

How to have Difficult Conversations with Parents/Carers

This short guide is for practitioners who work with children and their families. The information in this guide is part of the Neglect Toolkit. It is not exhaustive and it should be used as a reference tool alongside practitioners own protecting children practices and in conjunction with supervision.

Four factors to consider when preparing for a difficult conversation with a parent or carer:

1. Principles – that underpin safeguarding children

2. Planning – how to plan or be prepared

3. The conversation – things to consider

4. Examples – open questions and suggestions

We would like to acknowledge Bedford Safeguarding Board for allowing us to adapt their Difficult Conversations Leaflet for inclusion in our Aberdeenshire Neglect Toolkit.

1. Principles

To support protecting children discussions with parents/carers:

- Always take time to plan the conversation before you speak to parents
- Be open and honest, use basic language, avoid jargon
- Ensure child protection policies are clear
- Include child protection issues in information you give out to parents you are working with
- Explain your statutory duty to safeguard children's welfare, 'duty of care' and requirement to report your concerns
- Ensure parents/carers sign to acknowledge they have read and understood your child protection policy
- For Child Care settings ensure carers are aware of your injury policy, incident book and that they will need to sign this when entries are made
- Raise awareness that injuries acquired away from your agency also need to be recorded and signed by parent/carer to confirm they have been given the information
- Use Early Interventions and signpost to support agencies e.g. Home Start

2. Planning

If you feel it's too risky to speak to parents before speaking to children's social work, then don't. Do not put a child or yourself at risk if:

- There is suspected sexual abuse
- Parents could destroy evidence or hinder a police investigation
- It is possible the child could be silenced

It is good practice to discuss concerns with parents/carers and tell them you are going to make a referral. Before your conversation:

- ✓ plan how you are going to broach your concern and how to respond to different responses e.g. anger, denial, emotional breakdown etc
- ✓ choose a time and place to give full privacy
- ✓ consider the timing of the meeting (e.g. a tired, crying baby etc.) depending on urgency of the concern
- ✓ adapt your style to the parent; consider language barriers or learning difficulties
- ✓ acknowledge your own anxiety about dealing with a difficult situation as it may affect your communication style
- ✓ have the child's key worker with you or nearby for support and as a witness (and vice versa) or get support from social work
- ✓ if previous experience of the parent suggests they pose a risk, make a full risk assessment and do not meet them alone

3. The Conversation

Make sure members of staff know where you are and what you are doing before a meeting.

Tips and ideas for having a difficult conversation:

- Consider your position in the room so no one feels trapped
- Ensure children can't overhear you and are occupied (provide toys etc.)
- Frame the concern in a model of help and support
- Be straight forward - tell the parent a referral to social work is going to be or has been made
- Give clear explanations
- Always remain confidential and professional
- Words are sometimes really hard to find when approaching a parent - use 'active listening'
- Do not argue, interrupt, pass judgement, jump to conclusions or let the parent's sentiment affect you
- Avoid excessive reassurance ...it may not be all right
- Do encourage the parent to talk
- Clarify what the parent means
- Summarise what the parent has said
- Consider your communication style: tone, pitch, speed of voice, body language (body slightly to the side, with an open stance or sit); be calm and make eye contact and appreciate that they may need to talk
- Consider the parent's point of view which may be influenced by: bad experience of

services, lack of trust, limited or distorted understanding of what is appropriate for children, learning difficulties, cultural and language barrier

- Explain the nature of your concern using tact and diplomacy but be direct and use factual information "Liam was not brought for the last two appointments, can you share with me what is getting in the way of this so we can support you?"

Think about the strengths of the family and who else might be able to support them if they are having a difficult time. Doing this helps build relationships and allows a more open conversation. Trauma informed practice will support wellbeing and more effective outcomes.

4. Examples

This is not an exhaustive list and you may want to use a technique of your own, following the general principle of open and probing questions:

- Avoid using "I think" which indicates it could be own opinion
- Avoid using jargon, try the following:
 - ✓ "I need to talk to you about the injury to Emma's face; can you tell me what happened?"
 - ✓ "Oliver has been very lethargic today and says he has not slept. Is there anything going on that might be troubling him?"

- ✓ "Mason's behaviour has changed dramatically over the past few weeks; he has gone from being a happy, outgoing child to a very quiet, withdrawn child. Have you any idea what could have caused this?"
- ✓ "Whenever there is a worry about any child, or they say something about being hurt we legally have to pass on that information to children's services - you may have read this in the parent's information/handbook when Olivia started?"
- ✓ "William told a member of staff that he is slapped every night, and, because of what he said I have informed children's social work. All agencies are expected to talk to social work when children say things like this, and children's social work have asked me to talk to you about this. Can you tell me what happened?"
- Questions can start with the following:
 - ✓ "Is there a reason why.....?"
 - ✓ "We need to have a chat....."
 - ✓ "Ahmad has said....."
 - ✓ "I have noticed Amelia has seemed hungry in the mornings, is she managing to have breakfast before she comes to school?"
 - ✓ "Jakub has a bruise on his face but he can't remember how it happened, do you know how he got this?"