

Ask a Child Care Adviser: Communicating about difficult issues

Maintaining positive partnerships with families involves regular two-way communication. However, there will be instances where educators will need to discuss sensitive information with families about their child. Carmel Roma spoke with Child Care Advisers Mamta Bhatela and Tanya Tregillgas about the different types of strategies educators can use when raising difficult issues with families.

Whether the discussion is about the service's administration procedures, a child's behaviour or a one-off incident such as a child not eating their lunch, most families would prefer to be informed rather than remain oblivious to issues that concern their child. However some issues can be difficult for families to hear about, particularly if it involves inappropriate behaviours or actions that their child does not display at home but which the service has identified as an issue.

It is important for families to understand that children react differently in group care. Transitioning from home to a child care service where there are large numbers of children and adults can be stressful for some children. In most circumstances, educators want to discuss the issues with families so strategies can be developed and agreed upon to improve children's wellbeing and learning potential.

What are the common issues that educators find difficult to discuss with families?

Children's development and behaviour

Discussing concerns with a parent about their child's development or behaviour can be some of the most difficult conversations to have with families. This is because families often perceive this as a reflection on their parenting skills. A common concern for families using child care, for example, is biting. Consequently, it's one of the most difficult conversations to raise with families. Some parents are not aware of the reasons children bite and that biting is considered common behaviour for toddlers particularly in group care settings.

The service's policies and procedures

Families may need reminding about the service's recommended practices or operational procedures. For example, a parent may question why they need to pay fees when their child is absent from the service due to sickness; or why they need to collect their unwell child from the service.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 3.3 and 6.2

OSHCQA Principles: 3.1 and 8.3

QIAS Principles: 2.1, 2.2, 3.2 and 7.1

Other topics of discussion may include the service's opening hours, behaviour guidance strategies, safe sleeping practices and exclusion guidelines, which can often be made clear at the time of enrolment to avoid future conflict.

Families' expectations of child development

A family's expectation about their child's learning experience may differ from the service's philosophy or programming style. Families should be given clear guidelines about the service's philosophy, how it informs programs and experiences provided for children, and be provided with ongoing feedback on their child's learning and development.

Transition to school

Parents often want to know whether their child is ready to transition to school. However the child may not be independent enough to manage older and larger groups of children, particularly in relation to their self-help and social skills.



What should educators consider before raising a difficult issue with families?

Be prepared – If the issue is related to the service's practices or operational requirements, refer families to the policies and procedures. If necessary, provide families with copies of the policies as a refresher. If the issue is in regards to a child's development, educators should consider recording observations of a child's skills. This evidence can help to support the service's strategies and work with the family to improve the child's wellbeing. It may also be important to discuss those strategies which may not work or have not been successful if this is an ongoing behaviour guidance issue.

Seek advice and support – Information and resources such as NCAC's *Family Factsheets* and referrals from other sources such as peak bodies or health care organisations, will better assist the family to make decisions with educators. It will also provide educators with information when families ask questions.

Organise a meeting – Provide opportunities for families to have face-to-face meetings at a mutually convenient time. Educators should be open and unbiased, and use active listening skills to understand the family's point of view and discuss the issues raised.

Work together – Families and educators should collaborate to put strategies in place for a consistent approach between home and child care. Both parties should share and discuss their concerns and ideas to come to a mutual decision. For example, there may have been changes in the home environment which have unsettled the child. If the issue is biting, for example, parents need to be advised of the action being taken to reduce the likelihood and frequency of the biting. In some cases, the simple knowledge that the situation is being addressed and managed can reduce the concern of parents.

Be positive – In some cases families may become defensive and dismiss the issue. It is important that educators continue having conversations with families to keep them updated about effective strategies, changes in the child's behaviour and any other general observations. Sometimes this can give families a chance to come to terms with the situation and perhaps, given time, be more open

These strategies may be useful when discussing issues with families:

- **Avoid preaching** – When describing a problem, be factual and objective. It is a good idea to start a problem-sharing conversation by offering some positive comments first
- **Monitor the reactions of parents** – Maintain relaxed eye contact and be aware of body language or words which may indicate the parent may be feeling tense, hurt, disappointed or angry
- **Listen** – Take time to hear parents out and acknowledge and reflect parents' feelings, even if they are different from your own. Trust parents' abilities to also find solutions to problems.

Source: Newman, R.L. (2008). *Building relationships with parents and families in school-age programs* (2nd ed.). Ohio: School-Age NOTES.

to suggestions. Families should be reassured that educators are there to work with the family to find solutions to benefit the child.

How can services continue to promote effective communication with families?

Communication is the key to maintaining partnerships and working collaboratively with families. Collectively brainstorming ideas and discussing possible solutions or actions can help families feel supported and engaged with educators. Services can put strategies in place to assist building ongoing partnerships with families, which can support educators when they need to discuss difficult issues.

Daily conversations at pick-up and drop-off time are an important opportunity to briefly discuss a child's day and provides an opportunity to discuss more sensitive matters before an issue escalates. For example, "I just wanted to let you know that Mary had a difficult time concentrating during group reading today and was quite unsettled for most of the afternoon". This way, the family is alerted to the issue if further discussion is required.

Conclusion

Some conversations with families may be difficult and uncomfortable, but they are necessary and are vital to sustaining effective family partnerships – most importantly, these conversations need to work in the best interests of the child ■