

Connecting with Families Tips for Those Difficult Conversations

Kim arrives for her first day as a teacher in a mixed-age infant/toddler classroom at an Early Head Start program. She is excited about this new adventure. She immediately finds that she enjoys working with the babies very much but has trouble communicating with some of their parents, especially when a sensitive concern arises.

On Thursday, her third day on the job, she notices in the morning that 6-month-old Fernando has a terrible diaper rash. When Fernando's mother picks him up that evening, Kim mentions the rash. Fernando's mother says, "That happened at the center. He was fine all weekend and this morning." Kim is confused and worried by this. "Now what do I do?" she asks herself.

The next day 2-year-old Alicia bites another child. Kim later shares with Alicia's father what had happened. He angrily tells her that she obviously is not a good teacher since she could not watch the children to make sure this didn't happen. Kim feels intimidated and tells him she is sorry. That night Kim questions if she has made the right career choice. She knows she loves children, but she never thought working with families would be so hard. She decides to talk to her supervisor, Heath, and get some help from him.

What the research tells us

Many teachers have experiences and feelings like Kim's. Few early childhood professionals enter the field with a strong interest in working with families (Powell 2003). Often early care and education teachers begin their careers without realizing that their work means that they need to partner with families. Teachers may feel unsure and uncomfortable when discussing difficult topics with them (Powell 2003). Both new and seasoned early care and education professionals are eager for help and need a chance to learn strategies and skills, along with practical tools, for holding difficult conversations.

When Kim spoke with Heath, he told her that NAEYC conducted a parent survey to understand parents' perceptions of both center-based child care programs and family child care home providers. The survey asked families whether they turn to program staff for child-related guidance, information, and support (Olson & Hyson 2005). Heath shared two findings from the parent survey that he thought were impor-



tant for Kim to think about. First, "parents regarded advice giving as intrusive. They preferred to receive information in a cooperative, respectful manner, in the context of a relationship based on a sharing of information. Secondly, parents thought teachers needed more training in parent communication, specifically around communicating about difficult topics" (1).

Heath shared information from another survey that he thought might help Kim. ZERO TO THREE, working with MetLife Foundation and Hart Research Associates, conducted a nationwide parent survey. In the survey, 80 percent of families noted that professionals, including early childhood teachers, either powerfully or moderately influence their decisions regarding their children (Hart Research Associates 2009). Teachers of young children have a significant role in helping and supporting families, yet the teachers themselves need help and support to do so effectively. Talking to Heath, who listened carefully, and getting useful information from him helped Kim realize that she was not alone with her questions and struggles about working with families. Kim felt relieved, supported, and ready to learn more about how to effectively partner with families.

Getting started

Approaching parents or family members with something they might not want to hear is never easy, especially with the limited time available during drop-off and pickup times. It helps to get to know families well before there is a need to bring up a sensitive topic. That builds a sense of trust and caring that makes it much easier to ask for some time to talk together about a question or concern. Here are some strategies that can help build provider-family relationships. These same strategies can be useful when there is a difficult topic to bring up.

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Asking questions and wondering is a strategy that helps providers connect with families. By asking thoughtful questions, teachers honor parents' knowledge of their child. Wondering together with families demonstrates curiosity on the teacher's part, puts the teacher and family member on an equal footing, and demonstrates respect for the family member.

Regarding Fernando's situation, Kim acknowledged to his mother that she might have made a mistake, saying, "I think my question about Fernando's diaper rash got us off to a difficult start. I didn't mean to do that. I just wanted to make sure that you knew about the rash. I thought about what happened and realized that while I was well meaning, I am new here, and we don't even know each other. I hope we can start over. I am wondering if you are available at the end of the day to discuss how to best treat Fernando's diaper rash." Kim might then ask questions such as, "I wonder, has Fernando had a rash like this before?" After listening to his mother's response, she could ask other questions such as, "How did you handle it then?" and "What would you like us to do here?" Kim's asking questions and wondering may help Fernando's mother feel open to participating in the conversation and can go a long way toward building a positive relationship.

Two other strategies that help build relationships with families are active listening and showing empathy. Active listening is listening carefully to what the other person is saying and stating back to them what you understood. This process allows the other person to hear, think about, and clarify her own words. Active listening also involves paying attention to nonverbal messages, such as body language and facial expressions, which help you understand the speaker's meaning. Empathizing involves expressing your understanding and acceptance of another person's experiences and feelings. Teachers can do this by reflecting back what they are seeing and hearing from families; for example, "It can be tough to figure out what to do when your child is acting out. It sounds like this is taking a lot out of you."

Kim decided to use these two strategies to begin building a relationship with Alicia's father. Kim acknowledged to him that she might have gotten off on the wrong foot the day before. Then she expressed empathy for his feelings and used active listening. Kim said, "It sounds like you are really upset about this. I'm sorry this is difficult to hear, and I can understand why it would be! I can imagine that you don't want to hear about Alicia hurting another child. You might even worry if she is somehow in trouble with me. It is typical for children her age to show some aggression when they are frustrated, so I am not upset with her at all. Can I share with you a little bit more about the situation? That way maybe we can better understand what is going on. Then maybe we can find ways to help her so she doesn't end up getting frustrated and biting."

These strategies can help build a foundation of trust, caring, and connection that allows both families and providers to give and receive help, support, and information that benefits young children.

Think about it

- How do you feel when you are challenged in a relationship with a family member? How can you identify your feelings, and can you understand why you may be feeling those emotions?
- Consider a time when someone really listened to you. What did they do to show you they were listening? How did this make you feel? How can you use this experience during difficult conversations that may arise in your work with families?

Try it

- Explore some of the strategies listed in this column, and role-play with your co-worker or supervisor.
- Commit to taking a workshop on establishing relationships with families. Contact your NAEYC Affiliate, www.naeyc.org/affiliates/offices, the local child care resource and referral network (CCR&R), or a community college for professional development opportunities and information about establishing relationships with families.

References

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