

Communicating Sensitively with Parents

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As a child care provider, there will be times when you need to talk to parents about important issues. These may be issues related to the child, such as behavior problems, health problems, toilet training, or eating. You may be worried that a child has special needs and want to talk to her parents about your concern. Or you may want to discuss issues that are related to the parents.

For example, some parents may always be late in picking their child up. Others may not follow the rules and regulations of the childcare center. Sometimes you may worry that a parent is not taking good care of the child. At times parents may want to talk to you about their child or about their family. Sometimes, they may want your advice. Many things that parents and providers talk about are very sensitive issues. It is helpful if you handle these issues very carefully. The way you talk to parents is important. Remember that parents and you are partners in bringing up their child. Therefore, how you and parents deal with important issues could help or hurt the child.

General hints for talking to parents about sensitive issues

- **Schedule the meeting ahead of time.** When you need to talk to parents about an important issue, try to set up a meeting time with them. Ask them which day and time will work best for them. Find a time when you both can focus only on the meeting. Allow a lot of time for the meeting so that you and the parents can have a long talk. Be sure that you both have time to answer all of the questions that you have for each other.
- **Tell parents what the topic of the meeting will be.** This gives parents a chance to prepare for the meeting. They can think about the questions they have for you or what their thoughts and feelings are about the topic. This way, they will feel ready to discuss the issue with you. Then they will not be surprised, shocked, or angry.
- **Find a comfortable and private meeting place.** Make sure that you will be away from other people and the telephone when you are talking to parents. Ask parents if they need anything like water or coffee before you start talking.
- **Think about what you are going to say.** Spend some time thinking about exactly what you are going to say to the parents before you meet them. Think about what words you will use. Think about what those words will mean to the parents.
- **Thank the parents for coming.** Begin the conversation by thanking them for taking the time to come and meet with you. Tell them that this conversation could help both of you and the child.
- **Make sure the parents know that the conversation is private.** Before you ask parents for personal information about them or their child, explain to them why you need that information. Explain to them how you will use it. Don't ask about things that you do not need to know. Tell them that you will keep the information private. Then they will be able to decide if they want to give you that information or not. They will be more comfortable if they know what you are going to do with the information. They are also more likely to trust you with the information when they know that you are not going to share it with others.
- **Encourage parents to talk.** Some parents may be shy. Some do not feel comfortable with choosing words. You can encourage parents to share their thoughts and feelings in many ways. You can invite them to talk by saying things like, "What do you think?" "Tell me what you feel about this," "Do you want to share your feelings about this?" "Please tell me if you feel I have misunderstood something," "Do you want to talk about it?"
- **Be patient.** Some people think faster than they can talk. Some parents may take some time to find the right words to express what they want to say to you. They may want to use the right words to avoid making you upset. They may try hard to say things the right way. Listen to them patiently. They will appreciate your understanding.
- **Listen carefully when parents talk.** Let the parents know that you respect their feelings and care about their problems. Look at them when they are talking to you. Parents will know if you are paying attention to them by the way you reply or do not reply. Show them that you are interested in what they are saying.
- **Let them finish before you talk.** Listen completely to what the parents have to say. Listen to them before you form your opinions about the issue.
- **Keep an open mind.** Think about the problem or issue, not whether the parents are good or not. In most cases, the issue is not about "right" and "wrong." This is not a contest. Try to understand each other and find ways to work together for the child.

Source---<http://www.extension.purdue.edu/providerparent/parent-provider%20relationships/communicatingsensitively.htm>

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- **Give parents feedback.** Let parents know that you have been listening to them by restating what they said. You could do this by saying, “So what you’re saying is that ...” or “I hear you saying that...” This also gives the parents a chance to correct you if they feel that you have misunderstood something they said. You could use this method to show parents that you have noticed how they are feeling, too. You could say something like, “It sounds to me like you are worried about...” or “It appears to me that you are confused by ...”
- **Be aware of body language.** Body language is a way that people share how they feel without words. This could be the way they sit, the way they cross their arms or legs, looks on their faces, the way they nod, or the way they look at people. If your words tell a parent not to worry about something but your face looks worried, it will tell the parents that something is wrong.
- **Finish the meeting in a positive way and with a plan.** Make sure to say good things about the child, the parents, and/or the family at the end of the meeting. Talk about what you can do together to take care of the issue. Make a plan for the next steps you all can take together. This will help you both feel good about the partnership.

Hints for when parents want to talk to you about sensitive issues

Sometimes you and the parents need to talk because the parents are unhappy about the way you do things. Maybe they don’t understand your way of doing things. Or they may be doing the same things in a different way at home. They may want you to do things their way because they believe that is better for their child. Parents may also disagree with you about certain rules in your center. They may be worried about what one of the other adults in your childcare setting has done. They may also be upset with you. When this happens they might want to talk to you. At such meetings, you may also want to use the following suggestions in addition to the ideas above:

- **Put yourself in their shoes.** Try to see the issue from the parents' point of view. Try to pretend that you are that child’s parent and think how you would feel about the issue. Listen to the parents’ words, and try to sense their feelings.
- **Focus on helping the child.** Parents are concerned and worried about their child. They want the best for their child. You are the person with whom their child spends a lot of time. So parents want you to take care of their child in a way that they can support. Sometimes it can sound like parents are attacking you or the way you do things. Maybe you made some bad decisions, or maybe the parents do not understand you. Try not to defend yourself or react in hurt or anger. Explain your way of doing things. Listen to the parents. This will help both of you understand each other better.
- **Be open to trying the parents’ suggestions.** Parents may have really good ideas about doing things. Listen to their ideas and think about them. Sometimes their ideas may work out well.
- **Finish in a positive way and with a plan.** Repeat what the parents have said. Be sure you understood what their concern was. Ask if the parents understood your point of view. You do not need to agree about everything, but you should try to come up with solutions together. Share some ideas and ask the parents to do the same. Work together to decide which idea to try. Set a time to talk again to see if the solution is working.
- **Thank the parents for sharing their feelings.** After the meeting, think about the things you do well. Talk to someone who can support you. Decide what you can do to be a better childcare provider.