

Having Difficult Conversations with Families (VLS, 2012)

Communicating with others can be both simple and complex at the same time. Have you ever been surprised that someone misunderstood a message you thought you had communicated quite clearly?

Conversations with families can be difficult for a number of reasons. Sometimes, you might worry that families will be upset by something you share and even decide to withdrawal their child from your program. You may also worry the family will stop communicating with you altogether. While conversations with families about concerns may be difficult, they can provide you an opportunity to express your care and support for a family, as well as the infant's or toddler's development and learning, in a thoughtful way.

Misunderstandings can also occur as your views and understanding of a situation may differ from that of a family member. In these instances, it is helpful to consider the multiple perspectives to a situation. For example:

Example Situation	Your Perspective	Family Perspective
Mother picks up her young toddler at the end of the day. It's the third day in a row her daughter has come home messy and with dirty clothes (grass stains and finger paint).	It's important to offer young toddlers multiple sensory experiences throughout the day. Sensory experiences support early learning, growth and development.	We spend money on her clothes and we need to keep them looking nice. We do not go right home after I pick her up and I do not want people thinking I do not keep my daughter clean.

The teacher takes time to ask the parent questions and finds out the importance of keeping her toddler clean. The caregiver learns that the family believes clothing is directly related to the quality of care given by their family. By sending their child to this early care and learning program, they believed this was like sending their child to "school" and children are to go to school clean and well dressed. This is in part how the family shows their respect for education. The teacher also talks with the family about how sensory experiences are part of learning experiences and often involve messes. Through discussion, the teacher and family decide that the teacher will change the toddler's clothes during messy sensory play and/or ensure she is covered up.

As an infant teacher, you want to provide the best possible care for the infants and young toddlers in your program and you have an opportunity to consistently observe and learn about their earliest development. Your observations, notes, screenings and assessments are helpful for identifying strengths and possible areas of need that might arise during the early years. Sharing these concerns with families is the first step to a supportive planning process.

Sharing Concerns With Families

Families everywhere go through times in their lives when they need help understanding their infant or toddler and accessing information to help them navigate new circumstances or challenges. Families may have a question or concern, and you may be asked to provide information, suggestions, or recommendations about a variety of topics such as child development, challenging behavior, language, community connections, services providers,

etc. Sometimes you may have answers and sometimes you may have to look for answers. Sometimes the conversations you need to have with families will be difficult. If you have questions about how to handle situations in which families share information with you, or you need to know how to address a concern with a family, talk to your administrator, or program director. You may also consider some of the suggestions and ideas listed below:

- Establish relationships and effective communication with the family early on.
- Create a comfortable atmosphere for meetings and choose times when everyone can feel relaxed and have time to talk.
- Share strength-based information that is easy to understand, objective, and nonjudgmental.
- Arrange for someone to translate information if a family speaks a language unfamiliar to you.
- Think about your own cultural beliefs and values; consider ways these ideas affect your caregiving practices – consider possible differences in culture, values, opinions, and practices.
- Ask families questions and think about what it is like to be the primary caregiver of the infant or toddler you are discussing.
- Describe behaviors by sharing what you see and hear and ask families questions about behaviors at home:
 - “Today I saw her _____. What are you seeing her do at home?”
 - “He seems to like books. You must spend lots of time reading together at home. What else does he really like to do?”
- Ask families for feedback; provide time for families to think, process, and respond.
- Help families learn more about infant and toddler development.
- Help families make connections with community resources and organizations.

It is also helpful for you to be aware of existing services and approaches to early identification and intervention for infants, toddlers, and families. To learn more, consider seeking information by:

- Reviewing your program policies and documentation regarding screening and processes to determine the best approach to conversations with families.
- Reviewing your program policies related to making referrals if concerns emerge in an infant’s or toddler’s development.
- Identifying community services such as health consultation and mental health consultation.
- Knowing about your state’s early intervention system.

Family Conferences

Holding family conferences with each infant’s and toddler’s family is part of a high-quality early care and learning program. Conferences offer the opportunity to sit down with families and collaborate on the care for their infant or toddler. Conferences also help form the foundation for the communication system that gets established early on between a caregiver and family.

Family conferences offer an additional opportunity to come together with a family and share information, observations and questions. Together, you can highlight strengths and consider ongoing ways to support the unique development of their infant or toddler. A family conference for an infant or toddler with special learning needs may also include additional individuals, such as service providers.

As you consider scheduling a family conference, keep in mind what you already know about the family and your ongoing relationship building with them. What positive interactions have you had already with this family? What do you know about them already that will support a positive experience? In addition:

- Consider the goals of this family conference (e.g. share observations and developmental information)
- Communicate with families in their preferred style and schedule the conference at a time most convenient for them
- Ask families who they would like to include in the conference
- Talk with families about what your time together will look like. Explain the goal of the conference and that the focus will be on their infant or toddler. Ask families what would be helpful to them – do they have specific goals for the conference, things they would like to discuss, questions.
- Consider possible language barriers and arrange for a translator to help interpret if necessary

Keep in mind that what we share with families is just as important as what we do not share. For example, reading and looking at books with infants and toddlers is an important activity that helps foster a love of reading later in life, offers the opportunity to enhance relationships, supports language and literacy, etc. Think about how often you share with families that you read with their infant or toddler each day?

You can also structure your family conference time to help cover the topics and goals the family is most interested in. For example, a Family Conference Form can be created and utilized to keep notes from the meeting and include the following:

- Child's name, date, caregiver's name, family members attending, etc.
- Child's strengths in areas of development
 - Social and Emotional Development
 - Language Development and Literacy
 - Approaches Toward Learning
 - Cognition and General Knowledge
 - Physical Well-Being and Motor Development
- Possible goals and areas of development to support
- Action steps to support the goals/plan for the infant's or toddler's development and learning

You, as a teacher, along with families can invest in family conferences as a way to help build engagement and enhance relationships.

Sources:

<https://www.virtuallabschool.org/infant-toddler/family-engagement/lesson-3>

<https://www.virtuallabschool.org/infant-toddler/family-engagement/lesson-3/act/14766>

<https://www.virtuallabschool.org/infant-toddler/family-engagement/lesson-3/act/14771>