

Talking with Families about Problem Behavior: The Do's and Don'ts

Do	Don't
1. Begin the discussion by expressing concern about the child.	1. Begin the discussion by indicating that the child's behavior is not tolerable.
2. Let the parent know that your goal is to help the child.	2. Indicate that the child must be punished or "dealt with" by the parent.
3. Ask the parent if he or she has experienced similar situations and are concerned.	3. Ask the parent if something has happened at home to cause the behavior.
4. Tell the parent that you want to work with the family to help the child develop appropriate behavior and social skills.	4. Indicate that the parent should take action to resolve the problem at home.
5. Tell the parent about what is happening in the classroom but only after the parent understands that you are concerned about the child, not blaming the family.	5. Initiate the conversation by listing the child's challenging behavior. Discussions about challenging behavior should be framed as "the child is having a difficult time" rather than losing control.
6. Offer to work with the parent in the development of a behavior support plan that can be used at home and in the classroom.	6. Leave it up to the parent to manage problems at home; develop a plan without inviting family participation.
7. Emphasize that your focus will be to help the child develop the skills needed to be successful in the classroom. The child needs instruction and support.	7. Let the parent believe that the child needs more discipline.
8. Stress that if you can work together you more likely to be successful in helping the child learn new skills.	8. Minimize the importance of helping the family understand and implement positive behavior support.



Sharing



Concerns with Parents:

A 5-Step Guide for Early Childhood Professionals

Adapted from materials from
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5 Steps of Sharing Concerns with Parents

1. Briefly state your concerns and questions. If possible, do all steps in person. "I wanted to talk with you because I am wondering about (name)'s (area of concern). I'm wondering if you've noticed this."

- Do a subtle amount of sharing initially - the point is to introduce the issue and establish a partnership. Discussion and problem solving come later.
- Communicate privately with parents and do it early (don't 'put it off').
- Keep focus on the *child*. Avoid using the word "problem" or assigning fault/blame.
- Do this more spontaneously; then set up an appointment for further discussion. Setting up an appointment without preparing parents about the topic sets the parents up for too much worry, anxiety and wonder.
- Watch for a reaction - whether parent shares your concern, or parent questions or disagrees with your concern. The parent's response will set the tone for how you proceed. If significant denial or anger arises early in the discussion, back off, continue to gather information, and approach again at a future time. (See Step 4, Option B.) If the parent is ready to discuss, proceed with Step 2.

2. Collect Information. Respect the parent as the expert on their child. "Please share with me what you've seen or thought about this." "I'm wondering if you could help me understand."

- Gets the parent on the same wavelength, and helps guide what you say. This is less threatening, and may confirm what you also see. (Know that the majority of the time, parents see the same thing.)
- Encourage sharing, "Tell me more."
- If parent wants you to share first, that is okay. (see step 3)

3. Share Information. Share facts, not interpretations. "I've observed..." "When he ___, then ___."

- Your openness in this step will depend on how steps 1 and 2 have progressed.
- Be *specific*: What, Where, When – use direct observations and avoid interpretations or diagnosis.
- Maintain professional integrity for your own knowledge on typical child development and behavior, but leave room for doubt for another viewpoint from the parent for their specific child.

4. Brainstorm alternatives.

Option A. Parent shares concern:

If both of you have similar concerns, proceed with brainstorming ideas for addressing it: "It sounds like we're seeing similar things here. Let's discuss what to do about it." "What have you done or tried or thought of?"

- If possible, write down the ideas you both have.
- Make every effort to pull ideas and solutions from the parent first rather than sharing your own. You can then offer ideas and solutions, or go first if parent is at a loss and unable to offer an idea. One or two ideas are okay.
- Do not analyze or discuss the ideas/solutions until after your list of possibilities is complete.
- If behavior occurs at home and at preschool, opt for joint strategies when possible.

Option B. Parent disagrees

If the parent does not see what you see, denies the possibility, and/or gets upset with you, suggest that "let's both keep our eyes and ears open the next couple of weeks and see how (name) is doing in terms of (specific behavior), and then discuss again."

- Stop and back off - allow some room for doubt. Do not get into an argument or try to justify yourself, as it may only escalate the disagreement.
- Do set up the mindset that it will be brought up again in the future.
- Know that you have planted a seed and that the parent will be watching along with you.
- **Modify step five.** Your "plan" at this point is monitoring a specific behavior and then discussing again later (*even if it 'goes away'*).

5. Action Plan.

Select one or two of the alternatives, decide on an action plan, and set up an appointment to discuss again to evaluate progress.

- The more specific you are here, the better. (Time allowing, you may even wish to role-play possible problem situations.) *A review timeline is critical.*
- Before dropping a new approach that doesn't seem to work, be sure that:
 - It is being carried out properly, and
 - It has been given enough time to work.
- If the concern is a serious one and/or little progress has been made, discuss whether other resources may help (physicians, mental health provider, Child Find, etc.). Remember your own role and its limitations.
- Research supports that the probability of follow-through increases significantly the more specific the action plan is and when there is a timeline set up to review it.