

Having Difficult Conversations with Families

Early Years Team

Conversations with parents and families, which raise your concerns about their child's development are likely to be some of the most difficult ones you will have, so careful preparation is worthwhile and will help you to feel more confident.

Planning a meeting

If you organise the meeting too soon you will not have all the necessary information to hand, or an accurate picture of the child's development and needs, and this will not only dilute your message but may leave the parent feeling especially anxious and confused. However, try not to let preparation be an excuse to delay the conversation. The child is only in your care for a relatively short time, and it is therefore important that you act as quickly as you reasonably can to provide support for the child and their family.

Top tips:

- What, if anything, is mentioned in the setting's policies about how these conversations will be conducted? Is there a procedure in place for planning and implementing a difficult conversation?
- Ask the parent when it would be a good time to have a private conversation about their child. It is hard for anyone to respond to potentially difficult information when they are in between school runs, appointments and rushing home to prepare dinner. Making a set time to have this talk will help everyone be less distracted.

- Choose a time and place that gives privacy and your full attention - ensure other staff members know not to disturb/interrupt.
- If there are other adults who share your concerns and observations, consider having them partner with you when you talk to the parents.
- Always take time to plan the conversation, and how you are going to raise your concerns, before you speak to parents - role-play what you'll say with another trusted adult.
- Plan how to respond to different responses from parents e.g. anger, denial, emotional breakdown etc. First reactions are not set in stone, it can take some time for families to digest information that can be upsetting or shocking.
- Be aware that parents may have different perceptions and expectations of children's behaviour/development due to their own culture, upbringing, and experiences.
- Research what other support may be available e.g. referral to Area SENCo, and get information ready to share with the parents.

For further suggestions on preparing for a meeting, see the [Scheduled Conversation Checklist](#)

During the meeting

Remember this may be the first-time concerns regarding a child's development have been raised, so it may be shocking and upsetting for parents. Regardless of the situation, maintain a professional manner and avoid getting defensive or emotional. Be empathetic but stay focused on facts and what you have observed.

Top tips:

- Consider your communication style: tone, pitch, speed of voice, body language; be calm and make eye contact and appreciate that parents may need to talk.
- Use basic language and avoid jargon. Adapt your style to the parent; consider language barriers or learning difficulties and give clear explanations in language that the parents can understand.
- Be clear on your main points of concern that you want to share and have any relevant additional evidence that supports your concerns to hand e.g. observations, assessments, reviews.
- Encourage the parent to talk; use open questions such as, what are your main concerns? What are you doing at home that is working well with...?

- Respond empathetically - empathy is not about agreeing, it is about acknowledging their perspective and what they are feeling e.g. I am so sorry that you feel that way. If someone does not feel understood or listened to, they are unlikely to be motivated to work with you to help resolve any issues.
- Be a good listener - this requires you to be fully and actively engaged – not multi-tasking. Communicating this engagement through your body language will help show your care for the other person and keep tensions low. Repeating back a summary of what the parent has told you can help to show that you are listening to, and understanding, their concerns e.g. so let me see if I got that, you said that you are worried that Annie is not playing with other children.
- Consider that the parent's point of view may be influenced by bad experience of services, lack of trust, learning difficulties, cultural and language barriers.
- Summarise on the main points of the meeting and agree on the next steps of action for both the setting and for parents.
- Agree a time/date for a review meeting. Parents may need some time to process the concerns that have been shared and may need a follow up meeting after a relatively short period of time.

Further Resources

[Scheduled Conversation Checklist](#)

[Dingley's Promise - Having Difficult Conversations with Families training](#)

[Communicating with Parents – training video providing further information on effective communication, including body language, with parents](#)

Scheduled Conversation Checklist

Preparation:

Item	Done	Add your notes/actions here.
Check your understanding of your setting's policies and procedures relating to conversations with parents.		
Prepare and collate evidence of concerns about the child's development.		Have I followed the Assess, Plan, Do, Review process and put strategies and adaptations into place. Have I enough evidence for my concerns. Have I got the evidence clearly documented and well organised.
Discuss family and conversation with Manager/SENCo.		Have I talked to the team (if appropriate).
Identify possible next steps from the meeting e.g. onward referrals.		
Gather information about other professionals and support services to share with family.		
Where to hold the meeting?		Have I found a suitable space that is private and will be free from interruptions?
When to hold the meeting?		Have I accommodated family work patterns? Have I made sure I have plenty of time to offer? Have I checked if parents have other commitments i.e. collecting siblings from other settings?
Who to invite?		Which family members should I invite? Should I invite other staff?

		Will the family want an interpreter? Is there a trusted family member or friend who can interpret?
Verbal invitation to family given.		
Written invitation to family sent.		Email or letter?
Confirmation of attendance received from family.		
Remind family of date/time of meeting.		Verbal or written?
Whole room		Is it as tidy as possible? Are confidential items hidden from view? Is the temperature ok? Are tissues and glasses of water available for parents?
Tables		Do these create a physical barrier between you and the parent? Can you sit beside the table rather than behind?
Chairs		Are they suitable and comfortable for adults to sit on? Are they the same height (gives a sense of equality)? Who should sit where?
Lighting		Is light from the window going to dazzle anyone? Light on or off?
Do not disturb		Have I put a sign on the door to prevent interruptions? Have I warned other staff and so prevent interruptions? Can the room be free for the parents to use after the meeting in case they need time by themselves?
Your notes		Are any notes or records to hand? Will I be using a laptop or computer? Is it ready for use and can I prevent it from being a barrier between me and the parent?

Siblings		Be ready for children! Have (quiet) toys ready. Drink, snack , nappy changing.
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After the meeting:

It is easy to lose momentum after the meeting is over. Taking steps not to keep the process moving will make the next conversation less daunting.

Item	Done	Add your notes/actions here.
Write your notes about the meeting.		Brief summary of what was said and agreed. Include any important points raised or feelings expressed.
Talk to your manager/SENCo about the meeting and agreed actions.		
Write a short action plan.		
Give parents a copy of the action plan.		Email or paper copy?
Confirm date of next meeting with parents.		Email or letter?
Put date of next meeting and prompts to yourself to remind parents in your diary.		
Complete your actions from the meeting.		Continue to monitor child's development. Agreed referrals completed.
Informal check-in with parents in case they have ongoing concerns or questions.		