

How to have Difficult Conversations with Parents/Carers

This guide is for practitioners who work with children and their families.

The information in this guide is not exhaustive and it should be used as a reference tool alongside practitioners own safeguarding practices and in conjunction with appropriate supervision.

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

1. Principles – to support safeguarding discussions with parents/ carers
2. Planning – how to plan or be prepared
3. The conversation – things to consider when having a conversation
4. Examples – open questions and suggestions.

1. Principles

- 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 safeguarding policy and offer them a copy.
- 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 Help, refer to children's centre or signpost to other support agencies e.g. Health Visitor, Home Start, parenting courses etc.

2. Planning

If you feel it's too risky to speak to parents before speaking to children's social care, 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.

Otherwise it's 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 care.
- If previous experience of the parent suggests they pose a risk, make a full risk assessment and do not meet alone.

3. The Conversation

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

- Consider your position in the room so no one feels trapped.
- Ensure children can't overhear you and are occupied (provide toys etc.)
- Be straight forward - tell the parent a referral to social care is going to be or has been made but frame the concern in a model of help and support.
- Tell them that 'as a parent they will want to get to the bottom of the matter'.
- 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, give advice, 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, learning difficulties, cultural and language barrier.
- Explain the nature of your concern using tact and diplomacy but be direct and use factual information "Jodie was not brought for the last two appointments, what is the reason for this?"
- Do not use words such as child protection or child abuse, try words such as concerns, welfare and duty of care.

4. Examples

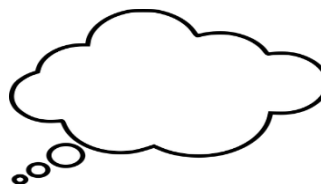
This is not an exhaustive list and you may want to use a technique of your own, following the general principle of open and probing questions. Avoid using "I think" which indicates it could be own opinion and avoid using jargon. You could consider the examples below:

- 'I need to talk to you about the injury to Jane's face; can you tell me what happened?'
- 'Peter has been very lethargic today and says he has not slept is there anything going on that might be troubling him?'

- 'Rubina's behaviour has changed dramatically over the past few weeks; she 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 Billy 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 care. All settings are expected to talk to social care when children say things like this, and children's social care 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.....'
- 'Omar has said.....'
- 'I have noticed John has seemed hungry in the mornings, is he managing to have breakfast before he comes to school?'
- 'Robert has a bruise on his face but he can't remember how it happened, do you know how he did it?'



Next Steps?

- Once you have had a conversation or a series of discussions with the parent or carer, you may need to consider what actions, if any, you need to take. Consider the following:
- Professional curiosity – have you confirmed the response you have received with other agencies? Do you need to make further enquiries?
- Trust your instincts – you have spoken to the parent/carer and you know the child - trust your instincts if you still have concerns.
- Follow safeguarding procedures – ensure you check your agency safeguarding procedures and seek guidance from an appropriate person.
- Pre and post-supervision - agencies have varying supervision procedures; be sure to raise your concerns and get guidance & support before and after you have had a conversation with a parent as this will give you chance to reflect on what happened and discuss what needs to happen next (reflective practice).
- Escalation and Resolution – if you are still concerned about a decision or practice you can escalate your concerns; WSCB recommends that all practitioners use the GM resolution Procedure at:

<http://www.wiganlscb.com/Docs/PDF/Professional/Resolution-Policy.pdf>

Following any discussion if you are concerned about the safety of a child or you believe they are at risk of immediate danger - contact the police. If you believe the child is at risk of significant harm – contact the police on 999 or Wigan Children's Duty Team on 01942 828300.

Information adapted from Manchester Safeguarding Children Board.