

Professionals communicating with parents: the basics

Effective partnerships with parents are crucial in early childhood settings. Close working relationships between parents and carers can be beneficial for early childhood programs and can provide important sources of support to parents.



Why effective communication is important

The nature and style of communication is fundamental to partnership. Yet limited time and the stress of running a busy early childhood service can get in the way of clear and supportive communication. Here are some quick tips on communicating with parents.

Listening

Let parents know that you're available for them and that you value any opinions or concerns they raise. Listening well is one way of showing you mean it.

Here are some ideas:

- Stop what you're doing and look at parents when they're talking to you.
- Let parents know you're listening and interested by nodding or saying, 'Uh huh' occasionally.
- Let parents finish talking then summarise what they said, and check that you understood correctly.
- Check on the feeling as well as the content of what's said. For example, 'Am I right in saying that you felt distressed about that incident?'
- Use open-ended questions to ask for additional information if you need it. Open-ended questions give people a chance to expand on what they're saying rather than just saying 'yes' or 'no'. For example, 'What did you mean by saying he was mucking up?'
- Try to understand parents' perspectives, even if you disagree with what they're saying. Put yourself in their shoes.

Speaking

The way you communicate with parents will either encourage partnerships or get parents offside. A partnership works best when messages are clear, specific and considerate of the other person's feelings. Always talk to a parent with the goal of strengthening your relationship.

Here's how:

- When we're rushed or get 'caught out', we might say things that we later regret. So it's **OK to pause**. If you're not confident about saying something sensitive, arrange a time when you can talk together with less pressure.
- Use 'I' messages. This means talking about how you're feeling about the situation rather than focusing on what you want parents to do about it or blaming parents.
- Be specific by describing what you see and when you see it. If you didn't observe a problem yourself, say so.
- Keep your comments in the present. Don't bring up issues from the past. If the issue keeps happening, move on to finding a solution.

Raising concerns with parents

Here are some ideas for raising concerns with parents:

- Be open and honest with parents, and talk about problems when they come up. Problems usually don't go away by themselves. If you leave them to escalate they might be more difficult to repair later.
- Make an appointment to discuss concerns. Be prepared for the meeting and have a clear agenda of

what you want to discuss.

- Give parents accurate information on what you observe.
- Explain exactly what the issue is and why it might be a concern.
- Check what parents think about the issue and whether they're concerned about it. Ask if they experience the same kind of issues at home.
- If you can, add some knowledge about the nature of the problem. For example, 'Many children are tired by this time of the day. Starting school is an exhausting experience'. Parents are more likely to help develop a solution if they understand the nature of the problem.
- Own the issue and emphasise that you have the child's best interests in mind. If the concern is something about a child's behaviour while they're in your care, it's your responsibility to develop a solution. Reassure parents you can work on the issue, but invite them to help with the solution. For example, you might say something like 'Biting other children is very common in children of Ben's age. It doesn't mean he is bad or aggressive. We have ways of helping children learn how to get what they want without biting, but in our experience it always helps to work with a child's parents to find the best approach for an individual child'.
- When you're communicating about difficult issues, be prepared to offer a range of solutions as well. Offering solutions is a consultative process. Ask for parents' opinions. Brainstorm as many solutions as possible, then jointly evaluate the pros and cons of each solution.

Dealing with concerns that parents raise

Here are tips for dealing with concerns that parents raise:

- Listen to parents' concerns.
- Avoid responding with immediate explanations or justifications. It's important that parents feel that their concerns have been heard.
- Show an interest in the parents' welfare as well as their child's.
- Show enthusiasm at any attempt parents make to help with the problem.
- Offering solutions is a consultative process. Ask for parents' opinions. Brainstorm as many solutions as possible, then jointly evaluate the pros and cons of each solution.
- Sometimes it might be hard to find a solution. You don't need to find a solution every time. When problem-solving isn't possible, you might be able to help by simply listening to parents. Notice the attitudes and feelings that parents express, and tell parents exactly what you heard them say in terms of feelings and attitudes.



Sometimes, even when you use all these strategies, issues still can't be resolved. If that happens, tell parents about your organisation's grievance procedure and make sure they know how to use it.



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