

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Engaging with Families
in Conversations About
Sensitive Topics



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Acknowledgments

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Engaging with Families in Conversations About Sensitive Topics

Explore this resource for tips for talking with families about topics that may be sensitive. These may include topics like housing situations, personal finances or health or mental health, safety, and others.

Head Start and Early Head Start program staff and other professionals can use this guide in conversations during enrollment, intake and other times in the family partnership process. Managers can use this resource in training and discussions with individual staff and teams.

Use this resource along with the **Building Partnerships Series** to learn about strategies to strengthen relationships with families. This series is available on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website.

Building positive, goal-oriented relationships begins with ongoing interactions between families and staff. When you make intentional choices about language during these interactions, you help build trusting, respectful relationships with families. These relationships can support families in reaching their goals for themselves and their children.

You may find that using strengths-based attitudes and relationship-based practices is especially important in working with families who are experiencing challenging situations. These situations may include housing, financial, health or mental health challenges, or concerns for the safety of a child or a family.

Tips for Engaging in Sensitive Conversations with Families

Use people-first language.

Use people-first language to show respect to families. People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation that individual may be experiencing. Using people-first language recognizes that people are not defined by their circumstance or situation. Forms and program policies and procedures that apply to families can reflect people-first language.

Examples include using the phrase “children with disabilities” instead of “disabled children,” or the phrase “children whose behaviors we might find challenging.”



Use language to honor each family’s cultures, languages, and experiences.

Use language that shows respect for a family’s cultures and home languages. Understanding a family’s cultures takes curiosity, patience, commitment, and a willingness to learn and to feel uncomfortable at times. It also takes courage and humility to reflect on your own experiences and understand how they affect your attitudes toward families. And it asks for your readiness to recognize when you have misunderstood or made a mistake.

Recognize that each family has their story.

Each Family Has Their Story.

Each parent has their own personal and family stories. These stories influence how they view the world and others.

As you start building a relationship with a family, you can learn about their story—and their strengths.

Encourage family members to tell their story in their own words. Reflect on the family’s strengths and what the family thinks is important. What you learn from their story can inform your interactions with the family.

Each Staff Member Has Their Story, Too.

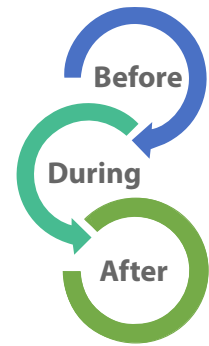
You have your own personal and family stories. These stories influence how you view the world and others. It is important to know and consider your own thought processes. Reflect on how you think, process, and react to certain situations, experiences, and events in your personal and professional life.

Reflect on your own strengths and those things that concern you as you prepare for your interactions with families. Sometimes it can help to do this reflection with a supervisor or trusted peer.

Approaches to Engaging with Families in Conversations about Sensitive Topics

As you partner with families and anticipate a sensitive interaction, consider how you will approach families:

- Before an interaction—when you plan and prepare
- During an interaction—when you partner with the family
- After an interaction—when you follow up with the family and access resources and support



Before an interaction with a family:

Prepare the physical and emotional environment.

Think about where the meeting will take place and its setting. The meeting can take place at the program, in a family's home, or at another carefully chosen location. Wherever you meet, your warm, respectful, and inclusive attitudes and behaviors can create a welcoming environment. Consider these questions as you prepare:

- Is it a comfortable and private space? Is it a safe space—physically and emotionally?
- Are there tissues, water, and a place to put coats and bags? Are there snacks and activities for the children? Consider offering food or juice if your program policies allow.
- Are there images and pictures that show that the program and staff care about families? These may be posted in the setting, or staff may share them during the meeting. Examples include photographs of children and families, children's art work, and information for families about parent groups, training, and job opportunities.

Learn about your own perspectives.

Reflecting on your thoughts and feelings is important to relationship building. Reflection gives you an opportunity to learn and make decisions about your approach with the family. Consider these questions:

- Why do I choose to work with families?
- What will influence my work with the family?
- Am I feeling like I want to fix the situation and rescue the family?
- Am I feeling scared and overwhelmed?
- Do I know what I want to say and what I should avoid saying?
- What thoughts or biases might I have about this family's situation?

Learn about the family’s perspective.

Reflect on what parents may be thinking about your meeting. What do you know about the family? Prepare to learn about the family’s hopes and expectations when you meet together for the first time.

Ideally, you can check in with the family before you meet. You can also check in during your interaction with the family. If, and how you check in, will depend on where the family members are in their journey, their readiness, and their availability. Ask yourself:

- What do I know about the family’s interest in meeting?
- Do family members want just to share their story?
- Do the family members want to meet me to see how we can work together as partners?



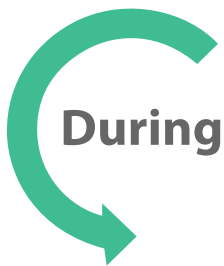
Consider the family’s cultures and structure.

Understanding each other’s cultural perspectives is an important part of building meaningful relationships. Learn about the family’s beliefs, values, and priorities.

It is also important for you to understand your cultural perspectives influences your views of the families you work with. Think about your assumptions and how to set aside judgments by asking yourself the following questions:

- What do I know about this family’s cultures, home languages, and experiences? What would I like to know? How can I find out? How will this help me in my work?
- Who is part of the family? What do I know about who the family relies on for support?
- What do I know about working with different family compositions or structures?
- What do I know about working with families who are newly reunited? (Families may be separated due to migrant or seasonal work, previous military deployment, incarceration, or recent immigration).

During an interaction with a family:



Be a guide from the side.

Recognize that family members are the experts on their family and their situation. Focus on their strengths. Ask about what the family feels is important. Look for ways to partner together. Family engagement means doing with—not doing to or for—families.

Ask if the family is open to what you have to offer before you give advice or information. Find out what they would like to do before you take action. Keep in mind some families may not share their opinions with you—whether they agree or disagree. They may not choose to follow up on suggestions or referrals.

Some families may think you have power over the situation. Recognize the power you do have over certain situations.

Ask permission and explain why.

Check in to make sure that the family members are comfortable talking about what may be a sensitive topic. Ask if it is okay to ask questions. Explain why you are asking questions and how their answers may help. Consider not taking notes if you sense family is not comfortable.

Use words like these to engage the family throughout the conversation.

- “If it is okay, I would like to take notes...”
- “When you are ready, let’s talk about...”
- “Would it be okay if we think together about...?”

Make sure families know they do not have to answer questions if they would prefer not to. Let them know they can ask to take a break or end the conversation. Let them know they can leave if at any point in the conversation they become uncomfortable.

Be flexible.

Be flexible and responsive to what the family says or brings up at the meeting. If the family shows an interest in taking the lead, allow that to happen. Recognize that the focus or goals of a meeting might change because of changes in family circumstances or needs. Consider using words like:

- “I am here when you need me.”
- “Would you be okay letting me know along the way what works best for you?”
- “There are no right or wrong answers!”
- “The only right answer is your answer.”

Be present.

Meet in a space where you can be fully present and free of distractions. Stay focused as you listen to the family. Put aside other thoughts that may be on your mind. At the same time, resist the feeling that you have to “give” or “share” a strategy or resource with the family.

Listen carefully and use silence.

During a meeting, there may be times when a family does not immediately respond to a question or engage in the conversation. It is important for you to pause and be comfortable with the silence. People may take time to process information and think before responding.

“Offer an ear, not a word.”





After an interaction, you may engage in self-reflection or meet with a supervisor.

Follow up.

Complete any next steps you agreed to take with the family during the conversation. You may check in with the family. Or you may share information and resources. Following up is important to building trust and partnering with the family.

Connect to community resources and peer support, when the family is ready.

Identify community partners or agencies with services that match the families' goals, interests, and needs. Connecting the family to systems of support can strengthen family well-being. Be sure to get the family's permission before making a referral. Make referrals in a respectful way. Share only as much information as you need in order to make the referral.

Make a plan with family members about how they will access services or resources. Conduct a warm referral or handoff where possible.

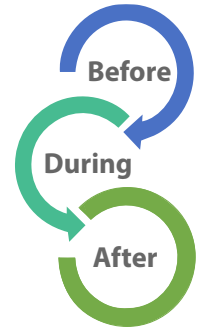
Warm Referral or Handoff

In a warm handoff, a staff person and family make a plan to access the referral. The staff person introduces a family member to a known contact at another agency. They may call the contact together. After the referral, the staff person checks in with both the family member and the contact to find out how referral went. The staff person thinks about how to make the process better for the future.

Use this tip sheet for practices and language to use when talking with families about sensitive topics. Just as parents are the experts on their family and situation, you are the expert in your professional role. Consider these strategies along with others you are already using to build strengths-based partnerships with families.

Explore these Resources

- **Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes**
- **Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families**
- **Relationship-based Competencies to Support Family Engagement**
- **Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**



Engaging with Families in Conversations About Sensitive Topics during Enrollment, intake and other times

Use these tips for engaging in conversations with families about sensitive topics.

- Use people-first language.
- Use language to honor each family's cultures, languages, and experiences.
- Recognize that each family has their story.

As you partner with families, consider your approach:

Before

- Prepare the physical and emotional environment.
- Learn about your own perspective.
- Learn about the family's perspective.
- Consider the family's cultures and structure.

During

- Be a guide from the side.
- Ask permission and explain why.
- Be flexible.
- Be present.
- Listen carefully and use silence.

After

- Follow up.
- Connect the family to community resources and peer support when the family is ready.

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