

# Child Care plus+

## + Raising Sensitive Issues: No surprises!

Talking to families about sensitive issues is one of the hard tasks that early childhood professionals have to do on a regular basis. Whether it is reminding a parent to pay tuition, communicating about a challenging behavior, or letting a parent know that you have concerns about the child's development, it takes skill, confidence, and practice. Clearly there are no easy answers, but there are some very specific tips that can make communicating sensitive information more effective.

The first tip is the most important. **Be sure that you have a good working relationship with the family.** It is much easier to ask serious questions and talk about difficult topics if you have a good foundation to start from.

**Have a system in place for ongoing communication with parents.** Each family in your program should know how to communicate with you about routine issues, such as toileting and feeding. They should also know how to schedule more in-depth conversations about their child's development or behavior. Knowing that they can visit with you whenever they need or want to provides an important foundation for communication. When you or the parent have a sensitive issue to bring up, you will already have some experience and success communicating with one another.

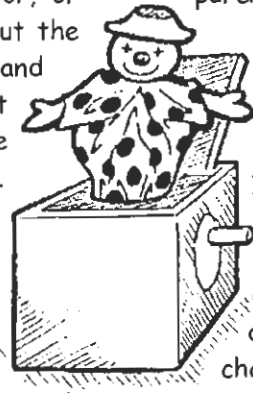
**Recognize that as much as you care about the child and the family, the parent is the decision-maker.** Many parents look to early childhood professionals for advice and feedback. But when it comes time to make a decision, it is the parent who has the final say. You may not agree with the parent's decision, but it is important to honor their choice. Perhaps your message was too difficult to hear right now or it wasn't as important as some other crisis the family is experiencing. Respect the parent's decision and continue to look for ways to strengthen the relationship you have with the family and child. Trust that you will have another opportunity to talk about this subject.

**Choose the right time to talk.** Look for a time when the parent(s) has time to talk, when you both are relaxed, and

when you can talk in private. Bringing up a sensitive topic at the end of the day when everyone is tired may make the conversation more tense than it needs to be. Let the parent know you would like to talk with them, let them know what the topic is, and then ask for input on the best time to meet.

**Make sure that objective observations and not conclusions are the focus of your conversation.** Instead of telling the parent what you think causes the problem, share your observations. Your role is to help the parent understand what you see every day. Share observations about the child's play during a recent group activity, words you hear, or challenging behaviors you have observed. As you describe the behavior, help the parent see how similar and dissimilar it is to the behaviors you would expect in a child of a similar age and stage. Be sure that you are actually asking for input, and be ready to hear new ideas.

When communicating with families about sensitive topics, the most important thing to remember is to have a conversation. Instead of making an announcement about what you are thinking or feeling, try to engage the parents in a conversation in which you both contribute equally. In a well balanced conversation, you often learn more than you tell. If you have strong relationships with the parents of children in your program and you regularly communicate with them, sharing sensitive information simply becomes part of the ongoing dialogue. Neither you nor the parent should be surprised when these hard topics come up. When you care for young children, you have to be ready to communicate with their families. + SAM/KM



### + In This Issue

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|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| + In Focus                 | + Putting It Into Practice |
| + Try It Out               | + Question                 |
| + Connecting with Families | + Resource Review          |

## + IN FOCUS

Imagine you want to talk to the parents of a 4-year-old about a concern—he is only using two-word sentences and most 4-year-olds have more complex language. Before you decide that he has a serious language delay or other developmental delays, let the parents know that you would like to share your observations about their son's language and find a convenient time when you can talk privately. To prepare for this conversation, record specific observations or audiotape a sample of the child's language.

**Offer concrete examples:** Begin by sharing specific examples to help the parents understand the way he communicates during activities/routines in your program.

**Ask for parent's observations:** "Do you hear him using similar sentences at home?" Be sure you are ready to listen to their response.

**Provide a developmental framework:** Once parents see that using very short sentences is the only way you have seen him communicate, describe typical speech patterns of 4-year-olds. Describe how their son's speech is similar to or different from these expectations. Avoid comparing their son with another child in your program; it is usually better to talk generally about the way children develop.

**Be sensitive to parents' reactions:** Parents might listen to your concerns and be ready to work with you to plan the next step. Or they may listen, but not agree with you. They may not be ready to think about the possibility of a developmental delay, or the child may actually behave differently at home. At these times, you may have to let go of your concerns for now, but offer to continue to share observations. Respecting the parent's position while continuing to develop the relationship is the best way to keep the door open to future conversation. + SAM/KM

## + TRY IT OUT

Regularly scheduled phone dates provide another option for connecting with families. Here's how to make it work:

- Let parents know you are offering a telephone consultation option, and about your goals. When a parent expresses interest in participating, find out how often he or she would like to talk with you, and the best time to call. *TIP: For some families, you will need to relay this information to two households.*
- Draft a calendar that fits the parents' requests, as well as your own schedule. You might decide you can arrange three calls/week, and then rotate participating families through the schedule.
- Before the call, make notes about specific incidences that illustrate the child's achievements and challenges.
- Begin each call with informal chat, then discuss more specific information about the child.
- Listen. You should learn as much as, if not more than, you share during the conversation. Use this opportunity to seek input from the parent about his or her child and the family's culture and values.
- Keep pencil and paper handy. A record of what was discussed is a useful tool for reflection later on.
- Brainstorm solutions together. Parents know their child better than anyone and should always be the first point of contact for issues regarding their child.

*TIP: Feel free to ask the parent for time to process new information. When you do this, set a time/date for another contact before the conversation ends. This lets parents know you take concerns seriously and will be in contact again soon. + SHW/CJ*

## + CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

Occasionally you will address a difficult situation and get an unexpected reaction, even when lines of communication are open. Let's look at a few reasons why parents might seem to resist your suggestions or ignore your concerns. ⚙ While a situation may be top priority for you, the family might be dealing with other issues that take precedence over your concern (job-related pressures or a grandparent's illness). ⚙ Some parents need time to process information. Initially there might be confusion or denial surrounding your concerns, but once parents have time to further investigate and reflect, they may be more ready to hear the issue. ⚙ Every family has distinct characteristics. Family traditions, parenting styles, and child-rearing strategies all play a role in how parents react to a situation. Their apparent indifference to an issue may, in fact, be how they've chosen to address it.

It is easy to criticize parental decisions when all the facts about a family are not known. Be patient. Wait and see where parents eventually lead you. Be mindful of the parents' right to privacy and maintain confidentiality. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that everyone is doing their best and wants what is best for the child. + CJ

## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

There is no precise formula for successfully developing a relationship with a particular parent. Open communication, mutual respect, and a spirit of collaboration are the basic elements for any successful partnership. When you incorporate these elements into your interactions with parents, you will almost naturally individualize your approach. There are also many examples of program practices that are *most likely* to result in constructive partnerships. The following three components set the stage for effective parent relationships and emphasize reciprocal contributions.

### FOUNDATIONS

An important first step is to set the stage for building a strong relationship. This can be achieved by including your expectations in a parent handbook or flier as well as during initial and subsequent interactions with parents. These occasions provide an opportunity to describe for parents what you expect from them as well as what they can anticipate from you as you work together as a team.

#### ★ What parents can anticipate from you:

- ✓ two-way conversation. You will *share* examples of their child's participation (photos, anecdotal records), *request* parent feedback, and ask for their thoughts and observations.
- ✓ discuss all aspects of early childhood development: social, emotional, physical, communication, and cognitive (thinking skills such as problem-solving and concept awareness such as matching).
- ✓ an expectation that parents and teachers work together to set learning goals for their child.
- ✓ encouragement to ask questions about their child:  
Who does my child interact with?  
What is my child's favorite play activity?  
Which staff member does the child prefer?  
How is my child's appetite?

#### ★ What you anticipate from parents:

- ✓ examples of the child's activities at home.
- ✓ descriptions of interests they see developing in their child.
- ✓ talk about what they enjoy most about their child.

- ✓ conversations with their child about favorite/least favorite activities at school.
- ✓ identification of the current and future goals they have for their child.

### INFORMAL OPPORTUNITIES

The second important step is to build into your program regular and frequent formal as well as informal opportunities for communicating and working together. Look at each informal opportunity in the chart below.

Each could be used to a) convey information, b) invite information sharing, and c) express interest/support of the family. The ideal would be to use a number of methods and balance how often they are used for each purpose.

- ★ daily face-to-face chat
- ★ parent suggestion box
- ★ personal notes
- ★ spontaneous telephone calls or e-mail messages
- ★ sharing program materials and activities
- ★ bulletin board
- ★ daily news flash
- ★ newsletter

### FORMAL OPPORTUNITIES

Formal opportunities are less likely to occur on a daily basis. They must be planned and scheduled, and may be ongoing or yearly events.

- ★ satisfaction survey
- ★ parent advisory board
- ★ parent volunteers
- ★ scheduled telephone calls (phone dates)
- ★ parent/teacher conferences
- ★ parent speakers
- ★ family potluck
- ★ parent workshops

As you can see, strong parent/provider relationships don't just happen, they must be carefully constructed. Building a strong foundation, as well as providing informal and formal opportunities for interaction, will most certainly result in positive outcomes. + SLM



## + QUESTION

**QUESTION:** *I have a child in my program who stutters a lot. Her dad and I have talked about this and agreed to watch her progress. When I noticed that she was having more and more problems communicating with other children, I felt comfortable setting up a meeting. I asked him what he was noticing and shared my recent observations. He seemed defensive when I talked about my concerns and about the services and the specialists that could help his child. When I said his daughter could be evaluated and possibly get free speech therapy, he got upset, exclaiming that she was just fine and that she would "grow out of it" without any therapy. How can I get rid of the feeling that I have failed to communicate with the dad and failed to help this child?*

**ANSWER:** Start by re-examining your goals for building relationships with parents. Are your goals focused on understanding and supporting the child/family connection and the parent as decision-maker? Sometimes our own beliefs and values "sneak in" to drive our interactions with families. Reaffirming your goal to meet children's needs by honoring parental wishes may help redirect your energy and ease some of your worries.

What might you do next? Tuning in to dad's perceptions may help you reconnect. Visit with him during arrival and departure times; *listen* a lot! When he initiates conversations about his child's interests, strengths, or needs, follow his lead and talk more about these topics.

In future meetings, try to be sensitive to body language and emotions. Even though your mental plan may have included introducing the idea of therapy, you might have responded to the parent's emotional reaction by putting

your idea on hold for a while, making a joint plan to continue observing, and proposing another meeting about this topic in a few weeks. By choosing this route, you have the opportunity to better understand parents' perceptions of their children—allowing you to support the child in the context of the family. + SHW

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

*So This Is Normal Too? Teachers and Parents Working Out Developmental Issues in Young Children* by Deborah Hewitt (Redleaf Press, 1995) takes the mystery out of coping with children's perplexing behavior. Learn how to deal with issues like biting, lying, sexual curiosity, and toilet training. Features a developmental explanation for behaviors, which leads to an action plan agreed upon by parents and providers. Easy-to-follow, reproducible materials make challenging behaviors a vehicle for cooperation among adults and stepping stones to learning for children. To order, contact Redleaf Press at [www.redleafpress.org](http://www.redleafpress.org) or at 1-800-423-8309 (order #153901); cost is \$14.95.

*CHILD CARE plus+* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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