Talking with families about your concerns

Adapted by Maria Lupton and Simone Gerber from an article by Hillary Geers and Jackie Brien in Diversity News, Playworks Resource Unit, 1999, No.3.

It is imperative that we develop partnerships with families to share the care of their children. Why?
Families know their children best; therefore their involvement in any program for their children is essential.

We talk to families every day. We often talk about their children’s achievements, their friends, the things they particularly enjoyed doing. We talk about how their children are settling in, our program and the philosophy and goals of our service. We may discuss administration or fund-raising. Often, after parents have been using the service for a while, we may share other information about their families and ourselves.

But how do we handle situations where we have concerns about children? How do we tell families about our perception that their children may be experiencing difficulties with their behaviour?

Though breaking the news can be difficult, it is important that the issue is raised as soon as possible. This may allow for earlier intervention, which could provide the support necessary for their children to reach their potential.

Not all interactions with families have the desired outcome. It has a lot to do with perceptions.
The perception of what is happening and what is being communicated can be very different for the two parties. It is essential that we recognise that the message that is received is not always the message that was sent.

Our background, our temperament and our emotions will all affect the way we ‘hear’ and ‘understand’ other people’s actions and words. We need to check that our verbal and non-verbal communications are understood the way we intend.

Remember, what we see as a problem may not be viewed this way by the family. This has significant implications for:
- What concerns we raise
- When we raise concerns
- How we raise concerns with families

Once a concern has been identified, it is important to consider both the needs of the families and the staff. Possibly neither party may be keen to talk about the concern. Both staff and families can be reluctant to discuss areas of difficulty.

Understanding families’ reluctance to hear the message

Families can react quite differently to information about their children. You may have observed your areas of concern for some time, while it may be the first time the family has considered these concerns. The family may not feel ‘ready’ to consider these issues about their child. Some families may also go into ‘threat’ mode when approached about their child. They may see it as a criticism of their parenting skills.

Understanding staff reluctance to deliver the message

Why is it difficult to move from discussing what the child ate and who they played with, to raising what staff perceive as areas of concern?

Staff can feel threatened too.

Possibly we don’t feel comfortable about the information we are imparting... or we have not had time to build a good rapport with the family before we need to bring up concerns ... or we feel under-resourced and not sure where to refer the family to... or we are afraid of backlash from a defensive parent... or we are simply so concerned for a family’s possible feelings that we avoid the issue.

If we really do have concerns about a child, we need to try talking to the family for the benefit of the child. Establishing a shared-care approach
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We also need to remember that both the family and staff need to develop and maintain an effective shared-care approach to benefit the child.

Remember that the family knows their child the best. Talk to them, listen to them and involve them.

At the time of enrolment:
- Ensure that families know from the start that you take observations of all the children – of their needs, abilities and interests - and that you will be happy to discuss what you have observed with them at any time.
- Ask families how they would like you to raise any possible concerns with them.
- Try to make regular opportunities for informal discussions on how both staff and families perceive their child’s progress. This opens the way for arranging meetings at a later date if you have a particular concern.

Raising Concerns

Before you raise concerns with families consider the following suggestions:
- Talk to colleagues about your concerns.
- Determine who is the appropriate person to talk with the family. Ensure that the person that will be talking to the family is experienced, confident and competent.
- Talk to the family as soon as possible. When there are two parents, try to see them together.
- Find a time to discuss your concerns with the family WITHOUT the child present.
- Demonstrate an attitude of respect towards the family’s particular needs, such as culture, religion, socio-economic and linguistic background.

Timing:
- Tune into the family’s feelings: choose your time well.
- While the child is clinging to his/her mother’s leg, not wanting her to leave, or as she is hurrying off to work, is not the best time to approach her about concerns.
- Likewise, at the end of the day, a few words about how the day went is good, but it may not be the best time for cornering a parent with a lengthy discussion.
- Allow appropriate time for the meeting and provide an appropriate space for privacy.

When raising concerns be positive, supportive and honest about the child. Give the family examples of the child’s strengths or areas that have shown improvement. Remember the importance of a positive approach when talking to families.
- Think about what you are going to say…what works for one person may not work for another.
- Begin by asking the family if they have noticed anything or have any concerns about their child’s behaviour.
- Acknowledge that your concerns are based on your observations in only one setting and that there are many reasons for behaviour.

Be prepared:
- Have concrete examples of your concerns – make sure they are objective.
- Have a list of different services to refer the family to, and appropriate support groups with the names of relevant people.
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- Develop an action plan with the family about what to do next. Have some ideas ready to suggest to the family.
- Take on board what the family suggests, even if it is quite different from what you had in mind!
- Reassure the family that staff are happy to work with them to achieve the best outcome for their child.

Explaining to other families

- Talk with the family of the child who is challenging about how they would like their child’s behaviour to be discussed with other parents.
- Have information on challenging behaviours available for parents to read/borrow.
- Ensure that families are aware of the benefits of inclusion for ALL children.

Some families may be concerned that their children will miss out because too much time will be given to the child with challenging behaviours. Reassure them this will not occur and if you have access to support staff, discuss how you will teamwork to meet all the children’s needs.