

Your 2-minute guide to...

Having difficult conversations with parents



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Sometimes we need to have conversations with parents that may be difficult both for them and us. The parent may be unhappy about something that has happened in the setting, or we may have a concern about their child that we need to discuss with them.

It is important that we don't shy away from these conversations, but welcome them in a calm manner. This shows that we don't want to avoid concerns and difficulties but discuss them and work them through.

The Education Endowment Fund (EEF) emphasises the importance of [Working with parents to support their children's learning](#) (2021). 'Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's learning, and levels of parental engagement are consistently associated with better academic outcomes'.

It is, then, important for us to do all we can to make this effective, however tricky a conversation might be.

The basics

Invite the parents into a confidential space. This will show that you respect their privacy and are making proper time for them, rather than having a rushed and public conversation at the door.

Be sure to have an interpreter present when needed: without this a useful conversation will be impossible.

A rule of thumb in all communication with parents is to use clear, everyday language. Jargon will not only be ineffective, but off-putting.

It is important to be factual – this will avoid any misinterpretations of what you say. Say exactly what happened and what your concerns are.

Sitting on the same level as the parent shows that the conversation is on an equal footing. As with any conversation, *active listening* is central to its success. It is especially important if the conversation is likely to be a tricky one.

Tips for active listening

- Use *open-ended questions* - this will enable you to get more information and a better understanding of the child and family.
- Show that you're *attentive*: smiling and nodding (in moderation) can help.
- Try not to *interrupt*.
- Thank them for sharing and check that you've *understood correctly*.
- If you don't agree with what they have said, say so and explain why – this shows that you are engaging seriously and not passively listening.
- If they are upset or worried *acknowledge it and be reassuring*. You could say something like, 'I can see that you're upset, but I'm sure we'll work together, and things will feel different soon.'

Active, respectful listening should make a challenging conversation easier, and more useful.

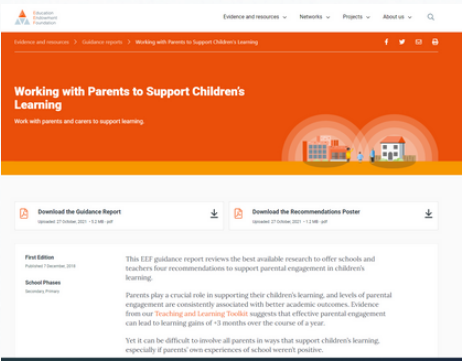
Tips for having difficult parents

- Prepare for it: think carefully about how you want to approach the conversation, bearing in mind all you know about the child and family.
- Speak to the parent face to face: talking on the phone can lead to misunderstandings, as well as run the risk of not being confidential or uninterrupted.
- Make sure your meeting is confidential: quietly ask to speak with them as they arrive or call them a little earlier in the day asking them to come in 10 minutes or so before picking up. Equally, if a parent asks to talk to you, suggest the same.
- Try not to engage in conversation until you are in the confidential space.
- Be open and clear about what has happened or what the concern is.
- Ask them if they have had the same experience at home.
- Reflect with the parent about how you can work together to support the child.
- If they ask something that you don't know the answer to, just say 'I need some time to think about that. Is it OK if I get back to you later/tomorrow?'
- Arrange a follow-up meeting.

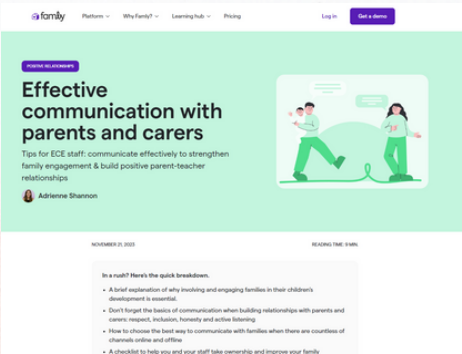
***Communicating effectively with parents strengthens your relationships with them.
This will be beneficial to the child's learning.***

A longer read:

EEF (2021) [Working with parents to support children’s learning](#)



famly (2023) [Effective Communication with parents and carers](#): communicating effectively to strengthen family engagement and build positive parent-teacher relationships.



[The Progress Check at 2](#) (p28-29): guidance on talking to parents if you’re concerned their child has SEND.

