



## Relationship-Based Practices: Talking With Families About Developmental Concerns

### INTRODUCTION

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As we get to know the children and their families in our program, we share their joys as well as their challenges. And sometimes there's a child who we feel worried about. Maybe it's something about their behavior, or maybe their development and skills. We all know it can be challenging to talk about worries like these with parents. But we also know how helpful intervening early can be when we have a concern.

We're going to look at raising a concern with a parent about their child's development. Having a challenging conversation with parents is about **engaging** them in a collaborative process of observing their child together.

### Collaborative Observations

- › Lay the **groundwork** for having more difficult conversations
- › Are different from **telling** them what we know
- › Are different from **giving advice**

Engaging parents in **collaborative conversations** about screenings and referrals is more than just having a meeting or completing a form; it's an **ongoing process** and an essential part of our **relationship** with families. It requires careful **relationship-building** in order for any conversations like this to take place, so that concerns can be addressed within the context of a trusting relationship. It's reassuring for the parent to know that you are in this **together**, and that they are **not alone** in trying to figure this out.

# HAVING IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS: RAISING A CONCERN

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## Six Relationship Based Practices

### DESCRIBE OBSERVATIONS OF THE CHILD'S BEHAVIOR

- › These should start with positive observations that are likely to be reassuring to the parent. Positive observations are different than compliments.
- › Parents need to know that you recognize and appreciate their child's unique strengths. It's easier to face **challenges** together when the child's **strengths** have also been carefully observed together. Even more importantly, sharing your **neutral** observations can help engage parents in observation and reflection, so that we get to hear what **they** think of the behavior **before** we offer any idea of our meaning; positive or otherwise.

### FOCUS ON THE FAMILY-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

- › Especially as we prepare to have challenging conversations with families, we want to be extra careful to recognize and highlight that the family-child relationship is the primary one in the child's life.
- › These conversations are only challenging in the first place **because** families care so much! When a family has an emotional reaction to a concern, it shows the depth of their emotional connection and dedication. Rather than fighting against a parent's strong emotional response to your concerns, you can work **with** it to help the family get through a hard time together.

### VALUE A FAMILY'S PASSION

- › When we bring a concern to parents, their reaction is rooted in their powerful drive to protect their child, as well as their passionate hopes for their child.
- › For these first conversations about developmental concerns or behavior to be successful, we have to be patient with parents as they process and react to the information. It's our own passion for the child's well-being that can make us to want them to agree with us immediately.
- › Instead, we can help the conversation flow more smoothly by joining with the parents' passion and trying to understand their point of view. You might

respond to what seems like a parent's "resistance" or even disagreement with you by deepening the conversation towards understanding. Listen so that **they** are seeing and thinking, **valuing** their input rather than trying to explain or justify your **own** perspective.

## SUPPORT PARENTAL COMPETENCE

- › Parents' perceptions about their child's development should always be taken seriously. Often they might suspect a concern before the professional does.
- › Supporting a parent's competence means listening for the observations and concerns before you tell them about your understanding of the challenges. This reinforces the parent's expertise and makes it more likely that you can share your observations effectively.
- › It means celebrating the **parents'** critical role and appreciating their unique understanding of their child. When we support parents' competence we honor their unique ways of addressing the child's challenges – whether they see these as challenges or not. For example, you might say, "Ben shows us things here at school, too. It looks like you've helped him learn that that's a way of communicating."

## ACTIVELY REFLECT ON THE FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE

- › When there's a developmental concern, it's critical that we **actively reflect on the family's perspective**. Invite parents to share their own observations and goals about their child and the family.

## REFLECT ON YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

- › It's also important to **reflect on your own perspective** as you talk with parents about your concerns. Your expertise, of course, is valuable too. But while **your** role is to provide support and guidance, you **aren't** there to promote your own vision of how you think the family should operate, **even if you feel like you know better than the parent about some things**.
- › Reflecting on your own perspective helps you identify your own emotions so you can set aside any unhelpful judgments and biases, and better manage any feelings of discomfort. Try looking for a common ground between you and the family to strengthen your partnership.

While these strategies strengthen **any** kind of communication with families, they are especially important during challenging conversations about a child’s behavior or development.

If you and the parent speak a different primary language, you must bring someone who speaks the same language as the parent into the conversation. Clear and natural communication is vital to these conversations.

## CONCLUSION

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In the field of early childhood, we all feel strongly about wanting to help children grow to their fullest potential; and we know that providing support for developmental challenges early on, has the best results.

That’s why ongoing observation of child development and early screening should be routine practices that support children’s needs and age-appropriate progress across all domains of development.

How we go about **engaging the family** in this process is critical to achieving positive outcomes.

Your program might use any of a number of research-based, developmental screening tools. Perhaps you are thinking about a child with a possible developmental concern in a domain **other** than speech. Maybe a routine screener raises a concern that has not been observed or discussed before, or maybe a parent comes to **you** with a concern.

Regardless, these Strengths-Based Attitudes and Relationship-Based Practices are applicable to all interactions with families and **any** developmental, social, emotional, or behavioral concerns.