

Parent Aware Tip Sheets

Daily Conversations

Why is it important to have daily conversations with parents?

Caregivers in child care/early education programs share the responsibility for a child's welfare with the child's family. Each day caregivers and parents have opportunities to share information and to get to know one another. This exchange of information helps to ensure the child's health, safety and positive development. Taking advantage of these opportunities presents some important benefits:

- Parents and caregivers get to know one another through daily, informal conversations. This familiarity builds trust and respect. Finding time each day to talk with family members about little things makes it easier to hold a conversation when there is something bigger, and potentially more important, to discuss.
- Caregivers can share information about the child's day that makes parenting easier. Parents can share information about the child's time at home, providing caregivers with important insights. For example, a parent might share that a child did not sleep well. This alerts the caregiver that the child may be irritable or sleepy.
- As caregivers get to know a child's family members, they develop a greater appreciation for the culture in which the child is developing. Caregivers can learn about cultural traditions, celebrations, foods, preferences for guidance, and the values and beliefs that impact the child's life.
- Caregivers and parents can share observations about the child's development. Sharing information about the child's abilities, interests and challenges at home and at the program provides a more complete picture of the child's development.
- Trusting and friendly relationships with families can provide satisfaction and enjoyment for caregivers. When caregivers and family members know and respect one another, family members may more fully appreciate the role the caregiver plays in helping the child to develop. This can be very satisfying for caregivers who do not always feel their work is valued.

How can you plan for daily conversations?

For some providers informal conversations with other adults develop easily. For others, these conversations require greater effort and planning. Regardless of the ease with which conversation naturally occurs, providers must take very seriously their role in initiating and maintaining regular conversations with family members. The following suggestions may help in planning for regular informal conversations:

- Be aware of the times of day when family members typically arrive at the program to drop off children or pick them up.
- Plan activities during morning drop off times and afternoon pickup times that do not require close, constant supervision. For example, plan table activities such as play dough or puzzles that interest the children but do not need the involvement of caregivers to be safe and successful. This will leave you free to interact with family members for a few minutes.
- Throughout the day make a few notes about positive things you might like to share with family members at pickup time. For example, note the activities the child enjoyed, new accomplishments you observed, or special friends the child played with.

- Learn the names of family members. While a parent is “Maria’s mom” she is also “Laura.” Referring to the parent by name indicates that you see her as an important individual.
- Whenever possible ensure that someone working in the program speaks the family’s home language. It is much easier for family members to engage in conversation if they are able to do so in their home language. Welcome the family member to the program each day with a friendly greeting. Even if you are busy with the children, wave and acknowledge the parent quickly.

What are some tips for developing conversation?

- Be upbeat and positive. Family members are more likely to engage in conversation when the caregiver appears interested, upbeat and welcoming.
- Whenever possible, arrange a special time for difficult conversations. Try not to ambush family members with startling news, complaints or major concerns during informal conversations.
- Ask open-ended questions and let parents lead the conversation. Remember, the conversation is not an interview or an interrogation. Show interest in the family’s point of view. Invite family members into the conversation by asking questions. For example, a caregiver might ask a parent, “How was your day?” or “How was the trip to the beach last weekend?”
- Develop professional boundaries. Although you will and should get to know family members well, it is important to remain professional. For example, it is inappropriate to share information about other children in the group with one child’s family member, even if you know that person well. Similarly, it is important for caregivers to be trustworthy and to treat information shared by families respectfully. For example, if a parent shares that she has lost a job it is not appropriate to share that information with others.
- Be open to all families equally. It is natural that you may have more in common with some family members than others. It is also natural that some family members more easily make conversation and build relationships with caregivers. However, as a professional caregiver, it is your responsibility to engage every family member, even those who are challenging or distant. Make a point to talk with each family member each day for at least a few minutes and longer when possible.
- Remember to listen. A conversation involves give and take, sharing between at least two people. While it is important to provide information to parents it is equally important to hear what parents have to say. Keep in mind that parents have unique insights about their child that can be of great value to caregivers.
- Keep the focus on the child. While it is fine to spend some time talking about general topics or topics of interest to the parent, it is most important to share information about the child. Parents count on informal conversations to learn about the child’s day and to get a sense for what happens in the program.

What is the best way to talk about difficult topics?

Sometimes caregivers and family members need to discuss difficult topics such as challenging behaviors, developmental concerns or illnesses. These conversations go beyond the topics usually suited for daily, informal conversations. When issues come up that require a deeper, lengthier conversation caregivers should:

- Arrange a time to meet with the parent. Alert the parent that you will need more than the few minutes that might be available at drop off or pickup time.
- If you are unsure how the parent might react to the request, try to avoid bringing up the topic in front of the child. Make a phone call to schedule the meeting time.
- Talk to the parent away from other parents and where the children cannot overhear the conversation.
- Before approaching the topic, consider the parent’s point of view. Thinking about the way in which parents might react and how they might feel, will help you to approach difficult topics in a sensitive way.