

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Talking With Families About Their Child's Development



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

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ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES



NATIONAL CENTER ON
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Talking With Families About Their Child's Development

Partnering with families of young children involves ongoing conversations about growth and development. Talking with a family about their child's development is an opportunity to strengthen your partnership. Effective partnerships are built on strengths-based interactions, perspective-taking, and valuing families' passion for their children.

Explore this resource to practice:

- How to partner with families when talking about their child's development
- Strengths-based strategies to open discussions about a developmental concern
- Perspective-taking and reflection

This resource is intended for Head Start and Early Head Start family services staff and home visitors. It may be used by individuals, supervisors, and groups for training and reflective supervision.

Beginning the Conversation

Young children change and develop quickly. Together with their families, program staff watch children move, express themselves, experience emotions, play, solve problems, and make friends. Staff and families share stories and observations and compare notes. We anticipate changes, watch for growth, and celebrate new skills. We partner to find the best ways to support children as they experience new challenges.

But what happens if we have a concern about a child? What if we are worried about the way a child is or isn't moving? What if we think there might be a language delay? What if we are worried about a child's ability to relate to caregivers and peers? How do we bring up our concerns with families?

Conversations about developmental concerns are most effective when we already have a trusting relationship with a family. When families already know how much we care, they are more open to care about what we know. Through this partnership with the parent, we can share what you have seen and build shared understanding based upon families' hopes and dreams for their child. In this way, you and the family can work together to figure out steps to support their child's developmental needs.

Beginning these conversations can be uncomfortable. We do not want families to feel judged or feel that their children are being criticized. Families can become anxious or worried when we bring up our concerns. How we talk with families and relate to them is essential.

Relationship-based practices can guide our conversations about a child's development. Use these six practices to help promote open, honest communication, and strengthen relationships with families.

Exploring the Relationship-based Practices

1. Reflect on your own perspective. Your role is to partner with parents and provide support. Based on your experiences, you may feel compelled to tell a family what you think is best for their child. When you are worried about a child's development, it can be easy to slip into a role of telling a parent what to do in their child's best interest.

But telling parents what to do can easily backfire and have a negative effect on your relationship. Reflecting on your own feelings, beliefs, and assumptions can help you recognize your biases—conscious and unconscious. Sharing your thoughts with another person can help you identify what you are feeling and thinking before you meet with a family.

“Parent” and “Family”

In this resource, “parent” and “family” refer to all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, including biological, adoptive and foster parents, pregnant women and expectant families, grandparents, legal and informal guardians, and adult siblings.

For example, you may share with a co-worker or supervisor: “It really makes me mad that Benji’s dad picks him up early.” This kind of reflection can help you name the judgments and biases that you notice in yourself. Then, you can choose to set them aside in order to see and understand the family’s perspective first.

2. Reflect on the family’s perspective. Families’ perspectives are shaped by cultural history, values, beliefs, and experiences. These include values and beliefs about disabilities and the meaning of tests, assessments, and diagnoses for their child now and over a lifetime.

As you reflect on the family’s perspective:

- Invite parents and family members to share their own observations and ideas about the child and their family.
- Ask questions to understand what the child’s behavior means to them. Families know their child and their family’s cultures best.
- Let the family’s perspective inform and guide the conversation when you talk with them about your concerns.

If parents have their own experience with a disability, they may feel extreme anxiety and worry. Parents may feel unwelcome at the center because of their own negative school experiences. They may also be hesitant because of language and culture. Some families may experience grief or loss linked to the hopes and dreams they have for their child.

Parents and families with a history of trauma may have that trauma “triggered” when they feel anxiety and worry about their child.



As you work with families who have a history of trauma:

- Look for common ground and create shared understanding with families. They may need additional time to process the information they have just received about their child.
- Find ways to partner with the family to decide what is best for their child. Together, you can plan how to best support their child’s own way of developing. Remember, you might have to set aside plans that have worked with other families to make sure this family has the best plan in place for them.

3. Observe and describe the child’s behavior to open communication with the family. Having a conversation with a parent about their child’s development means engaging the parent in a process of observing their child together. Engage parents in observation and reflection by sharing your observations about the child’s behavior.



For example, you might say, “I noticed Charlie goes straight to his cubby when you two come in. He knows where it is.” This kind of statement gives parents the opportunity to share what they see—whether it is similar or different. It encourages them to open up to you. It may lead to what they are doing and seeing at home. Simple statements can give parents the opportunity to share their ideas, hopes, and/or concerns for their child.

This strategy, sharing behavior in a descriptive way, can help if you need to address a developmental concern. You can describe the behavior you see and then ask the family what they have noticed. Begin the conversation with something that the child does know how to do rather than with what the child is not doing.

4. Focus on the family-child relationship. One of the most important roles for a family services staff member is to support the parent-child relationship. When you focus your actions on supporting the parent-child relationship, you help bring positive outcomes to the family, their child, and your work with them.

Observe interactions between the family and their child. Share your observations and comment on behaviors that show a connection. For example, you might say, “I notice she begins to babble and move her arms up and down quickly when she hears your voice.”

Focusing on the family-child relationship can help you feel compassion for a range of emotions and reactions. Parents’ reactions to our concerns reflect their emotional connection to their child and the child’s well-being. When we raise a concern about a child’s development, we are not sure how a parent will react. We want to focus on the strength, importance, and value of the parent-child relationship.

5. Value a family’s passion. Parents’ passion for their child and family can show up as strong emotions. Because caring for children and supporting families is emotional work, you may have reactions to these emotions. You can work with parents to try to understand their emotions, both comfortable and uncomfortable. Together, you can try to appreciate the feelings as signs of a shared concern for the well-being of their child and family.

Sometimes sharing emotions can be uncomfortable. It is also a way to strengthen your partnership with families. Even when you and a parent have different ideas about what their family needs, it can help to remember that everyone wants what is best for the family. When there is a shared goal, you can work with families to share worries and resolve disagreements, as well as celebrate successes.

It can be easy to forget shared goals when a parent’s strong feelings, such as anger or defensiveness, get directed at you in ways that feel uncomfortable. You might find yourself

thinking, “Hmm, maybe this parent is not ready to think with me about challenges because of a possible disability or delay their child is having.” That may be a good time to pause, step back, and think about what the strong feelings say about the parent’s love for their child.

6. Support parental competence. Supporting parental competence means supporting parents’ skills and self-confidence. It means partnering with them as they discover what works for their child and their family. As you share your understanding of their child’s challenges, you can recognize and celebrate the parents’ critical role in understanding their child.

As you support parents’ competence:

- Provide positive feedback about the progress they are making to address their child’s challenges. For example, you can ask: “Would you and Enrico be open to meeting with the team to share what you have been doing at home to help Juan speak in longer sentences? That would allow us to use some of the same strategies you are using.”
- Plan to begin a discussion about a child’s development by sharing strengths-based observations about the child and asking the parents to share what they see. You can then introduce your concerns into the conversation, using the child’s strengths and the family’s expertise as common ground. By partnering with the parent, you can work together to find the best ways to support their child.

Consider these strategies you can use actively to support a strong partnership:

- Have regular dialogues with families about child development so there are no big surprises.
- Have ongoing conversations that build on screening and assessment data.
- Acknowledge cultural differences and perspectives about development and possible delays or disabilities.
- Talk about exploring developmental concerns with the family’s pediatrician.



It’s Your Turn – Reflective Practice

Read the scenario. Consider how Ms. Emilia uses the Relationship-based Practices to open a conversation with the family about possible developmental concerns. Use the reflection questions as a starting point for self-reflection or a group discussion. Think about how you can use the Relationship-based Practices to improve the quality of your conversations with families.

Miguel and Alicia Alvarez and their 3-year-old daughter Teresa, are enrolled in a Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program. The family recently immigrated to the area from southern Mexico. Miguel and Alicia are filled with hope and a strong desire for Teresa to learn and grow into a smart,

healthy, and loving child. They are counting on the program staff to create a learning environment for Teresa. They are looking for support for what they can help their daughter learn at home.

Ms. Emilia, a family services worker, has been working with the family for one month. She knows that a strong relationship with Miguel and Alicia will have a positive and lasting impact on Teresa's well-being and learning. Ms. Emilia and Teresa's teacher have concerns about Teresa's gross motor skills. She often bumps into other children or loses her balance when she moves between learning centers in the classroom and outside on the playground.

Scenario:

Ms. Emilia schedules a meeting with Miguel and Alicia to review the developmental screening the family completed. She is interested in seeing if Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez have similar concerns about Teresa's movement. She wants to learn about Miguel and Alicia's perspective on how Teresa is moving from place to place at home. Ms. Emilia would like to reinforce their expertise as parents and support their strong connection to Teresa.

Ms. Emilia: Good morning, I am so glad to see you both today. Thank you for meeting with me. I know that this is a very busy time and you are beginning the harvest. Today, I'd like us to share our observations of Teresa's development. We will go over the screening that you completed, talk about how we can support Teresa's development, and explore any questions you may have about her development. Are we ready to start?

Miguel and Alicia nod.

Ms. Emilia: Thank you. We've loved getting to know Teresa. She is so energetic. She seems to like doing a lot of different things. She looks at books, builds with blocks, paints, digs in the sand, and has a big smile when she finishes a puzzle.

Miguel: Yes. She wants to explore everything.

Alicia: Teresa's always asking questions. She wants to be wherever we are. She has even started helping me in the kitchen. It can get messy but it's fun.

Ms. Emilia: That sounds like a special time for the two of you. We've noticed how much she likes to explore, too. She also seems very curious about other children. If there is a group of children playing, she wants to be in on the action!

Alicia: We just started bringing her to her cousin's house for visits. There are several children about her same age and she loves to play with them outside. She smiles, laughs, and tries to keep up with them. We hope she'll make friends with the other children here, too.

Ms. Emilia: That's great to know. We can definitely help Teresa make friends with the other children. Let's take a look at the results of the screening you completed. Her communication skills are right on track with other children her age. She even can say both her first and last name!

Miguel: Yes, it seems like she has been talking forever! She loves to tell us stories when she comes home from the center.

Ms. Emilia: I see on the screening that you might have some concerns about Teresa's physical development. It looks like you have observed that she has trouble kicking a ball and standing on one foot.

Miguel: I wouldn't say we're concerned but we've noticed it. She is still so young. She spent most of her time inside with her grandmother when we were home in Mexico. I think she just needs more practice. We will keep bringing her to play at her cousin's house and will let you know how she is moving to keep up with the other children. Maybe we can practice hopping and kicking together.

Alicia: We would like you to focus on encouraging her to make friends and play.

Ms. Emilia: We can certainly focus on helping Teresa make friends. We have noticed that she sometimes bumps into other children, and stumbles when she is running on the playground. Perhaps, we can both continue to observe her movements over the next month. How does that sound?

Reflective Practice Opportunity: Questions to Consider

Reflect on the following questions about Ms. Emilia's conversation with Miguel and Alicia:

- Which Relationship-based Practices did Ms. Emilia use in her conversation with Miguel and Alicia? Did she miss any opportunities to use the Practices?
- How did Ms. Emilia share concerns about Teresa's development? Did she describe Teresa's behavior? Was she strengths-based? Did Ms. Emilia seem judgmental or critical?
- How did Ms. Emilia recognize Miguel and Alicia's relationship with Teresa as the most important relationship? Did she focus on the strength, importance, and value of their relationship with their child?
- How did Ms. Emilia support the expertise and knowledge Miguel and Alicia have about Teresa?

Ms. Emilia is anxious to have a follow-up meeting with Miguel and Alicia to talk about Teresa's movement and friendships. Ms. Emilia and the classroom teacher have observed that Teresa is still stumbling when she wants to get somewhere quickly. She is eager to play with other children. She often bumps into them, which causes them to shy away.

Ms. Emilia is eager to hear what Miguel and Alicia have observed at home and with Teresa's cousins. She knows that it is harvest time and all the families are working six days a week. She decides to ask if they can meet with her after as soon as they have time.

Ms. Emilia: Hello, Alicia and Miguel! It is so good to see you both this evening. Thank you for staying a few extra minutes so we can catch up on Teresa's progress. I know it's a busy time for all of you. I am eager to hear what you have observed at home and when Teresa is with her cousins. May I start?

Alicia smiles and nods.

Ms. Emilia: I wanted to share something I observed last week. I noticed Teresa watching her friends closely when they moved to the water table on the playground. She smiled, started to follow them, and tripped, falling to the ground. Another child stopped to take her hand and Teresa stood back up again. They arrived at the water table together. I noticed you also hold hands with Teresa when you drop her off at the center. I think she felt comfortable with her friend because she learned that from you.

Miguel: Last Sunday when the kids were all playing soccer at my brother's house, I watched Teresa try to kick the ball but she missed and fell backwards. Her cousin helped her up. She was crying a bit. I felt badly for her.

Alicia: When we were making tortillas, I asked Teresa to pour in the water. She missed the bowl and the water spilled on the table. I started to scold her. Then I quickly realized that she didn't mean to spill it.

Ms. Emilia: Thank you for sharing your observations with me. Your knowledge about Teresa is so important in making decisions about what is best for her. I think that at this point it makes sense to schedule some additional screenings and observations of Teresa. She is making so much progress in many areas of her development. We want to support her other skills too.

Miguel turns to Alicia who nods in agreement.

Miguel: Thank you for caring so much about our Teresa. We trust your decision.

Ms. Emilia: I'd like to consider this our decision. We are partners in doing the best we can for Teresa.

Reflective Practice Opportunity: Questions to Consider

The scenario describes how Ms. Emilia begins to address concerns about Teresa's development. Reflect on the following questions about your own conversations about development with families:

- What strategies have you used to discuss developmental concerns with families?
- What has worked and what has not?
- What kinds of reactions and perspectives have you experienced?
- Were there reactions and perspectives that surprised you?
- What have you learned that has helped guide your practice?



Closing Thoughts

Ongoing conversations about a child's growth and development are opportunities to stay connected with families and build partnerships. Families and staff may have different perspectives about development based on their backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. Staff can reflect on their own perspective and how it may be similar or different than the family's perspective. Sharing descriptions and observations about a child's behavior can open up discussions about behavior and lead to greater understanding. If there is a concern about a child's development, staff can partner with families to discover the best way to support the child and the family.

How do you communicate with families about their child's development?

What strategies do you use to discuss developmental concerns with families?

What new strategies might you apply to conversations about development?

Resources

Explore the following resources available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Building Partnerships with Families Series

Explore this series to learn strategies to strengthen relationships with families. Specific resources in the series to support developmental conversations include:

- **Engaging with Families in Conversations About Sensitive Topics**
Find tips and approaches to help staff talk with families about sensitive topics.
- **Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families**
Learn how to prepare for and engage families when conversations include challenging topics.
- **Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**
Find out how family engagement and practice strategies are key to building relationships with families. Learn how to use strengths-based attitudes to work with families toward building a positive relationship—despite the challenges that may come up.

Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment

Discover how programs can share information with families about children’s learning and progress toward school readiness outcomes.

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Simulation Series: Boosting School Readiness Through Effective Family Engagement

Use this simulation series to practice everyday strategies to develop positive goal-oriented relationships with a family. The simulations can be used individually, in groups, or as part of reflective supervision. Review Simulation 4: Relationship-based Practices: Talking with Families About Developmental Concerns to practice using collaborative strategies to partner with families during conversations about developmental concerns. In this simulation, we’ll focus specifically on a child’s speech and language delay, but you can use these strategies no matter what the concern might be.

Relationship-based Competencies to Support Family Engagement Series

Learn more about the knowledge, skills, and individual practices that early childhood professionals need to effectively engage families in positive, goal-oriented relationships.

Screening Dual Language Learners in Early Head Start and Head Start: A Guide for Program Leaders

Use this tool to plan, implement, and evaluate program screening processes for children from birth to age 5, who are dual language learners (DLLs). Consider ways that leaders can make informed and intentional decisions about selecting screening instruments as well as implementing high-quality screening practices for children who are DLLs.

Explore the following resource available on the Centers for Disease Control’s website.

Tips for Talking with Parents About Developmental Concerns

Review this tip sheet from the “Learn the Signs. Act Early” campaign to find specific tips, examples, and possible responses staff can use when they talk with parents about concerns around their children’s development



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