



Department of Early Education and Care

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EEC Child Care Licensing

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: Communicating with Parents

Being able to communicate with parents depends in part on the relationship between parents and educators. This relationship, like all others, depends on people getting to know and trust each other. The relationship between educator and parent begins with the first contact, which may be a telephone call. It continues with the pre-enrollment interview and will be influenced by the parent handbook and enrollment paperwork. Once a child begins to attend the program, daily conversations with parents will help to build trust and allow for an exchange of information about the child. When educators have a good relationship with parents it is easier to talk with them about problems or concerns that may arise.

The relationship between educators and parents may influence the way parents view themselves. The self-confidence of the parent – and of the educator – in their respective roles also impacts the way information about the child is shared. When parents and educators each acknowledge the important role of the other and are honest and outspoken about their hopes and expectations for the child's growth in early care and education there is less opportunity for misunderstanding, frustration and disappointment.

From time to time difficult situations or issues will arise that are a challenge to bring up and discuss with parents. These may be problems and concerns about a child, or even a parent's lack of respect for program policies. Whatever the issue, it is best to address it when it first develops. Putting off the conversation usually makes it harder to bring up later. When considering sharing information about a child's behavior, it is important to remember that not every behavior needs to be discussed. Behavior that happens only once, or that is normal for a child's age (such as grabbing a toy or refusing to share) can be dealt with as it occurs. Some concerns should be shared with parents, such as marked changes in a child's behavior or activity level, behavior that endangers other children, or delays in the child's development, as compared to most other children his age. If the educator feels that it's time to involve parents, there are a number of ways to help the conversation go smoothly.

First, the educator should think carefully about what it is s/he wants to say. The educator should have facts and be specific. If the educator has kept a written record of the things s/he noticed that caused concern¹ (including dates and places) this will help him/her be accurate and honest. If there is more than one educator in the child care program, the educator should share his/her observations and concerns with another educator. This will help to clarify the concerns being raised and anticipate the impact the educator's words may have on the parents. It will help to ensure that the words don't sound critical, complaining or blaming.

¹ Required if a referral for additional services will be made.

The educator should schedule a convenient time and a private place to talk with parents. It is also helpful to let parents know in advance the topic of the meeting, so they can be prepared with thoughts and ideas of their own. Sharing specific observations or concrete examples of the child's (or the parent's) behavior in a calm, concerned and non-judgmental way will help the parents to see the educator's point of view. The educator must be honest without being unkind.

During the meeting it is important to allow enough time for parents to think about the information that has been shared and to ask any immediate questions they may have. It is equally important to be sure that the conversation cannot be overheard by the child or by other children or adults, and to reassure parents that the conversation will be kept confidential.

Once the educator has shared his/her concerns, s/he should ask the parents for their observations and suggestions. The educator should be patient, listen carefully to what parents have to say, and keep an open mind about the problem or issue. Generally, there is no "right" or "wrong" answer to the problem; rather, it is very important that parents and educators work together to solve it.

The meeting should end in a positive way with a plan for next steps. This may include offering resources to the parents for further evaluation by qualified professionals, or it may mean a cooperative way of working together to address a particular behavior. Whatever the plan, it is important to set a timeline for follow-up to see if the solution is working. Finally, follow up with a letter to the parents summarizing the meeting and its outcome, including goals set for the child, any referrals made, and your follow-up plan. Keep a copy of your letter in the child's file.

In summary, "None of us likes to deliver bad news. However, our responsibility to children requires that we face problems, not ignore them. Setting a positive tone, using effective communication techniques, and involving parents in the process will make the task easier."²

Information for this Technical Assistance paper is taken from the National Network for Child Care's "Connections" newsletter, including "Communicating with Parents", by Patricia L. Chronis, MSW, MEd, UIC Children's Center, University of Illinois at Chicago; "When you Have A Problem", by Nancy F. Morse, M.A., Instructor, Parkland College, Champaign, Illinois; "Communicating with Parents", by Ronald L. Pitzer, (1992), Minnesota Extension Service Family Child Care Newsletter (June), as adapted from Jane S. Harvey "Family Day Care: A Home-Based Business", University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Issue #2, January 1990; and from the Provider – Parent Partnerships website of Purdue University: Communicating Sensitive with Parents, by Saraswathy Ramamoorthy with Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., CFLE; "Parent – Provider Relationships", by Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., CFLE; "Talking to Parents About Problems in Development" by Saraswathy Ramamoorthy with Judy Myers-Walls, Ph.D., CFLE.

Additional Resources may be found at: www.ces.purdue.edu/providerparent; www.wvcc.edu/parent/ccr&r/commparents.cfm; www.nncc.org; www.ericdigests.org/pre-9220/diverse.htm

² Morse, N.F. (1992). "When you have a problem", in Todd, C.M. (Ed), "Day Care Center Connections", 1(6), pp. 6 – 7, Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Reprinted with permission from the National Network for Child Care