

## How to have effective conversations with parents

Effective conversations with parents are a cornerstone of home-school partnerships, enabling teachers and parents to share information and make collaborative decisions. Active listening is an important skill, which can encourage parents both to offer more information and to feel heard and valued. Other skills might be needed to manage difficult conversations, such as assertion skills and shared problem-solving skills.

### How to listen effectively

Effective listening is one of the most important skills needed for effective partnership with parents. Effective listening includes being attentive in terms of body language and environment, listening for content, and active listening, or listening for feelings and underlying causes.

#### Attentiveness

This involves focusing your attention on the person you are listening to, and maintaining good eye contact.

- If you are not comfortable with direct eye contact, focus on the tip of the speaker's nose or their mouth instead. Parents will not tend to give eye contact while they are speaking, but will periodically check for eye contact as a sign that you are listening.
- Ensure an optimal distance from the parent. Being too close or too far will make them feel uncomfortable, so look for signs of discomfort or anxiety and adjust your distance accordingly.
- Face the parent squarely, and lean slightly forward to communicate your attentiveness (avoid leaning backwards which gives the impression you are not listening). Remove any physical barriers such as desks or tables between you and the parent. Use open body language (arms and legs uncrossed) which indicates an open attitude, and remain relaxed, so that you can focus on what is being said.
- Try to have important conversations in environments free of distractions. Avoid movements such as fiddling with a pen, looking at the clock, or constantly changing position. Try not to drift into your own thoughts, which is usually easier if you use the strategies of paraphrasing and active listening.
- Use nonverbal sounds such as 'mmm' and 'uh-huh', or say 'right' and 'go on' to show your attention without disrupting the flow (these are especially important for phone conversations in which the usual visual cues of attentiveness are missing).

#### Listening for content

- First invite parents to talk about their concern or issue by asking, for example, 'How can I help?' or 'You seem upset, would you like to talk about it?'
- Ask open questions such as 'how do you mean?' or 'what happened next?' and avoid closed questions which transfer conversational power to you.
- Allow pauses which may encourage parents to reflect on what they have said and add more. Silence can be a very effective way of encouraging parents to open up and continue exploring and explaining their thoughts and feelings.
- Paraphrase or feed back the main points of the message to the parent in your own words for confirmation and clarification. Focus on facts, not feelings, and keep the paraphrase short and to the point (only the key ideas of the message, not everything that was said). Paraphrase the parent's message at natural breaks in the conversation, such as when the parent pauses.
- Avoid communication blocks. Phrases used for reassurance such as 'don't worry, it'll work out', or for denial of feelings, such as 'look on the positive side' act to stifle parents' communication attempts and their exploration of their concerns and feelings.

Also avoid criticism, moralising, diagnosis or labelling, and refrain from excessive questioning, giving advice, or discussing yourself or others you have known with this or a similar problem.

### Active listening

The process of active listening involves reflecting both thoughts and feelings back to the parent. Your aim is to actively support the parent to clarify their thoughts and feelings, acting as a sort of sounding board for the parent to explore their concerns, ideas and feelings. It is important to respect the parent's feelings and have faith in their ability to work through and solve his or her own problems. You need to really want to listen to the parent and to help them with their concern (rather than solve it for them).

- Reflect the parent's main feeling along with the apparent reason for the feeling. A formula such as 'you feel ... because ...' is helpful: for example 'you feel frustrated because he didn't finish the work' or 'you feel delighted because she has put in so much effort' or 'you're angry about the result'. You need to set aside your own perspective and try to understand what the parent is experiencing, using the clues available in how things are said, expressions and gestures.
- Try to hear what lies beneath what is being said and feed this awareness back to the parent accurately and sensitively, although you do not have to be completely right to be helpful. A response that is a little inaccurate helps parents to clarify their thoughts and feelings further.

### How to be assertive

Assertiveness involves being honest and direct, and communicating one's ideas, needs and concerns diplomatically while respecting the rights of others. Assertion skills are required whenever you need to make or refuse a request, give constructive feedback, deal with criticism, and engage in shared problem-solving.

- Use assertive body language: Adopt an open posture with feet firmly planted on the floor, face the other person squarely, lean forward and maintain good eye contact, and don't fidget. Use a facial expression to match the seriousness of your message, and a firm but calm voice. Breathe deeply to remain calm.
- Start at a lower level of assertion, such as 'I would appreciate it if you could...'. Move to a stronger level, with a phrase like 'It is important that you...'. Increase assertiveness until you get a satisfactory response, for example, 'It is essential that you...'

### Responding to criticism

- Listen to the criticism, using listening skills and questions to clarify the criticism.
- Determine its validity, and, if you consider the criticism to be fair, agree with the parent and make a brief apology with an assurance that you will correct the situation. If you consider the criticism to be only partly true, agree with the part you feel is valid, briefly apologise and at the same time correct the false part. For example, 'Yes, I did make a mistake in that case and I regret that, but I don't accept that I make this mistake repeatedly'.
- If you consider the criticism to be completely false then clearly reject it, explain how the criticism makes you feel, affirm yourself and ask for an explanation of their comments. For example, 'I don't agree I was wrong to do that and I am upset by the suggestion. My teaching plans are sound. Please explain your grounds for making such a comment'.

### Dealing with aggression

- Actively listen and reflect back the parent's thoughts and feelings to confirm that you are listening, and speak softly, slowly and calmly.
- Ask for clarification of their complaints and ask what else is bothering the parent. Make a list of their concerns and read it out to see if it is complete and correct. Determine which concern is the greatest priority, and use problem-solving techniques to work through it and come up with a solution.
- Avoid arguing, raising your voice or shouting, becoming defensive, attempting to minimise the other person's issues, taking responsibility that isn't yours or making promises you cannot keep, as all of these are likely to inflame the situation.

## Refusing requests

Saying no can be difficult, even when you have a good reason to do so. Try these acceptable ways of saying no:

- A postponed no: Explain you cannot comply at present but you may be able to in the future. For example, 'I'm not able to take that on at present but I may be able to help you next term'.
- A delayed no: Ask for time to think it over. This gives you more time to consider the request and work out exactly how you will say no.
- A listening no: Use active listening skills, which lets the parent know you understand the reason for their request, combined with a brief apology and a firm refusal. For example, 'I understand your frustration about not being able to meet the deadline. I'm sorry but I can't alter it for you'.
- A 'get back to me' no: Explain the difficulties you have in meeting the request, and suggest the parent try other sources of support. Offer that if all else fails you are happy for them to get back in touch and you will see what you can do. For example 'I'm really busy for the next two weeks. You could try [name]. If you get really stuck I'll do my best to fit you in but I can't promise anything'.
- A 'broken record' no for people who will not take no for an answer. Simply make a brief statement of refusal and repeat it as many times as necessary, avoiding discussion.

## Making requests

This can also be difficult for some people.

- Make requests directly, firmly and clearly to the parent, being specific and precise about your needs. Create an expectation that they will support you by focusing on the positive.
- Offer clarification where required.
- Give time for the person to think about it and suggest that you will follow up with them. Be prepared to compromise and respect the other person's rights to say no.

## Giving constructive feedback regarding parenting behaviour

- Describe the behaviour in specific and objective terms, and express or explain your feelings about this behaviour or the difficulties it causes for you, without blame or judgement, for example, 'When you miss a communication about homework, I feel frustrated because your child loses an opportunity to practise'.
- Discuss and agree the exact actions or change in behaviour that would solve this problem, for example, 'It would be useful if you would check the homework diary every Monday'.
- Describe the consequences that are likely to result from the changed actions in terms of benefits for the parents, the student and yourself, for example, 'This will ensure that your child gets a chance to practise key concepts and techniques taught in class'.

## How to engage parents in shared problem-solving

To work through issues and solve problems in a collaborative way with parents, try the following set of actions. Start by listening and clarifying concerns or ideas. Don't rush through this part - it is a very important part of the problem-solving process.

- Define the problem in terms of the needs of each person.
- Use active listening skills, clarifying the other person's needs, and if possible, their reasons for these needs. Summarise their key thoughts and feelings, and identify any common themes, connections or contradictions in their account.

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- Ask questions that keep parents focused on the main aspects of their concern, and draw tentative conclusions. You might also need to suggest alternative interpretations, or new perspectives on the situation.
  - Share information that you have that might be useful.
  - State your own needs assertively.
  - Help parents determine what they want to do about their concern or issue. Brainstorm possible solutions that will meet both sets of needs, as many as possible. Then expand on and clarify each idea. Select the solutions that best meet both parties' needs.
  - Plan what to do, where, when and by whom. Make a written note about what each party will do. Agree another time to meet to evaluate how well the solution is working for everyone.

### References & Further Reading

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Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: Building effective school-family partnerships*. New York, NY: Springer.