

Sharing concerns about a child with parents and carers



A guide for early years professionals



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

How to talk to parents and carers when you have a concern about a child

Starting a conversation with parents or carers when you have a concern about their child can be both a daunting and challenging task - especially if the issue being raised is of a sensitive nature. However this is not an unusual part of the role of an early years worker.

If you work in an Early Years setting, there will be many different issues that are likely to come up around the children in your care that would be helpful to chat through with their parents or carers. This new leaflet, developed by clinicians at the Centre, lets you know what steps to take before raising a concern, and highlights a number of pointers that you might want to consider when you do arrange a meeting to talk to them.

Some top tips on sharing concerns about a child with a parent or carer

Build up friendly, trusting relationships with the parents and carers of the children at your setting

One of the simplest ways to build a friendly and trusting relationship with parents and carers is to show a huge amount of interest in their child and share this with them at handover or through your observations. Let them know the things that their child has been excited about, who they have enjoyed playing with, what they have struggled with, and their developmental achievements. If you already have good relationships with parents and carers in your setting, starting a conversation about your concerns will be easier. If you have good relationships with parents or carers in your setting, they will be more open to a conversation with you, and more likely to feel you are a person who wants to help and support them.



Share your concerns with your team, and gather up key information

It is helpful to have as much information as possible about the child ahead of talking to a parent or carer about your concerns. Ask others in your team if they have observed similar or different things to you to get a full picture of what might be going on for the child.

Observe the child in different situations and environments

One thing you can do is to take time to understand how the child acts on different days, how they engage with different children and staff members, how they manage different types of activities and, (when possible), how they are in alternative settings. For instance, some childcare workers might be able to observe the child at their home or in a children's centre. This can help to work out whether the difficulties are happening across the board, or whether they may be occurring as a response to something temporary. For example, the child might be going through a developmental leap, or adjusting to a new situation at home such as a new sibling or a parent or carer returning to work. Taking the time to follow this process will not only help you understand the child, but also communicates to the parent or carer that you are invested in getting to know them.

Explore your own attitude towards your concerns with colleagues, or during supervision sessions

It is helpful to share your concerns with others, perhaps during supervision, to help you reflect on your own understanding of what is going on. You might think about how these concerns might be making you feel, or look at how certain elements of your experience and training could be influencing your point of view.

Consider whether it makes sense to monitor the situation before raising the concern

Sometimes being very quick to inform a parent or carer that there is a problem may lead to them becoming defensive or unnecessarily worried. You may want to ask yourself "*Is this definitely a problem? Or am I just observing changes?*". This may help you to frame your conversation with the parent or carer more constructively. At times it can be helpful to monitor the situation for a while and see whether things improve or resolve with support, before being more direct.



Things to think about when engaging a parent or carer around a concern

Think carefully about the best time and place for the meeting

If the conversation is likely to cover some sensitive or complicated topics you might need to consider holding it in a more private and relaxed environment. Consider scheduling your meeting for a quiet time of day, or in one of the quieter rooms in your setting. If you need to, seek support from colleagues to help you do this. You may want to consider if you are the right person to have this conversation. Perhaps the parent or carer already has an established relationship with another staff member and might want them present.



Plan what you are going to say and how you will say it beforehand, and use clear language and examples

Before the meeting happens have a think about how best you can communicate what you need to say. Try to make sure that the parents or carers are able to understand the language you use, and try to avoid using overly complicated language. During the meeting, pay attention to how well the parent or carer is understanding what you are saying. If an interpreter is needed, make sure you have organised this in advance.

When giving your opinion, try to base your views on specific examples of what you have seen, and describe in clear terms how these have informed your worry about the child.

Prepare for, and pay attention to any emotional responses the parent or carer may have to your concern and offer them understanding before advice

When you are planning to discuss your concerns, you might be worried about whether the parent or carer shares your point of view. If they do, it could be a relief to them that you are bringing it up. They might also be completely open to having a conversation with you, and see you as a supportive presence who can work together with them on any issues.

On the other hand, you might worry that they may view you

as critical, or think that you are blaming them and holding them responsible.

With this in mind, it could be helpful to tell them that you understand and empathise with their experience of the problem at the very start of the conversation, before you launch into expressing your own view on it, or offering advice.

For instance, in response to a biting incident you might say: *"This is very common for children of this age and something all children tend to do at some point. But as a parent, I know it is very hard to hear about when it is about your child."*

During your meeting you should be attentive to any feelings of blame, shame and guilt that they may be having in response to what you're saying. Remember that it is possible that they may also have some feelings of anger, or they could completely disagree with your opinion, or oppose what courses of action you are suggesting – so try and prepare for their response going in a few different ways.

Try to keep in mind that they may need some time and emotional support from you to manage their feelings. So having a break in the meeting or having a couple of short meetings to talk through can be helpful.

Try not to take a negative reaction personally

Remember that the way that a particular parent or carer responds will be unique to them – someone else might respond in a completely different way. Also, their reaction to the conversation may be influenced by outside factors such as their past positive or negative experiences of relationships with others, or the stresses they are facing at that particular time.

Pay attention to any additional information they might offer

A parent or carer might share details about outside influences that could be impacting on the child, for instance the arrival of a new sibling, a parent or carer returning to work, or the fact that a well-loved granny has become unwell.

Think about how any cultural, social or racial elements could impact your conversation

Be mindful of any cultural, social and racial similarities or differences that you have with the family, and how this may impact upon your own understanding of the child and their parents or carers. It can be helpful to adopt a curious, sensitive and interested approach.

If other professionals are to be involved following a concern, support the parents and carers through any resulting anxieties and keep them informed along the way

It is often the case that concerns about a child may lead to other professionals becoming involved. Understand that there may be anxiety about this, and make sure that you remain as transparent and open (where safely possible) with the parent or carer about the information that is shared.

Acting on safeguarding concerns

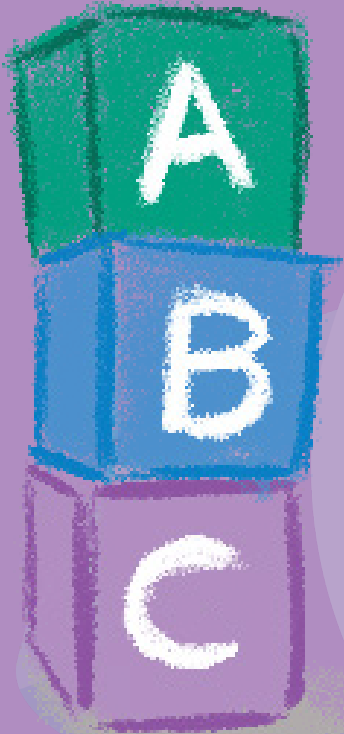
If you have any safeguarding concerns you can speak to your line manager or the Designated Safeguarding Lead in your setting.

You can also call Children's Social Care anonymously for advice before beginning any kind of referral process.

If a referral to Children's Social Care is appropriate, it is usually good practice to be transparent about this with the parent or carer so they are not caught off guard by a call from a social worker.



Early Years in Mind



Early Years in Mind is a free learning network for early years staff and practitioners hosted by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

The network was developed by mental health experts at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

To join the Early Years in Mind learning network, please visit www.annafreud.org/eyim.

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