like to discuss and come back for another meeting with all their questions.

**Who?** Broaching concerns about their child with a parent requires the skills of experienced staff who have some experience of working with parents and addressing concerns about their children. However, it is recognised that less experienced staff need a chance to learn new skills. This could be facilitated by asking parents if, at a future meeting, they would mind key members of staff sitting in on the meeting.

It is vital that the person chosen for the meetings is someone with good social and communication skills, including good listening skills and ability to show empathy and understanding. It is helpful if the visitor knows the child well, as this can reassure the parents that they understand their child’s needs.

## The Meeting

**How?** How information is communicated will partly depend on the individual communication style of the person giving it. However some basic guidelines can be followed.

Be as open and honest as possible. Start and end the meeting on a positive note – for example, start off by first talking about some of the progress the child has made and mentioning one or two good points about the child. Then you may wish to ask the parents how they feel their child is getting on at nursery. This gives them the opportunity to talk about any concerns they have – they know you have asked to see them therefore will be anxious that something may be of a concern to you. They are likely to be feeling very vulnerable and therefore an opportunity to raise their concerns first could be perceived as empowering on their part.

When you move on to discussing your concerns communicate clearly – use plain and understandable language and avoid using professional jargon. Be as precise as possible with parents about exactly what your concerns are and have some evidence in the form of observations of their child you have made over time to support what you are saying. It is best not to speculate about what might be at the root of the child's difficulties at this stage. Even if you think a child may have a particular condition/disorder, diagnosing or mentioning labels for difficulties at this stage can be very worrying for parents and cause unnecessary anguish – especially if they prove not to be the case. Answer parents' questions as honestly as possible.

Give parents time for the information you are giving to sink in and to think about how they want to respond and what they want to ask. Sometimes, due to our own anxieties we can rush these difficult conversations. Try to tolerate some silences – parents will be more appreciative of a conversation that gives them space and time than leaving the meeting feeling they have been talked at and bombarded with information, some of which they may not have fully understood or taken in.

End the meeting by returning to progress and positives and give clear information about what you plan to do next and what, if anything, you would like them to do. You can also ask them if there is anything else they would like to add about their child or ask you at this stage. Reassure them there will be further opportunities to meet and talk and suggest they may like to bring a friend or partner with them next time, if they have attended alone. Let the parents know that they are able to contact you if they have any further questions or concerns.

### **After the Meeting**

Following the meeting it may be helpful to make some brief notes of the meeting as a record for the child's file and the parents detailing the main points of the discussion and any agreed actions (in keeping with the SEN Code of Practice's *Plan, Do, Review* cycle). After the meeting it can be useful for you to debrief - to discuss the meeting and how you felt it went with a colleague or manager and share any new, relevant information with them.

**Adapted from Stockport MBC - Child and Educational Psychology Service - Updated April 2017**