

MODULE 3.2

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

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Communicating with parents

Objectives

- School staff have knowledge and skills for communicating effectively with parents on youth development and/or mental health issues.

Outcomes

- Appreciate the importance and benefits of strengthening communication and interpersonal skills.
- Increase knowledge of how to communicate effectively with parents.
- Develop basic skills and strategies for communicating effectively with parents in relation to youth development and/or mental health issues.

Key messages

- Effective school staff have good communication and interpersonal skills.
- Communication skills can be developed and strengthened over time.
- Effective communication with parents will most likely occur when a positive relationship exists.
- Consideration of the student's strengths when communicating with parents will ensure the best outcomes for students, families and the school.



Positive relationships and effective communication



The benefits of home-school partnerships are apparent, with research consistently finding that teacher and family relationships are important for young people's social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement (Desforges & Aboucher, 2003).

The development of positive relationships between families and school staff takes effort from both parties and typically develops over time rather than over a single event.

School staff bring a range of interpersonal and communication skills to the table, which are important for building successful relationships. Bluestein (2001) reports that parents identify with the following teacher attributes:

- Warmth
- Approachability
- Positive discipline
- Child/young person-centredness
- Effective classroom management
- Reliability
- Trust

The importance of trust

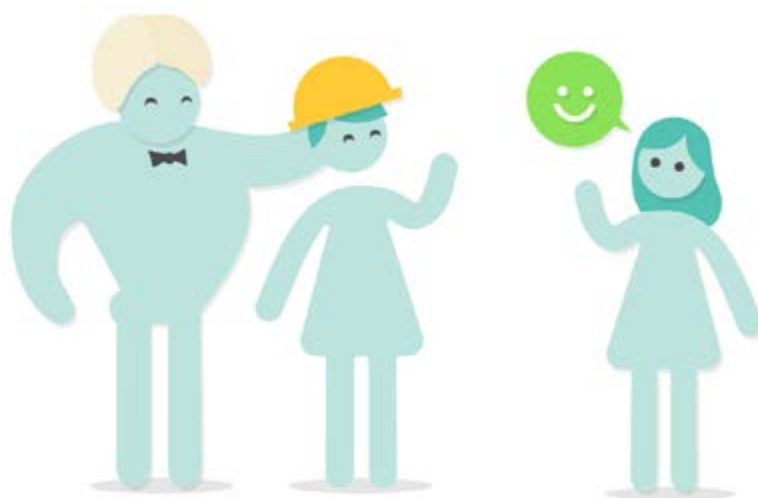
Trust develops when people are honest and open with each other and clear about expectations and boundaries. It is essential that school staff respect the confidentiality of parent information unless legal issues take precedence or the information needs to be conveyed to other staff (with the parents' permission). Being clear and upfront about this early in the conversation can ensure confidentiality and maintain a trusting relationship.

Communicating with parents

Any member of staff can find themselves having conversations in which a parent raises concerns or expresses emotions associated with their parenting or their child, particularly with respect to how their child is going at school. It is therefore helpful for all staff to feel skilled and confident in knowing how to communicate and respond at those times.

Effective communication requires preparation and practice. In particular it requires knowledge of the following areas:

- Parent and staff vulnerabilities**
 Understanding vulnerabilities that both parents (and staff) can feel when communicating or interacting can help staff to reflect on how best to achieve a positive outcome when communicating with parents.
- Strengths-based approach**
 Taking a strengths-based approach in conversations ensures that strengths are always part of the conversation, negative aspects are not the sole focus of the conversation and parents are more likely to appreciate that school staff have the best interests of their child at heart.
- Essential communication skills**
 Communication skills are something we use every day in many different situations. However we need to ensure communication is as clear and positive for the other person as we think it is. Practising ensures that refined skills become a habit.
- Common communication mistakes**
 Understanding common mistakes that hinder communication can help prevent them from happening.
- Cultural differences**
 Being aware that cultural differences may affect communication can help staff prepare.



Appreciating parent and staff vulnerabilities



When dealing with complex issues related to young people, schools and families can sometimes fall into a trap of blaming each other when things are not going well. It is important to avoid this where possible and seek to create an environment of trust, honesty and respect. The capacity to understand and show some empathy for the respective challenges each party faces (parent and teacher or school staff member) is likely to engender the type of mutual respect required to develop a positive working relationship.

Both school staff and parents can feel vulnerable when communicating or interacting, particularly if the purpose of the meeting is to discuss a concern. Some other challenges to effective communication include:

- being time poor or stressed when attempting to communicate
- lack of confidence in one's skills as a parent or a teacher
- lack of experience in teacher/parent communication
- previous negative experiences when communicating or interacting (some parents may be reluctant to engage with their child's school because of negative experiences they had as a student)
- preconceived ideas about the parent/family or teacher/school
- not recognising the benefits of developing a positive working relationship.

Strengths-based approach

When parents and school staff communicate about concerns they have with young people, it can be easy to forget about the strengths of the student and to focus only on problems and negative behaviours. By keeping the student central to the discussion, it will ensure that their needs, developmental stage, strengths and perspective will be considered.

A strengths-based approach is one founded on the following beliefs:

- **All people have strengths and capacities.**
- **People change and grow through their strengths and capacities.**
- **People are the experts on their own situation.**
- **The problem is the problem: the person is not the problem.**
- **Problems can blind people from noticing and appreciating their strengths and capacity to find their own solutions.**
- **People have good intentions.**
- **People are doing the best they can.**

A strengths-based approach does not mean issues or concerns are not raised – rather it includes strengths in the conversation and ensures that the negative aspects are not the sole focus of the conversation. Often solutions to problems can be found when strengths are identified. It can also be a way to enable the conversation to keep moving forward and not become stuck in negativity and helplessness.



Strengths-based example of problem solving

When a parent or school staff member raises a concern about a student's behaviour it can help to notice the times when the student behaves well. This assists in identifying more clearly where the problem may lie. It also helps maintain a sense of self-worth and self-esteem for the student and promotes hopefulness about their prospects of success. Sometimes it can also highlight that at least part of the issue is 'within a situation'.

Including young people in conversations

The degree to which the young person is included in conversations between parents and staff could be the subject of discussion at the school. As young people approach adulthood it may be that they are more often present for discussions. However, there may be times when it is more appropriate for these to occur without the student present. At those times, a prior discussion as well as a plan to follow up with the student will be important. This helps ensure they feel included and trust can be maintained. Including the student also provides an opportunity for them to have their say and to help all parties understand each other. For more information on how to initiate a conversation with a parent if concerned about their child, see **Module 3.3 Sharing concerns with parents.**



Essential communication skills

There are a number of core communication skills that school staff may find helpful when talking with parents.

Communication skills are something we use every day in many different situations. However we need to ensure communication is as clear and positive for the other person as we think it is. Refining communication skills is not difficult but does require practice to form into an effective habit.

Active listening

Active listening helps the parent know that the teacher, or school staff member, is listening and understanding. When the teacher thinks they know what the parent means, they reflect back both the content and any accompanying feelings. The parent can then confirm the accuracy and reframe or correct the information. This provides active engagement and helps both the teacher and parent to gain a better understanding of the situation.

Active listening involves three key skill areas — attending, following and reflecting.

Attending

Attending is the ability to communicate your availability. Ensuring you have the time to attend to someone is an important first step. Other considerations include:

- **Creating a space**
Choose a place that is comfortable, private and removed from distractions.
- **Eye contact**
Eye contact communicates attention and interest in western cultures, though may be inappropriate in other cultures. If unsure, mirror the level of eye contact of the other person.
- **Body language**
Body language can show how attentive and interested we are in what the other person is saying. An open, relaxed posture (for example, not crossing your arms), sitting side by side or facing the person and leaning slightly towards them, shows that you are present and paying attention to what they have to say.
- **Psychological attention**
Psychological attention involves putting all other thoughts aside so that you are completely present in the moment with the person.



Following

Following is the ability to continue the conversation. This can be achieved with the following skills:

- **Open and closed questions**

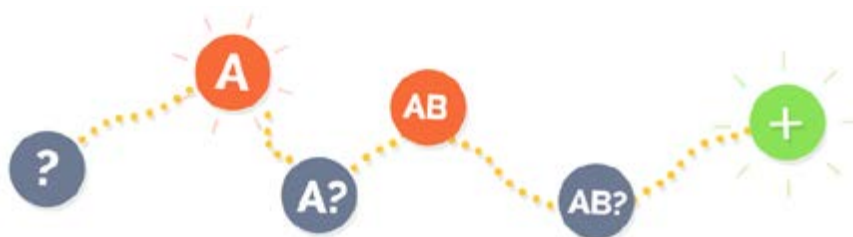
Open questions help the other person to continue talking and allow them to elaborate in more detail, whereas closed questions elicit short specific answers (usually 'Yes' or 'No') and can limit the conversation.

Example: **Open question:** "How is David enjoying school this year?"

Closed question: "Is David enjoying school this year?"

Use a balance of open and closed questions to keep the conversation flowing.

Asking the right amount of questions and using pauses can sometimes enhance the flow of conversation so that the other person feels like they are being listened to, especially if open questions are asked. Using a balance of both open and closed questions, as well as empathic silence and reflection, can help enhance a conversation by making it feel two-way and respectful.



- **Minimal acknowledgers**

Minimal acknowledgers encourage people to continue to speak after starting. These can include 'mm', 'uh-huh' and when complemented by positive body language such as nods, leaning forward and smiling, can be very effective in helping the speaker feel like the other person is listening and caring about what they are saying.

- **A conversation opener**

A conversation opener encourages the other person to begin talking, to talk more or go deeper. They include no judgements and send a message that you are interested in hearing more.

Example: "Would you like to talk about it?"

 "Could you tell me more about that?"

- **Clarifying query**

When people are anxious and/or confused it may be difficult to understand them. A clarifying query invites them to explain further.

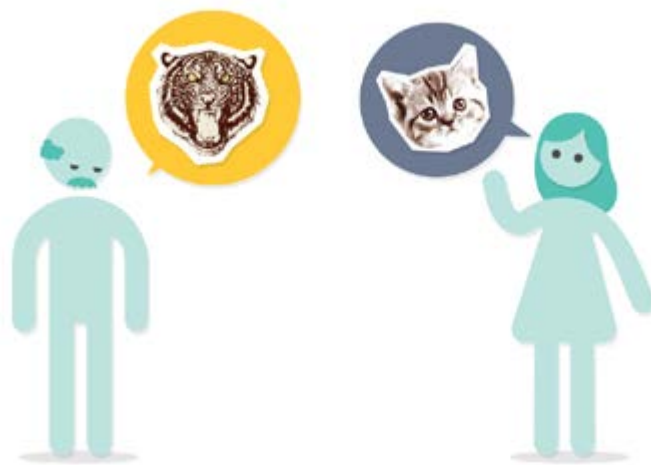
Example: "I didn't quite catch that. Could you please tell me in a different way?"

 "I think you said that ... Did I understand correctly?"

Reflecting

Reflective responses involve putting the feelings and content of what someone has said into your own words. They show the other person that you understand the meaning of what they have told you.

- Example:* “When this happens it leaves you feeling”
(Reflects feelings experienced)
- “Sounds like a really tough day.”
(Communicates understanding of the situation)



Reflecting skills include:

- **Paying attention to feeling words**

- Example:* “I am so annoyed at myself for letting her walk all over me”.
This statement indicates the person is specifically upset about being taken advantage of.

- **Picking up clues from the overall message**

- Example:* “I kept pacing up and down the hallway after he went to bed”.
This statement indicates a level of worry or stress associated with the problem.

- **Empathic silence**

Some people may feel uncomfortable sitting in silence in the presence of another person. When silence is used appropriately however, it can convey understanding, patience and attention.

- **Focusing and prioritising**

Focusing a conversation on the main content helps ensure the most pressing needs are discussed.

Example: “I can hear that there is a lot going on for you right now. Can you tell me what the most urgent issue is for you right now, so we can focus on that?”

“You’ve told me about ... and ... I’m wondering whether you would like to focus on one of these issues today, so we can work through it together?”

- **Empathy**

Empathy is built on a foundation of acceptance and respect. It shows the other person you understand their perspective without passing judgement from your point of view. It communicates understanding and acceptance and helps to build trust and support.

Example: “I can’t cope with Daniel’s behaviour any longer. I don’t know what to do.”

Empathic response: “Sounds like things have been really tough at home lately and you’re running out of ideas.”

- **Clarifying and checking**

Clarifying and checking shows you are listening and understand. It is a valuable communication strategy and can help prevent misunderstandings.

Example: “If I’ve got this right, you’re feeling really upset about how Abdullah behaved after school yesterday.”

- **Summarising**

Summarising is a helpful way to show that you have understood the main message from the conversation. It reflects to the speaker that you have been listening and understand their point of view.

Example: “When we first started talking you told me that you were worried about Tanja’s latest attitude change. If I’ve got this right, you’re hoping to get some support in dealing with this and would like some suggestions for where to go next?”

Common communication mistakes



Sometimes we can behave in ways, or say things, that can affect the flow of communication. It is a good idea to be aware of these so we can aim for effective conversations.

Some things to be aware of include:

- not listening or selective listening (for example, when distracted by your own thoughts)
- allowing your own agenda to get in the way
- judging, diagnosing, lecturing or ridiculing
- being reassuring when there may not be a positive outcome (for example, "You'll be fine.")
- the 'you statement'. Many communication blockers start with "You...". A 'you statement' is often an opinion or judgement.
- lack of time. Staff may indicate that they are busy and don't have much time to talk with parents. If time is limited, staff can say something like "I only have five minutes right now, but could we meet at...".

Cultural differences

Core communication skills and approaches to parenting and caring can vary between cultural groups. Misunderstandings can easily occur due to these variances, rather than from actual differences in opinion or ways of doing things. Communicating effectively with parents and families from diverse backgrounds requires an ability to understand the needs of their family, show respect for diversity, and a willingness to hear views and ways of doing things that are different from our own.

This will happen best when school staff take a respectful, curious and non-judgemental approach to finding out about the family background. For a supportive and respectful relationship to develop, it helps to look for what both parties have in common and to maintain a focus on the needs of the student.

The following list of considerations could be useful for schools to explore when working through the best ways to communicate with diverse groups of parents within their school community”

- When is an interpreter required? How would I ask parents if they need one? How do I book one?
- What do I know about the family’s background and what’s the best way to find out more? What can I pick up from the student? Can I ask other staff members? How can I ask the parents about themselves?
- How do I find out about the parents’ expectations of me? Do we share a common understanding about the role of parents, teachers and other school staff in the student’s education? Do they know how the Australian education system works?
- Who can support me at the school, or from the community, if I’m not sure about how to engage with a family?
- How can I reflect on my own body language to know if this is having an effect on the interaction?



Background interference

Parents and school staff may come from very different backgrounds and have had very different life experiences. They may not usually interact with each other but find themselves coming together to support the student. This can be confronting for staff and parents, and leadership support may be required to assist communication and avoid blaming each other or misunderstandings.

Whole school communication strategy



Increasingly families are becoming more complex and have varying expectations of what the school can provide. Continuing to reflect on and develop staff communication skills will ensure that all staff, including graduates and staff new to the school, will be well prepared and ready to communicate effectively with parents. Communication is a two-way process where school staff and parents share information with each other and are ready to work together in an ongoing way.

Review policies and procedures so that staff know what to do when parents raise concerns.

Consider:

- What concerns should be handled by various staff members?
- At what point should concerns be referred to leadership or welfare staff?
- What is the process for staff to respond to their legal obligations around mandatory reporting if a parent shares information that raises concerns for the staff member about the student's safety?
- What resources can staff refer parents to?
- How do staff handle early morning visits or interruptions during the school day?
- What additional training might staff require in order to effectively communicate with parents? How can this be undertaken realistically given competing demands on time? Are there particular groups of staff requiring additional training or support (e.g. graduates, experienced teachers whose roles have previously only been about curriculum)? Are there mechanisms such as mentoring that will enable support and training on the job?
- Are there expectations that all staff should be available to parents to discuss concerns? Can anyone opt out of this? What do staff do if they feel unsure or unsafe?

References and key readings

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