

Tips for Collaborating with Families

To truly collaborate with families, you must speak so that they can hear you. The following tips can help to ensure that your relationship is a collaborative one.

Focus on connecting, and avoid initiating a conversation with a correction.

What would a parent’s reaction be if we approached an initial conversation with a correction—for example, “I wonder if it might be better if you talked to your daughter instead of yelling at her?” We typically need a connection before we can accept a suggestion or correction from someone else. We might be able to accept a correction if it comes from someone we trust or someone we have a positive relationship with.

Avoid jargon—use simple, clear language.

At Early Head Start and Head Start, we use so many acronyms that families may not be familiar with. Using acronyms and professional jargon distance us from families we work with, make them feel inadequate, or turn them away from wanting to connect with us. Acronyms come so easily to us that we do not even realize we are using them. Listen to this sentence, for example: “John lives in an SRO, referred there by DMH after the FSW connected with a DCF worker.” Professionals will understand it, but nonspecialists may not know what the speaker is talking about.

Offer choices and seek permission regarding the timing, agenda, content, and order of topics in a conversation.

The following types of phrases can be useful to offer choices and provide families with an increased sense of control.

- “Is now a good time to talk about this?”
- “Should we talk about this first or about _____?”
- “Tell me what’s on your mind?”

Appreciate and acknowledge the perspective of each participant in the conversation.

Each person in the conversation may have a different perspective. When you recognize parents’ perspectives, they will feel that you understand their unique experiences.

Support self-efficacy

Understand that the individual or family, not the Early Head Start/Head Start staff, is responsible for choosing to change and for carrying out change that is meaningful to them. Our belief in parents’ ability to change can have a powerful effect.