

TALKING WITH PARENTS ABOUT SENSITIVE TOPICS

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Educators have . . .

- Expertise in child development
- Experience with many children
- Experience with a particular child over weeks and months
- Knowledge about local resources



Basic Expectations For People

- People look generally symmetrical
- People will move in coordinated ways
- People will communicate in ways that others can understand
- People will behave appropriately in social situations
- People will be able to learn

Reactions To Differences

- How do we react to differences?
 - ▣ First reactions are automatic reflexes
- Differences can be
 - ▣ Unfamiliar – new to you
 - ▣ Unexpected – familiar but in a different context
 - ▣ Unsettling – disturbing to you
- Initial reaction may not be a rational reaction

Habituation/Sensitization

- Habituation
 - ▣ When differences become familiar, they become part of your personal comfort zone and noticed less and less
- Sensitization
 - ▣ Training yourself to notice differences in greater detail

When You Are Concerned About A Child . . .

- Begin observing more closely – observe the child over time
- Make notes, describe *what you see* in detail. Gather information about specific behaviors not opinions
- Note when and where behaviors occur and under what circumstances
- Make notes of what you have tried and what happened- see if changing the environment or your approach affects the behavior
- Observe on different days at different times
- Note both positives and areas of concern
- Consult with other professionals, respect privacy
- Schedule a time to meet with the parents

Conducting The Conference – Listening To Parents

- Welcome parents, make them feel comfortable and at ease
- Choose a seating arrangement that brings you together
- Ensure privacy/confidentiality
- Set aside enough time
- Encourage participation – How do the family see the child's development/ behavior? Do they share your same concerns?
- If family has a differing view, ask questions and gather information
- Encourage partnership - Ask if they have any ideas/suggestions about how to help their child

Discussing Your Concerns With Parents

- Think cooperation, collaboration
- Let the family know you are sharing your concerns to support their child's development
- Keep an open mind
- Communicate clearly, without judgment and with concrete examples about specific behaviors – avoid labels and diagnosis
- Listen to responses and questions
- Remember it's not a contest, there's no right or wrong
- Recognize feelings of nervousness, fear, upset, frustration etc.
- Emphasize there is no blame, accusations or judgments
- Come up with a plan together
- Offer referrals, resources, **support** throughout the process
- Do not guarantee eligibility or services from another agency

Starting Where The Family Is . . .

- Everyone moves at a different pace and accepts information differently
- Be empathetic: hearing that life may have to change or that their child is different is very difficult
- Tolerate non acceptance – parents may be shocked or angry
- Tolerate emotional expression
- Understand context of the conversation
 - Inopportune time
 - Incompatible with family beliefs
 - Family life cycle disrupted
 - Relief, validation
- Be available to support the family – don't get caught up in your own feelings

Understanding The Family Perspective: The Dream And The Reality

- Coming to terms with reality may mean grieving the dream or the 'hoped for' child
- Stages of grief
 - Denial
 - Anger
 - Bargaining
 - Depression
 - Acceptance
- Be aware of this loss and what it May mean for this family



Fears That May Keep Us From Saying Something

- Fear of being blamed (killing the messenger)
 - Blaming is a reaction and may also point to the parents blaming themselves
- Fear of unleashing an emotional reaction
 - What if they cry? What if they yell?
- Fear of expressing our own emotions
 - Finding balance between professional composure and expressing sympathy and other helpful feelings
- Fear of not knowing all the answers

Welcome To Holland



Working with Difficult Parents

- Listen with understanding
- Imagine the conversation with you as a parent
- Know your own “hot buttons”
- Paraphrase what they say
- Be aware of your body language and posture
- Acknowledge their reactions
 - “I understand this is difficult to hear . . .”
 - “I can tell you are very upset . . .”
- Allow the parent to feel in control
 - “How would you like me to handle this situation?”
- Sometimes you can only “place them on the path”
- Come to a compromise that doesn’t compromise your professionalism and professional judgment

Remember . . .

- People’s emotional reactions and anger towards the educator are usually the result of displaced feelings from something going on in their personal lives with no connection to you!


