

Discussing Sensitive Issues: A Proactive Approach to Communicating with Families

Self-Guided Learning Package

This resource was developed by Community Child Care (CCC) with funding provided by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (2008-12).

The Inclusion and Professional Support Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email pvc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Discussing Sensitive Issues

You have chosen to complete the 'Discussing Sensitive Issues: A proactive approach to communicating with families' package. The aim of this package is to:

- Assist child care professionals to understand the needs of families
- Understand the issues that cause families concern
- Understand the importance of having a communication plan in place
- Gain further knowledge and skills about communication
- Develop strategies for communicating sensitive issues to families
- Develop strategies for responding when families have concerns.

Introduction

Working with children also involves working with families. This Learning Package is designed to help you further your understanding of families and gain greater confidence and skills for communicating with them.

Professor Frank Oberklaid, Director of The Centre for Community Health at the Royal Children's Hospital, states "*Parents should be encouraged to raise any concerns with the professional, and in turn those working with young children should establish the kind of trusting relationship that allows a mutual sharing of observations and any concerns...This sort of relationship is likely to lead to positive outcomes for the child and the family, as well as being very satisfying for the professional*" (Oberklaid, 2004, p2).

In order to communicate well and have a partnership with families we need to understand them. (See also the Self Guided Learning Package – Partnerships with Families).

You do not need to be a parent yourself, but you do need the ability to 'walk a mile in another man's moccasins.' That is, to try to understand what it is like to be a parent. Often we only see things from our own perspective and if partnerships are going to be achieved we need to see things from the family's perspective as well. We often see the lives of the families as more exciting than our own. Educators could possibly have feelings of resentment towards families who rush in and leave their child, and then dash off to an exciting, well-paid job with interesting adult stimulation. This is magnified when the educator has the task of comforting the distressed child and coping with soiled nappies and other mess. On the other hand, families may feel guilty or jealous that the educator is able to spend all day with their child, while they have to go to a boring office job just so they can pay the bills.

The transition to parenthood is a major life event for most parents. For women it usually means taking time away from the workforce, at least for Maternity Leave, and being at home alone with a very vulnerable new-born baby. Many women miss the social contact they had with their work colleagues and feel anxious about whether or not they are caring for their baby correctly. Even the most confident new mothers are often concerned about sleeping and feeding issues. Fathers may also often have concerns about supporting their family both emotionally and financially. Many fathers are expected to be involved in the hands-on care, which may cause anxiety as well as tension about whether or not they are also fulfilling expectations in their workplace. Both parents often suffer from sleep deprivation.

Many new families do not have extended family who can provide them with support, sometimes due to distance or because grandparents are still working themselves. They often feel isolated and although support services exist, many feel that they should be able to cope and therefore don't seek assistance.

Self Help Question 1

List three other reasons why a new family might be finding life difficult?

When families gain a place for their baby in a child-care setting they often experience a range of emotions. They may still be suffering from sleep deprivation (which may go on for several years if they have more than one child who wakes at night), and feel very fatigued. They may be remembering their own childhoods if they were at home with their mothers, and feeling guilty about leaving their child in care. Most mothers returning to work do so for financial reasons and many feel very worried about whether they are doing the right thing for their child. Some mothers may feel guilty because they have not found it fulfilling being at home with their child and want to return to work. Other mothers may feel torn between wanting to care for their child themselves and being forced to return to work if they want to retain their hard-earned place on the career ladder.

Whatever the reason for leaving their child in care, most parents miss their child terribly and worry about whether their child will be cared for in the way they would care for them at home.

Self Help Question 2

A family is contemplating leaving their child in care for the first time and they are anxious about whether the service can meet the needs of their child. List three things you could tell them to reassure them that you will be providing the best possible care

By acknowledging that families are anxious about leaving their child for the first time, and addressing their needs as well as the child's, we are helping them to see that we want to work with them to make the transition to care as smooth as possible for everyone.

If this is the first time the child has been cared for by someone else, their anxiety is understandable. It is a big step for the whole family. Families have a great emotional attachment to their children and want to give them the best possible start in life. A child will settle far more readily if the family is relaxed and confident about the care that will be provided.

Factors that may affect the communication between the educator and family at the beginning of the partnership are:

- Parents' possessive feelings. They may feel that they are the only ones capable of caring for the child properly
- Separation anxiety. Parents worry that their child is not going to be safe or that they will come to love the educator more than the parent.
- Defensive feelings. Parents may feel that they are being judged as parents, (particularly if there is a worrying behaviour issue), whereas educators may feel that the parent is judging the care provided.

Self Help Question 3

List three ways you could reassure a parent if he or she expresses anxiety over whether the child will love the educator more than him/her. (Even if the parent says it in a joking way, there will be real concerns at the root of their comment).

It helps families to understand that the educator is a support and not a substitute for them, if the educator does not refer to the group as 'my children' or 'my child.'

Each family has different needs and different ways of expressing them. Some families want very detailed information about what their child will be doing at different times of the day, whereas others only want to know about their child's eating and/or sleeping. Others may not care about any of this, only that their child is safe and happy.

Families that speak languages other than English often have additional issues of concern when leaving their child in care. They may be worried about their ability to communicate with their child's educator about issues that concern them about their child's care. They may feel anxious about whether their child-rearing practices will be understood and followed by the educator.

We know that families are very diverse, not just in relation to race or culture, but also in religion, values, backgrounds, structure and lifestyle. Even people from the same country are diverse, and may have differences in education, religion and rural or urban backgrounds. As educators we have a responsibility to be culturally competent.

'Cultural Competence encompasses:

- *Being aware of one's own world view*
- *Developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences*
- *Gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views*
- *Developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures'*

(EYLF, 2009, p16)

Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena (2004) note that families are also diverse in the following ways:

- Some are more open and willing to share information
- Some are more confident as people and as parents
- Some are more assertive
- Some are more critical and demanding

- Some have more support
- Some are much more interested in and available to get involved
- Some have more desire to know details about their child’s experience

‘In order for a children’s service to work effectively, there has to be genuine acceptance and acknowledgement of diversity and a firm belief that the constructive resolution of differences in attitudes, understandings, and perspectives often results in better outcomes, more creativity, and more efficient problem solving’ (Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena, 2004, p20).

Educators are very good at acknowledging the uniqueness of every child in their care but it is also important to acknowledge that parents are all different too. ‘We need to remember and accept that parents may have different ideas, values and expectations from our own, and acknowledge that a parent is not incompetent or using incorrect child-rearing practices when they do things differently’ (Waters, 1996, p7).

Self Help Question 4

Make a list of the future outcomes you want for the children in your care

Now make a list of what you think families want for their children

Did you notice that the two lists are quite similar? Most parents want their children to be happy and safe, to have a positive self-image, to get along with others, be capable and confident in all areas of development and eventually live happy and effective lives.

Did you have similar points on your list?

Usually we want similar outcomes for the children in our care: You will have probably included points such as: to be happy, safe, explore their environment and develop new skills and concepts, to learn to interact with other children and adults and develop a positive self-esteem that will help them in their journey through life.

At enrolment, many educators ask families what they hope their child will gain from being cared for by the service. This is a good idea for two reasons. Firstly, so that you can learn what expectations they have, and secondly, if their expectations do not mesh with what you are able to offer, you can use the opportunity to explain the constraints of group care and/or the philosophy of the service.

Introducing a communication plan at enrolment is a procedure that can be very beneficial in fostering good communication between educators and families. A communication plan is a written document which outlines all the opportunities that families and educators have to communicate with one another. The Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital published an excellent kit called 'Sharing a Picture of Children's Development' that includes a communication plan (refer Appendix 1). http://www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/econnections/Sharing_pic_Sect_1-4.pdf

A communication plan:

- Reinforces that educators and parents want to share information with each other
- Clarifies for educators and parents what level of communication to expect
- Outlines the methods that will be used to share information between educators and parents
- Seeks commitment from educators and parents to share information in a range of ways.

Sometimes educators think that parents seem rushed and uninterested in what has taken place during the day. It helps if we can acknowledge that parents may have other issues in their lives that we don't know about, and understand that sometimes parents have other responsibilities apart from being a parent. For example, they may have been up all night with their unsettled child and have to rush off to look for a nursing home for their elderly parent before they get to work themselves.

Often educators say that they wish families would share more information with them about what is happening at home because it would help them understand the child more. Greenman has an interesting view about this. He suggests that since families do not have the right to personal information about educators, we do not have the right to know personal information about families (Greenman cited in Albrecht, 1994). We need to respond to the child's needs, no matter what is causing the stress, by being flexible, warm and nurturing.

Sometimes educators experience the opposite problem when parents share intimate details of their lives or seem to see the educator as a counsellor. We need to be careful not to fob the parent off, but at the same time put limits on our own willingness to listen, especially if the issue requires specialist assistance.

Most parents want to hear positive news about their child. Most are aware that their own child is not perfect, but want the educator to recognise how unique and special their child is. They want their child to be seen as an individual, not just as part of a group of children, and most importantly, want you to like their child. One way to demonstrate this is to always be able to tell the parent something that you noticed about the child during the day. For example, you might mention how caring their child was to another child who was hurt, or how their child was able to get to the top of the climbing frame without any assistance or talk about the amazing construction their child built. All parents want reassurance that their child is fitting in socially and developing at the same rate as their peers.

Self Help Question 5

List five examples of the sort of things you could tell a parent at the end of the day that show you like and notice their child:

When discussing sensitive issues with families it is helpful to have a good understanding about communication in general and to have developed skills and strategies to communicate in a way that will lead to positive outcomes.

Communication Skills

Good communication does not mean that everyone always has to agree, or that everyone always likes everyone else, or that we have to share the same values and ideas. However, it does mean that we should demonstrate mutual respect, that we should listen and that we should try to reach a compromise.

What leads to communication break down?

Sometimes it is the person's inability or reluctance to hear and listen. Sometimes it could be fear about what they may hear or in some cases, fear of physical attack. Sometimes the breakdown might be caused by a difference in perception or in expectations.

Anything that prevents understanding of the message is a barrier to communication.

Barriers may include the following:

Culture, background and bias

The effect of past experiences can change the meaning of the message.

Noise

Equipment or environmental noise can impede clear communication. The sender and the receiver must both be able to concentrate on the messages being sent to each other.

Ourselves

Focusing on ourselves rather than the other person can lead to confusion and conflict. Some of the factors that cause this are defensiveness (we feel someone is attacking us), superiority (we feel we know more than the other person) and ego (we feel we are the centre of the activity).

Perception

If we feel the person is talking too fast, not fluently, does not articulate clearly etc., we may not listen to the person. We tend to listen uncritically to persons of high status and dismiss those of low status.

Message

Distractions may happen when we focus on the facts rather than the idea. Distractions occur when a word is used differently to the way you would use it. For example, the word kids, instead of children.

Environment

Bright lights, other people, unusual sights or any other stimulus provides a potential distraction.

Stress

People do not see things the same way when under stress. What we see and believe at a given moment is influenced by our beliefs, values, knowledge, experiences and goals.

Other aspects of communication to consider:**Body language**

Body language needs to be open and welcoming, to show we are listening and interested, and provide feedback. Crossed arms and legs present a barrier, leaning back in the chair sends a message of disinterest, and being too close can make the other person feel uncomfortable. An arm's distance away is usually appropriate.

Tone of voice

The tone of voice should be friendly, calm and reflect a positive message. Speech that is emotional, fast and high pitched is hard to listen to, whereas a low tone and slow speech can also be off-putting. Tone of voice should be varied to reflect the nature of the communication.

Words

Words are the least important part of the message. They only tell us the topic of the message.

1. You gather information through your senses

You hear the tone of voice and words. You observe the body language. You may also have your sense of smell activated.

2. You decide what the information means**3. You have a feeling based on your interpretations**

If you perceive the message as being negative you may feel physically affected.

4. You decide how to express your feeling

If you interpret the message as a threat, you will have a fight or flight response. You will become angry and aggressive or passive and upset.

5. You express your feeling

If this is an angry, defensive expression, the communication will become negative and difficult.

Hearing and listening are not the same thing. Passive listening occurs when the person receiving the message has little motivation to listen carefully. Active listening involves listening with a purpose such as to understand others, solve problems and show support.

Active Listeners:

- Spend more time listening than talking
- Do not finish the sentence of others
- Do not answer questions with questions
- Are aware of biases
- Never daydream or become preoccupied with their own thoughts when others are speaking
- Let the other speaker talk
- Do not dominate the conversation
- Plan responses after the person has finished speaking, not while they are speaking
- Provide feedback but do not interrupt incessantly
- Analyse by looking at all the relevant factors and asking open-ended questions

Raising sensitive issues with families

When exchanging information one approach that is helpful is to think in terms of helping parents:

- Helping parents to understand their child's behaviour during the day
- Helping parents to understand the educator's interactions with their child
- Helping parents to further develop their own skills and strategies

Albrecht (1994) believes that if we are exchanging information with families we need to think about whether this information is useful to them.

For example, if a child is unsettled during the day or cries more than usual the educator might say to the parent, *"Michael was fussy and cranky and cried more than usual today."* This comment does little except make the parent feel guilty. A more effective comment might be, *"When Michael was a bit unsettled today I gave him a cuddle and shared a story with him. I also offered him morning tea earlier to make sure he wasn't hungry. Both these strategies seemed to work today, what do you do at home when he is unsettled?"* This response helps the parent to know what the educator is doing to assist her child, gives the parent some hints about what might work at home as well, and most importantly offers the parent the opportunity to share what they do at home in situations like this. It also gives them a chance to identify other causes of the behaviour that the educator may not know about.

If you need to discuss an issue that is causing you concern it is usually preferable to set up a mutually convenient time to meet with the family to discuss the best possible experience for their child. This shows the family that you are interested in seeking their views and puts them at ease. Offer refreshments as a way of reinforcing a casual, caring tone. Parents may be anxious about what is expected of them so it is best if you can give them an outline of how the time will be used.

Ensure that the invitation to attend is welcoming and non-threatening. Tell families what to expect, and that the focus is on talking with them not at them. Suggest that they might think about any questions or concerns they may have. Tell them the proposed format:

For example: 10 minutes for the family to raise any issues, 10 minutes to review the child's folder/portfolio/profile of development and 10 minutes to jointly set goals and plans for the child.

Offer different times – early in the morning, late afternoon or evening – perhaps in their home if that is more convenient. Offer child care or include the child in the discussions (by showing/talking about their work) and then provide quiet activities for the child to do out of hearing while you talk with the family.

Provide adult chairs in a tidy, welcoming area.

Invite the family to talk first and ask some specific questions:

- What does your child like about our service?
- Is there any information you would like me to know about your child?
- Do you have any specific concerns about your child's development?

In any communication with parents always start with the positives and be very alert to the personal and emotional responses that parents will naturally have towards any concerns about their child (Gronlund and Engel, 2001).

Give some examples of the child's progress, using amusing or meaningful anecdotes if possible. Avoid the use of jargon such as 'whole child', 'readiness', 'eye-hand coordination', or 'developmentally appropriate practice', so that the family does not feel intimidated.

Present the concerns you have about the child's progress in the context of group care. Remember that if you are raising a concern about behaviour, the parent may not have seen this type of behaviour at home, so they may have trouble accepting what you are saying. It is important to reassure parents that group care is difficult for some children at times. Remember also that parents see themselves as very linked to their child's behaviour and may feel that you are criticising their child-rearing.

It is important to discuss with the parents how you have reflected on this issue and the ideas you have generated as well as collaborating with them on how to work this issue through.

It is better to present the issue as something requiring joint problem-solving rather than conveying the message that it is their problem. Using 'I wonder if you have some ideas that we can work on together?', rather than, 'What I think you should do is,' reinforces the attitude that educator and the parents share a mutual concern for the child.

Be very clear that your ideas are suggestions, open to discussion rather than the only way to do things. 'Maybe we could both try ...' Where possible, offer more than one suggestion so that you leave the parent with the opportunity to make a choice.

If you are concerned about the possibility that a child has an additional need or possibly delayed development, it is often better to wait until the parents raise the concern themselves as sometimes they are not ready to face that there may be a problem. This is a difficult situation and you may need to seek advice from your Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF) about how best to deal with the issue.

If the parent is clearly reaching out for help be ready to offer relevant articles or books to read or suggest consultations with the ISF, General Practitioner or other specialists.

Try to conclude the discussion with a positive comment, such as 'I'm really glad we had this opportunity to talk about this so we can work on it together.'

When parents raise sensitive issues:

Often the issues raised by families can be seen by educators to be complaints. Sometimes the parent's concerns seem minor to us such as, '*Why does he get so dirty?*'

Self Help Question 6

Reflect back to a situation when a parent raised something with you that you took to be a complaint. What was your reaction? Was your reaction appropriate? How else could you have responded?

Some parents can be persistent and even be regarded as annoying, but it helps to remember that by making a request or complaint, parents are acting responsibly. It is their job to look after their child and to monitor their care.

As consumers of the service provided by the educator, parents have a right to complain, especially if the care fails to meet their expectations.

Parent complaints often arise from anxiety or reluctance to give up part of the child's daily care. Genuine acceptance of responsibility and non-defensive explanations may make it possible for the parent to feel accepted and complaints may then diminish.

Some parents don't complain because they fear confrontation or are worried that if they complain it may affect the care of their child.

When parents make requests, try to change your thinking from a defensive attitude to a 'why not' approach. This is not a 'customer is always right' approach, but helps us to think through ways to accommodate the parent or to compromise so that both parties are happy.

We need to encourage all families to share their concerns. It is important to listen carefully and to pick up non-verbal clues such as facial expressions and body language that might show that families have concerns, but might need encouragement to raise them.

We also need to be careful not to make assumptions based on the parent's body language. For example, if you noticed the parent yawning when you were telling them about the child's day you might assume that they were not interested, when in fact they may have been up several times that night to attend to the baby.

Self Help Question 7

Reflect on the following examples:

How would you interpret the possible meaning of the body language if:

The parent shrugs their shoulders?

The parent doesn't make eye contact with you?

The parent sits on the edge of the chair when you ask them to sit down to discuss something with you?

Think about your behaviour and body language in these situations. How can you modify or alter this so that you are more approachable?

When a parent approaches you with a complaint:

1. Show your concern and remain calm

Give the parent a chance to let off steam and to express their feelings. If they are concerned about something it is better to know about it so you can address it. Even if they are upset, you need to remain calm, tactful and show you are listening. Avoid responding without thinking and be as patient as possible.

2. Be objective

The issue is not really about who is right. The parent is simply seeking satisfaction and needs to feel heard. Often the opportunity to complain is just as important to some people as any resolution of the issue.

3. Be prepared to listen

Every story has two sides and it is important that you hear the other view. Empathise with the parent. This not only shows respect, but might also enable you to find out what the real problem is, including any hidden agenda. Concede any point that you can. Never laugh off a complaint – try to show that you have taken the matter seriously. If you are particularly busy at the time, make an appointment to meet as soon as possible. Never allow people to gain an impression that you are not interested.

4. Assemble the facts

You should resist making any decisions until you have all the facts. Parents may attempt to minimise their part in a problem by selectively omitting certain details, so search beneath the surface to understand what is involved without trying to manoeuvre them into admitting the complaint is unfounded. State your interpretation of the key issues and allow the parent to clarify where necessary. Effective handling of the complaint at this stage could avoid complications later.

5. Use creative techniques

Complaining can be a form of attention-seeking. By understanding the person's motivation, you will be able to adopt an appropriate strategy:

Other strategies that may help are:

- Remaining passive. Respond when you are ready; just sit; let the parent exhaust the verbal tirade to the point of repetition before responding.
- Positively reframing the issue. Change negatives to positives. Whatever someone complains about, counter with a good point. You might get the complainant to stop and think, even back off. For example, if a parent complains about the noise in the room, agree and say, "Yes, the children have been very busy this morning doing, its happy noise, isn't it?"

It is important to follow your service's grievance procedure

6. Address the complaint, advise of the decision

The parent would like a direct answer. Either give it in clear, definite, understandable terms, or guarantee a response by a certain time. If further time is required to investigate, unanticipated delays should be communicated to the parent.

If you are at fault, admit it, apologise, take steps to ensure that it will not recur, and move on.

Review your procedure to see if you could have handled the process better.

Not all educators can relate to all parents in the same way. When someone has difficulties communicating with a particular parent, it's probably best to leave the communication to another educator who gets on better with the family.

When parents are concerned about their child:

Often parents raise concerns at drop off and pick up time when the educator is distracted with lots of other responsibilities. It is important not to make a hasty response and to give yourself time to consider the issue carefully. If you can, use reflective listening to ensure that you have heard what they are concerned about correctly. Sometimes the terms they use may need to be clarified. Try to make a mutually convenient time to meet to discuss the issue. This gives both you and the parent time to get your thoughts together.

When meeting with the family:

- Provide a quiet comfortable place away from distractions. Sometimes it might be more convenient for them to meet at their home. If the meeting is in your workplace, if possible arrange for others to take phone calls and to cope with other interruptions
- Try to agree beforehand on how long the discussion will take and try to keep to the agreed time
- Introduce the purpose of the discussion (even if you both know what the topic is)
- Explain to parents that there cannot be any discussion about children other than their own, for reasons of privacy and confidentiality
- Give the family adequate time to talk about their concerns
- Use reflective or active listening to clarify what they are thinking or feeling, by re-stating the message so that the parent feels understood and accepted. When the parent expresses a concern, try to think of a word that describes the emotion that is being expressed and reflect your understanding back. 'You seem to be worried about your child's behaviour.' You may not agree with what the parents say, but you can show that you accept their feelings by the way you listen to them. Show through your body language that you are paying attention and ask open-ended questions to encourage them to talk more e.g. Describe what happens when....
- Sometimes parents can be so emotional about their child that they find it difficult to be objective. They may not know whether their child's behaviour is typical or unusual. Sometimes just reassurance that this is common behaviour for children at this age can alleviate their concerns
- Help the family explore alternatives rather than giving advice. Parents are more likely to accept suggested alternatives than direct advice about what to do
- Problem-solve with them using a brainstorming approach. Try to encourage them to come up with suggestions and not include too many of your own. Offer your opinion if the parent asks, but try to let the parent make the final decision
- Bring information to share with the family if appropriate. This may include a summary of the child's progress, examples of work and photos as well as pamphlets or references for them to read for additional information
- Remember not to use jargon
- Know when and who to refer the family to if the issue raised exceeds your training and expertise
- Plan how to conclude the meeting, by summarising what you have discussed or preparing a plan of action together.

Ethical Dilemmas

Sometimes we are faced with situations where the family is requesting something that would be against our beliefs and understanding about developmentally appropriate practice. It is important that we do not make the family feel that what they are requesting is ridiculous or that they are 'bad' parents. Sometimes it might be appropriate practice for them at home, but not possible in a group setting.

Self Help Question 8

How would you respond if a parent tells you he/she wants you to smack their child when they are naughty?

When the family enrolled their child in the service they should have been made aware of the service's philosophy statement and policies, and given an opportunity to discuss any differences of opinion then. Families should also be aware that these documents have been developed in consultation with families and educators and that they will have an opportunity to participate in a review of them regularly.

It helps parents if we listen respectfully, without judging, when they tell us what they want for their child, even if we think that what they want is in direct contradiction to our beliefs about what is in the best interests of the child. It is important not to show disapproval or anger in our facial expression or voice but to stay calm, concerned and non-threatening. Without becoming defensive, listen to the parent's views. Use your professional knowledge of high quality practice to explain why you would manage the situation differently. Use the National Quality Standards and the Early Years Learning Framework 2009 and or the School Age Framework 2010 to show the family what is expected practice and what guides your practice. This helps them to understand that you are not being obstructionist or not listening to what they want, but that there are expected practices that you need to follow. Above all, critically reflecting on your own practice to see if your beliefs and attitudes might also be contributing to the situation and also reflecting on the practices of your service to see if they can be improved will ensure a smoother running service.

Using the following strategies might be helpful:

- Acknowledge the parent's feelings by showing empathy and being sensitive to his or her experience and perspectives
- Explain the reason for the current practice
- Avoid judgmental statements or put-downs
- Listen and accept the parent's statements without necessarily agreeing with them
- Clarify the issue to check everyone's understanding
- Involve the parent in brainstorming ways in which the problem might be solved or consensus reached

Self Help Question 9

Think how the families in your service might view you as an educator? Hopefully not as patronising, authoritarian, rejecting or prejudiced.

Describe how you would like to be viewed by the families you work with

Conclusion

We need to empower the families and view them as clients of the service, just as their children are. We need to reflect on our daily practice so that we are continually improving the service and we need to be critically reflective on our beliefs to see if they are affecting the way we communicate with families, educators and children in our service. A good educator/family partnership takes thoughtfulness and the ability to communicate sensitively and clearly, without blame or defensiveness. Developing an effective approach to communicating sensitive issues with parents takes time and effort, but the result is a better relationship between the family and the educators, with positive outcomes for children.

Appendix 1 - Communication Plan

This communication plan outlines the opportunities for you to share information about (insert child's name) with the (insert service/ room name/ educator) during 20__

- At the beginning of the year or on enrolment you will be given a copy of the Family Handbook that outlines the centre Philosophy statement and policies.
- You will be asked to complete a Background Information sheet to inform the educator or (insert child's name) interests, likes, dislikes, fears, celebrations that the family celebrate, and any information such as food, sleep or medical requirements.

On a daily basis

- There will be opportunities for informal conversations at drop off and pick up times.
- Written information will be provided to families outlining participation in experiences, social interactions, food eaten and rest details.

On a fortnightly basis

- Program planning information will be displayed on the notice board.
- Families may make comments or suggestions about the service.

On a monthly basis

- Families are encouraged to contribute information to their child's individual folder

On a six monthly basis: Family/Educator Interviews

- Educators will provide families with a written record of their child's interests, interactions and achievements over the past 6 months and discuss these together.
- Families are welcome to contact educators to arrange a time for discussion at any other time.

Remember: If you have a concern about your child's health and development, do not hesitate to talk with our educators.

Signed:.....(Parent/s).....(Educators) Date:

Adapted from the 'Sharing a Picture of Children's Development'
Foster et al, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital 2000.

References and Resources

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Assessment Task

1. List at least five concerns families may have when leaving their child in care
2. List the strategies you would use to find out how the family is feeling about leaving their child in care for the first time and what concerns they have
3. List at least three strategies you could use to ease a family's concerns about leaving their child in care
4. Provide a plan for how you would encourage communication between the family and yourself so that you can provide high quality care, meet the child's needs and keep the family informed as much as possible about their child's experience in the care setting
5. List at least three issues that may be sensitive to families that they might raise with you. Outline how you would respond to each issue
6. Outline how you would respond if a parent accused you of neglecting his/her child's belongings because the child's coat has disappeared
7. Outline at least three strategies you could use to try and defuse the situation if a parent starts shouting at you in front of the children and other parents at the end of the day because he/she has received a reminder about fees