Better Parent Communication:

What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?

During morning drop-off time in her classroom, Pearl notices that Marcus's father looks very upset. Marcus also looks worried and does not want to leave his father's side when he says goodbye. When Pearl approaches the pair, Marcus's father says, "It's been a bad morning. We were just told we have to leave our apartment by the end of the month and we've got nowhere else to go."

Working with parents is an essential part of working with children. You may encounter joys and challenges with parents that you did not anticipate and that are different from those with children. Early Head Start and Head Start families may be facing multiple stressors in addition to the demands of caring for young children. To be successful in your communication with families, you must develop specific strategies for working with parents.

Good communication with parents is built on partnership. When a family comes to Early Head Start or Head Start, you are joining with them to share the responsibility of caring for their child. Remember that when parents share their thoughts, questions, and feelings, it is a sign of trust in you. When you can work as trusting partners, you can have a good conversation about a number of easy and more difficult issues.

What can you do or say?

In certain situations, you may not know how to respond to a parent. When you feel challenged, try the following strategies:

Stay calm: If a parent catches you off-guard by what he or she says, you may feel unprepared and even worried about how to respond. It is important to take a deep breath and try to stay calm. This will help you think more clearly and also give the parent the message that it is okay for them to talk with you.

Pearl takes a deep breath to help her focus.

Be aware of the child's needs: Some parents may be comfortable continuing the conversation with the child nearby. Others may want to talk with you privately and need help transitioning the child to the classroom first. In times of stress, some children may be more vulnerable than others and should not be included in the conversation. Work with the parent to determine what is best for their child.

Pearl notices Marcus's worried expression and sees that he is holding his father tightly. She quietly asks, "Do you think Marcus would like to build a tower with you and we can talk once he is settled in the classroom?"

Focus on the parent and show that you are listening: Show the parent you are paying attention. You can do this through eye contact, by nodding to them, and with your body position and facial expression. Make sure you understand what is being shared. Repeat what you believe is the main issue or concern. Watch a parent's body language and emotions. Listening is about hearing the words and noticing the emotions being shared. If you and the parent do not speak the same language, locate an appropriate translator. Avoid the use of children or family members in this role.

After Marcus seems settled and is playing with other friends, Pearl and the father move to a quieter space in the classroom. She turns and looks at Marcus's father and gently asks, "You won't have anywhere to live after one month?"

Help the parent feel supported: It's important to let the parent know that you want to be helpful to the child and the family. Some parents may have clear ideas about what they need while others may feel overwhelmed and unable to assess their needs. To better understand how to help, explore with the parent how the family is feeling. A good place to start is by focusing on the strengths of the family and parent-child relationship.

Pearl comments to Marcus's father, "I noticed Marcus kept close by your side this morning. He seemed reluctant to let you go." Marcus's father is quiet for a few moments and then shares his concerns.

Find support from others: One great benefit of Head Start is the availability of other staff across roles. Determine with the parent whether it would be helpful to include any other members of the Head Start team. If the parent wants additional support, consider who else on your team might be helpful. Let the parent decide whether they want to connect with other team members on their own or with you present. This is a chance to address the needs of both the parent and the child.

Marcus's father asks Pearl if she will meet with him and the social worker that afternoon to talk about the housing situation. Pearl adds, "We might also want to use that time to talk about how best to support Marcus while this gets resolved."

Identify resources and help with problem solving: Once the team is together, ask the parent what resources they have or might require. When possible, come prepared with a list of known resources and provide suggestions if the parent is interested. Think with the parent about how to access and connect with available resources. Again, gauge your conversation towards what the parent needs at this particular time. Some families may be overwhelmed with too many ideas while others may want to exhaust the possibilities. Some parents appreciate problem solving together while others would rather do it on their own once they have information or strategies to try. Respect the parent's style and privacy.

The social worker explains that the program has a lot of information about housing and potential community resources. The team reassures the parent that they are available for support while he searches for the best option for him and Marcus.

As providers, we may have the urge to try and fix things for the family. It is best to avoid this urge and instead find ways to provide support, encouragement, and problem solving strategies if needed. Your role is to be compassionate, share knowledge, identify family strengths, and model problem solving strategies to help empower the parent to take action. Your other crucial role is to help find the best way to support the child through the crisis. Here are some steps to consider in follow-up.

Plan action steps: Once resources have been identified, discuss next steps with the parent; this is a good problem solving strategy. Be as concrete as possible: decide who will follow through with each step, establish target dates, develop a plan to update each other on progress. Determine what steps will be taken at school and at home to support the child.

The social worker reviews the plan with the group about how everyone has agreed to proceed. He checks in with Marcus's father to make sure he is comfortable with the plan.

End on a positive note: Reinforce the existing family strengths and reassure the parent that the child will be well cared for during this crisis. Share your confidence that the program and staff are committed to supporting the family.

To close the meeting, Pearl addresses Marcus's father: "I know this is a difficult time for your family. I hope you know that we will do our best to care for Marcus as you sort things out. We know how much you want to find the best situation for him and we will support you in that process."

Despite the challenges that you might face with parents, each encounter is an opportunity to build the partnership between you and the family. Your unique position as a support to the child and parent can give families the sense that they are not alone, especially when facing a crisis.

For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

Parenting, Depression, and Hope: Reaching Out to Families Facing Adversity Understanding Depression Across Cultures
Fostering Resilience in Families Coping With Depression: Practical Ways Head Start Staff Can Help Families Build on Their Power to Cope
The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections
Encouraging an Expressive Environment: Supportive Communication From the Inside Out

Trainings:

Module One: The Benefits and Challenges of Engaging Parents
Perspective Taking
What Is Depression? 1

Additional Resources

Lundgren, Diane and Johnetta Wade Morrison. "Involving Spanish-Speaking Families in Early Education Programs." *Young Children* 58, no. 3 (2003): 88-95.

Valdes, Guadalupe. *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools: An Ethnographic Portrait.* New York: Teachers College, 1996.

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