

Tip Sheets

Starting the Conversation: Developmental Concerns

If you routinely observe and record the development of all children in your program, you may sometimes find that a child has red flags in their developmental progress and that it is time to talk to their parents about your concerns.

This is often the most challenging conversation that early childhood providers anticipate having with families. And although it can be difficult, sharing your concerns is vital to the education and care of the children in your program.

Sharing Concerns with Families

It is difficult for a parent to hear their child may have a developmental concern. The following strategies should help alleviate some tension and set the stage for this important dialogue.

Positive Sandwich

One solution is to present your concerns using a *positive sandwich*. This sends the important message to the family that you care about the child, enjoy their presence, and want what is best for them and their development.

POSITIVE SANDWICH FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

- **OPEN THE CONVERSATION WITH A POSITIVE COMMENT ABOUT THE CHILD.**
- **DISCUSS THE DIFFICULTY/ CONCERN IN A POSITIVE WAY.**
- **END WITH ANOTHER POSITIVE COMMENT.**

Additional Tips

Ahead of the Meeting

- Establish a positive and trusting relationship with families.
- Ensure the meeting environment is as private and comfortable as possible.
- Assure the family that your discussion will be confidential. This is very important as a family may fear that the child will be treated differently or even expelled from the program.
- Be factual in your documentation.

During the Meeting

- Share factual information.
- Be respectful at all times.
- Give parents plenty of time to ask questions.
- Listen to parents' questions and comments in the context of fear and anxiety.
- Parents may be questioning their own competence. Congratulate and assure them.

Keep in Mind

- Parents have a strong emotional investment in their children; work with it instead of against it.
- A family's values and experiences strongly influence their definitions of problem behaviors and appropriate management techniques.

Preparing for the Conversation

Make Objective Observations and Recordings

Take factual notes on the challenges you think the child has, in addition to your observation forms. Be specific about what you've been observing and write it down. This will help you stay focused while talking to the family.

As you begin to share information, provide your documentation with specific and non-judgmental **examples** of what you have observed and recorded.

Schedule a Specific, Open-Ended Time

Ask for a specific time to talk with the family, preferably when both of you will have plenty of time to talk and won't feel rushed. This should not take place at drop-off or pick-up unless the parent has time to stay longer and you have other staff who can care for the children while you go to a conference room.

Consider Cultural Differences

Before you enter the conversation, think about- and take into consideration any cultural differences that may exist.

- Are these differences affecting development?
- What questions do you need to ask about their culture and the child's developmental needs?
- Are there cultural issues around which parent should be at the conference with you?

All of these considerations will be very important to the success of your time together.

Have Additional Resources Ready

Have contact information for the assessment resources in your community ready, and help parents take the next step. It's one thing to tell a family where to go for a referral; but giving them current numbers (and even the name of a person they should speak with) will make it even easier for parents to follow up on a difficult call.

Keep Calm and Collected

Last, and perhaps most important, spend a few minutes gathering your thoughts before the family conversation to calm your nerves. Remind yourself that this difficult conversation is important to the child's well-being.

If a family chooses to ignore your concerns, continue to support them and the child, raising concerns again when appropriate.

Not all families are ready to hear about developmental concerns at the same time, and it may take time for them to process this information. Your trusting relationship with them will help them decide their next steps.

Additional Resources

CDC | Child Development

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment>

KidsHealth

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/growth>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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