

Building Partnerships Series

For Early Childhood Professionals



Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Acknowledgments

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement would like to acknowledge the Brazelton Touchpoints Center for leadership in developing this resource. We recognize and value the role of parents and programs in making a difference for children, families, and communities.

This document was developed with funds from Grant #90HC0014 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care, by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

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Suggested citation: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2020). *Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families.*



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Parent, Family and Community Engagement



Preparing for Challenging Conversations with Families

Addressing challenging topics with families can be a way to strengthen relationships and build trust. Sometimes it is difficult to know how to discuss a challenging topic with a family.

Explore this resource to learn:

- Why prepare for challenging conversations
- What makes conversations challenging
- Steps to prepare for conversations with families about challenging topics
- Strategies to use during conversations with families

Head Start and Early Head Start program staff can use this resource to partner with families. Supervisors and managers may use this resource in training, meetings, and individual conversations with staff.

This resource is part of the **Building Partnerships with Families** series available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Six Steps to Prepare for Challenging Conversations with Families

Step 1. Reflect on what you think and feel before talking with the family. Reflect on your own or with a supervisor or staff you trust.

Step 2. Prepare your questions about the challenging topic.

Step 3. Prepare questions to learn about the family's perspective on the challenging topic.

Step 4. Prepare the family for the conversation.

Step 5. Prepare the physical and emotional environment for talking with the family.

Step 6. Practice with other staff or a supervisor. Share your reflections and questions.

Why Prepare for Challenging Conversations

Head Start and Early Head Start program staff and families partner to nurture children to be healthy, ready for school, and successful in life.

Trusting, respectful, goal-oriented relationships between staff and parents are essential to ensure the healthy growth and development of young children. These relationships also help to strengthen family well-being. Positive relationships develop over time through multiple interactions. These relationships can improve wellness for both staff and families by reducing the isolation and stress that some families and staff members may experience (Sparrow, 2011).

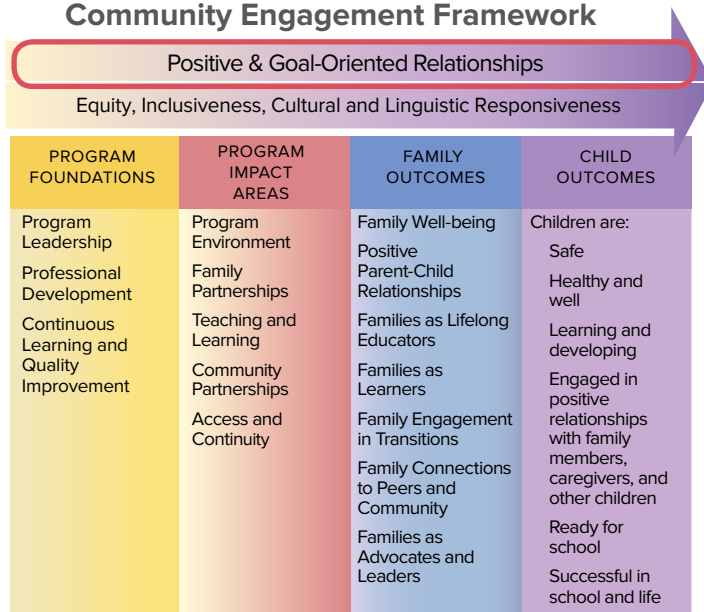
As you build these relationships, you may find that some topics are challenging to bring up or discuss. Examples may include: concerns about family well-being, child development, child and family safety as a result of domestic violence, substance use or misuse, or child maltreatment. Or you may feel unsure about what to say when a topic is sensitive or difficult to face for some families. Some topics may feel uncomfortable for you. You may wonder if they are uncomfortable for the family. You may feel uncertain about how the conversation will go. You may want to avoid saying something that you think will disrupt your efforts to continue a positive relationship with the family.

You can prepare for these conversations. Reflect in advance on what to say and what not to say. Think about what you might need to say that you are not sure you should. Your reflections can draw on your own expertise. Talk with your supervisor, the mental health consultant, or trusted peers and staff in your program.

Parent and Family

In this resource, parent and family refer to all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child. They may include biological, adoptive and foster parents, pregnant women and expectant families, grandparents, legal and informal guardians, and adult siblings.

Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework



Positive, goal-oriented relationships are mutually respectful partnerships with families focused on families' goals. These relationships promote parent-child relationships and family well-being.

What Makes Conversations Challenging

For many staff, challenging topics may relate to concerns about families' safety or how children are being cared for. Whether a topic is challenging depends on individual staff members and their experiences. What you find challenging may not be the same as what your co-worker finds challenging.

Many of the topics that people find challenging have been considered stigmatizing or too personal to talk about. Often they affect families' well-being— examples include opioid and other substance use, homelessness, and domestic violence, among others (Avery, Beardslee, Ayoub, & Watts, 2012).

Some topics may be challenging for staff to discuss because they bring up difficult memories or current challenges from their own life. Head Start or Early Head Start staff who have previously been parents in the program may identify with the families' experiences. When raw and vulnerable feelings arise, staff may wonder how they can maintain their professional stance.

These feelings are very common for staff who work with children and families. The distress you may feel at first, however, can lead you to deeper empathy, and more authentic caring. It can also lead to a greater appreciation of your strengths and families' strengths. Turn to safe and trusting relationships with peers and supervisors for reflection and insight. These relationships can help you find a path to your own inner resources.

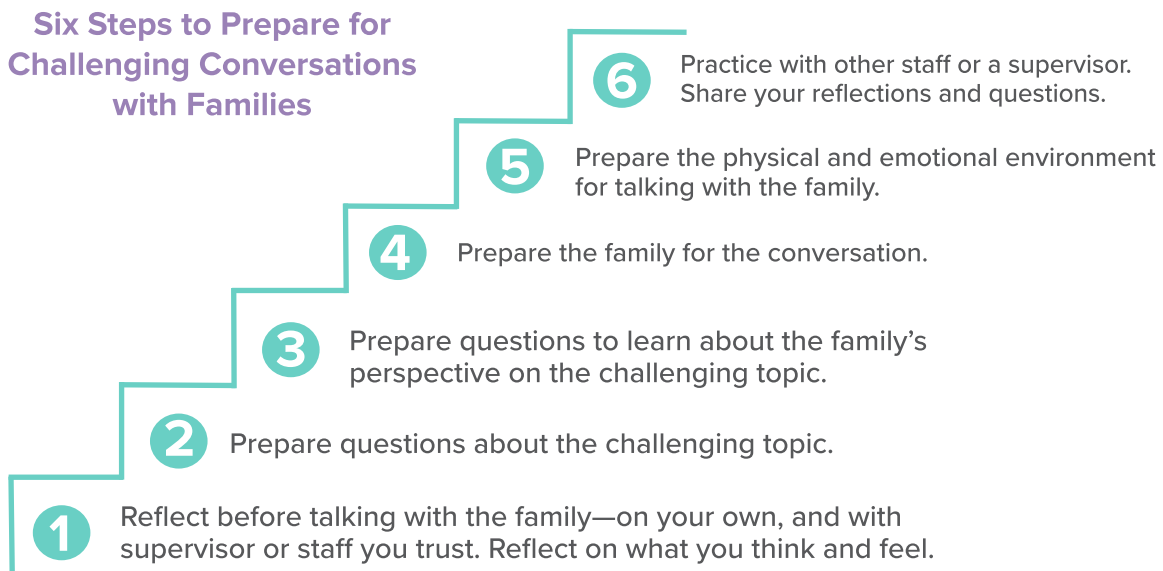


Professional Stance

Professional stance refers to how you present and conduct yourself with peers and families. It shows the values and commitment you bring to your work. Your professional stance is informed by the ways you think about who you strive to be in the work you do.

Six Steps to Prepare for Challenging Conversations with Families

Use the six steps below to prepare for conversations with family members about challenging topics. Preparation for these conversations is not just the work of individual staff members. Program leaders, supervisors, and managers can emphasize the importance of preparing for these conversations. They can prioritize the support, time, and space that staff need to prepare.



Step 1 Reflect before talking with the family—on your own and with a supervisor or staff you trust. Reflect on what you think and feel.

Taking the time to reflect is essential to creating and maintaining positive, goal-oriented relationships with families. Understanding how our experiences, beliefs, and cultures influence our work allows us to acknowledge our strengths. It helps to recognize our personal reactions as they arise in our professional roles.

Reflecting on your possible reactions to a topic can help you prepare for and understand the strong feelings, attitudes, or opinions you may have, whether they are positive or negative. For example, you may find it challenging to focus on the strengths of a family when you are worried about their or their child's safety because of opioid use or domestic violence.

Remind yourself to keep looking for the strengths in a family, even when there are challenges to address. When you can do this, you are more likely to have a productive interaction. These positive interactions promote respectful partnerships with families. These partnerships are the foundation for facing challenges together.

You can reflect on your own and with a supervisor or staff you trust.

Step 1

Reflect before talking with the family, cont.

Areas for Reflection

Consider these areas of reflection and what to say to families about challenging topics before beginning the conversation.

Your thoughts and feelings about the challenging topic

Your current relationship with a family or parent

Your knowledge about the family or parent

Your feelings about the family or parent

Your ideas about working toward an understanding with the family

Your ideas for managing your time and following up

Your thoughts and feelings about the challenging topic

Reflection. How are you feeling about this topic? About having this conversation?

- What are your thoughts about having this conversation? What are your feelings?
- What are you hoping will happen? What would be the best outcome? What are you afraid of or most worried about? What is the worst thing that could happen?
- Who could help you prepare for the conversation?

Your current relationship with a family or parent

Reflection. What is the current status of your relationship with the family or parent?

- How do you feel about your relationship with this family? Have you built a positive, goal-oriented relationship? If so, what are the strengths in your relationship?
- Have there been past challenges you have faced with this family and feelings that you and the family have not repaired or resolved?
- Does the relationship feel strong enough to have a productive conversation? What will you do if the family does not want to meet again?



Reflection. What do you know about this family or parent?

- What do you know about this family's cultures and home languages? What communication strategies might be most respectful?
- Does this family trust staff and leaders at your program? How might this conversation change that?
- Have you had challenging conversations with this family before?
 - Have there been strong feelings?
 - How did the family perceive the conversation? For example, did they see it as an effort to work together or offer help, or as a threat or danger?
 - What have you learned about what might work best?
 - Are you the right person to talk about this topic with this family? Are there other staff better suited to address the topic, with you or on their own?
- How is the family doing right now? What stresses might affect how the family reacts to what you say?
- What changes in this family's reality are you asking them to face? Will you be introducing new information that may be difficult to hear? (For example, the child is not developing typically, has been hurt, or is in danger)?
- What might this conversation mean for this family? What problems or trade-offs might arise from this conversation?
- What can you say to gently prepare the family for information that may be difficult to hear?
- Is this a good, bad, or neutral time for the family to have this conversation? If it is not a good time now, what will be lost or gained by waiting? If you decide to wait, how will you know when the time is right, or better?



Reflection. How do you feel about this family?

- How do you feel about this family? Do you like, respect, and trust this family?
- What assumptions have you made about this family? Do you have any judgments or biases you need to recognize and set aside? Are you ready to discover that some of your assumptions may be wrong?
- How do you think the family feels about you, other staff, and the program? Do they like, respect, or trust you, other staff, and the program?

Your ideas about working toward an understanding with the family

Reflection. How can you work toward a shared understanding with the family?

- How will you begin the conversation to try and create shared meaning? Will you describe behaviors you have noticed? Will you share your opinion? Will you ask if the parent is open to hearing your opinion? What questions will you ask the family and when?
- How will you know that the family has understood what you intended to say? Will you ask the family to repeat what they have heard?
- How will you know that you have accurately understood what the family has said? Will you restate it for them to check your understanding?

Your ideas for managing your time and following up

Reflection. How will you manage your time and plan for follow-up?

- How much time will you have for the conversation? What will you do if you or the family need more time?
- What is your follow-up plan so you can reconnect and check in again? Planning for another meeting can allow you and the family an opportunity to check on misunderstandings or hard feelings. Together you may be able to make repairs or resolve issues.

In extreme circumstances, such as when there are safety concerns, you may need to decide that you should not have another conversation. Talk with your manager or supervisor if this is the case. Be sure to discuss whether a different staff person should try to have a follow-up conversation with the family.

Step

2

Prepare your questions about the challenging topic.

Think specifically about what you are prepared to ask and why. What do you need to know before you start the conversation?

- What questions do you want to be sure to ask? What might help you in your work or to allow the family to feel heard and understood?
- What outcomes do you expect? What possible outcomes are you prepared for? What are your options? Your back-up plans?
- Do you have resources to share if the family requests more information? Do you know where to refer the family, if needed?
- Is there a staff member who could give you some of the background information you need? Should that staff member take the lead or join you in the conversation on this topic?
- Do you have information about a community agency or partner if you need to make a referral for services? Do you have a contact person you can introduce the family member to? Are you prepared to make a plan with the family for the referral. How will you follow up with the family and contact person? (These steps can be part of a warm referral or handoff.)

Step 3

Prepare questions to learn about the family's perspective on the challenging topic.

Preparing to understand the family's perspective will be important for your relationship with the family.

Think specifically about what you will need to be ready to ask the family and why.

- How might the family view a conversation about this topic with you?
- What feelings might the family have about the topic? Examples might be surprise, relief, shock, fear, shame, frustration, or hopelessness. Might they see the topic as less important than you do, or not as a problem at all?
- How will you work with the family to understand more about how your cultures might affect how you both see the challenging topic?
- What understandings or misunderstandings might the family have about why you want to address this topic with them?
- What potential negative outcomes might the family think could arise from this conversation?
- How will the answers to your questions help you in your work to partner with the family?
- What might the family hope to gain from this conversation?



Step 4

Prepare the family for the conversation.

Take the time to prepare families for the conversation. Consider their possible perspectives about the topic and the conversation.

- What should the family know about why you will be talking together? What should they know about what you will talk about, and what outcomes you are hoping for? Have you been clear and specific about the nature, purpose, and spirit of the conversation that you have invited the family to have with you? For example:
 - Do family members expect that you may be offering to help with matters that they may consider highly private or personal? Do they expect to work on differences in understandings of a situation? Or do they expect you to share concerns you may have?
 - Is there someone the family would like to join the conversation who would help them feel more comfortable?
 - Should an interpreter attend? Is there anyone who should not be present (like the child or a partner who has been using violence)?

Step
5

Prepare the physical and emotional environment for talking with the family.

Think about how you will prepare the environment for the conversation. Keep in mind privacy, comfort, and safety. Consider offering a snack, such as fruit and crackers or a cup of water or tea, according to your program protocols. Having food or drink together can help reduce tensions and set a positive tone.

How you prepare the environment will depend on the topic to be discussed. For example, some topics may create safety risks. In those cases, plan to meet in a location that you can easily and quickly exit and where other staff who can help contain the situation are readily available. Safety risks may include, for example, informing the family that you will need to file a mandated report on suspected child abuse or neglect. Another may be sharing concerns about intimate partner violence.

How you prepare the physical environment will also depend on where the conversation will take place—in an office, in the center, or during a home visit. If the conversation will be in an office, you can invite family members to sit where they will be most comfortable. If you have any concerns about your safety, you will need to sit closest to the door. If you meet in the family's home, ask where they would like you to sit. You would not want to bring up topics that might create a safety risk while in their home..

Keep these factors in mind as you consider ways that you can prepare the physical and emotional environment:

- Is the physical space private? Comfortable? Welcoming or intimidating for the family?
- Will you ask what the family needs to feel comfortable and safe, both physically and emotionally?
- Can you and the family member leave the space without having your exits blocked by each other?
- Are there people nearby who can help you and family members at the time of the conversation, if needed?
- Will you begin by asking what the family understands about the purpose and goals of the conversation? Will you offer to clarify, if needed?
- Will you express your positive intent, your interest, in and your respect for the family's perspectives?
- Will you indicate that family members do not need to answer any questions they prefer not to answer? How will you let them know that the only right answer is their own answer? That they can ask to end the conversation and leave if at any point they become uncomfortable?
- Do you and the family members have a way of contacting people to ask for help during the conversation? For addressing any misunderstandings after the conversation?



Step
6

Practice with other staff or a supervisor. Share your reflections and questions.

You may wonder how you can put the suggestions in the first five steps into practice.

One way to prepare is to practice with a peer, or to work with a supervisor or manager. Together, you can review and consider the suggestions. Then pick a challenging topic to role-play a conversation. The topic might be one you are expecting to discuss with a family. Or you might choose a topic you have discussed in the past. Or choose one that you know a peer is concerned about.

Work with your partner to make the role-play comfortable. Don't expect to get everything right. Value your mistakes as opportunities for learning. Take turns playing the roles of the staff member and the family member. Stop and give each other honest feedback. Focus first on what each of you think you did well. Share your reflections about each difficult moment in the conversation.

Pause over the course of your role-play to consider what you are thinking and feeling. Think about what you are worried about or struggling with. Refer to the Areas For Reflection (p. 5) to spark your and your partner's thinking.

Taking time to reflect is essential to creating and maintaining positive, goal-oriented relationships with families. Use and practice the six steps to prepare for your conversation with families about challenging topics. You can prepare yourself to be curious, to learn, to express your genuine concern, and to work toward a shared understanding. Take time to work with other staff or a supervisor to plan carefully for emotional and physical safety—for the family and for yourself.



Strategies to Use During Conversations with Families

Consider these strategies to manage moments that feel challenging in conversations with families:

- Focus on self-regulation
- Focus on the family
- Work through your own feelings
- Take time for yourself
- Seek support

Focus on self-regulation

When you face a moment that feels challenging, focus on your self-regulation. Take a moment to collect your thoughts. Take a deep breath. Pause the conversation or take a break. If you do need a break, the family may be grateful for one, too.

Try using words like, “This is such a valuable conversation. What we’re talking about is real and difficult. I want to be sure we honor how important it is. Is it okay with you if we take a pause now?

We could pick up where we left off, after we give ourselves a little break. May I get you something to drink, like water or tea?”

Focusing on your self-regulation can help families as they face the challenges in their lives. Caring for yourself can help you care for families. Managing your thoughts and feelings can also help you avoid some common reactions that might seem negative to families. Common reactions to avoid include minimizing feelings that may be difficult (like fear, pain, loss, anger). Another is moving too quickly to focus on the positives before validating what a family is feeling. Families may feel you are not hearing them or that you are not able to handle what they are feeling.

Focus on the family

Sometimes a family’s experiences bring up our own experiences. When this happens, it can be tempting to say, “I know what that’s like,” or to say “I understand how you feel.” There are times when this can be helpful. It is important, however, to stop and consider what this might feel like for the family before you say it. It can be difficult for a family to believe that anyone does understand. The family may need you to keep the focus on them, rather than you.

It may be most helpful for the family to hear that you are trying to understand and that you care. Concentrating on those two things may help you move past memories of your own. You can focus on getting back to understanding the family’s experience, and what is unique and different from yours.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is managing your thoughts and feelings so you can take action to reach your goals. This may include actions you take in relationships, at work, at home, and in other settings (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos & Hamoudi, 2015). How we self-regulate is influenced by our relationships and cultures.

Work through your own feelings

Some of the most difficult feelings for staff to deal with may be when they don't know how to help. Or, when they think they know exactly what would help, but do not have the resources or power to do so. These are very common feelings for those of us who work with children and families. They are sometimes referred to as “moral injury” because these situations can feel like a betrayal of our conscience or value system.

Yet families almost always already know the limits of what we can and cannot do to help. Families can still find comfort when they know that we care deeply about them and will do whatever we can—even though it may not be enough. Often what matters most is simply being clear that we will not abandon them. It helps to know that we will stay by their side no matter what. This kind of commitment can help families regain hope. It can restore their courage when adversity is wearing them down.

When you do feel like you have been through the same thing as a family you are working with, you may think you know exactly what the family should do. In these moments, it is important to remember that the solutions that may work for the family might be quite different from those that have worked for you. Your job is to partner with the family to find their own solutions by drawing on their resources and experiences. You can share your own only after they have done this, and only if they have asked for your advice.

Take time for yourself

When a family's experience does connect you with painful times in your past or right now, try to take time alone. Think your own thoughts, feel your own feelings, and cry if you need to. Remember that you are not alone. This happens to most of us who do this kind of work.

Consider sharing a few words with someone whom you can trust to understand your story and receive it with the respect and care it deserves. Sometimes simply thinking about that person can make you feel better. If there is no one like that in your life right now, then this experience may help you resolve to develop a relationship where you can share. If what you learn from families helps you feel gratitude to them and for the work you do, that can provide comfort, too.

Mindful self-compassion is a set of practices that parents and people in the helping professions sometimes turn to in order to learn to care for themselves and value who they are (Becker, Patterson, Fagan, & Whitaker, 2016). They are then better able to support those around them.

Seek support

Seek support and encouragement from other staff, your supervisor, and program leadership. Ask for the time, space, and help you need to prepare yourself for these conversations. Working with children and families brings up our own strong emotions. These can overwhelm us or help guide us. Talking through them with others we trust can help. None of us should have to do this work alone.

After any challenging conversation, be sure to build in time to debrief. Reflect with other staff or a supervisor. If you have planned a follow-up conversation with the family, you can discuss that as well. This is especially important if you know you will need that next conversation to make a repair or resolve an issue in a relationship.



Closing Thoughts

You can practice using these steps and strategies to get better at discussing challenging topics with families. These skills are critical to supporting family well-being. These steps can help you to understand how your experiences and beliefs influence your work with families. You can also use the steps to appreciate each family member's perspective. Of course, we do not always have as much time as we would like to prepare. But with practice, you will be able to apply these six steps to the many different kinds of challenges in conversations—even those you weren't expecting.

As your sense of mastery deepens, your confidence will grow. The families you work with will be able to sense it. They may feel more comfortable and hopeful talking with you about challenging topics. And as you practice, these conversations will become easier. You can find your own voice and the words that feel right for you. You will see how working through difficult conversations together with families can make your relationships with those families stronger and even more rewarding.

Building Partnerships with Families Series

Explore the other resources in this series available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

- **Building Partnerships: Guide to Developing Relationships with Families**
- **Strategies for Family Engagement: Attitudes and Practices**
- **Family Engagement and Cultural Perspectives: Applying Strengths-based Attitudes**
- **Partnering with Families of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners**
- **Preparing for Conversations about Sensitive Topics with Families**

Related Resources

Available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

Learn more about positive goal-oriented relationships and how they contribute to strong family and child outcomes.

Relationship-Based Competencies to Support Family Engagement Series

Learn more about the knowledge, skills, and individual practices that early childhood professionals need to effectively engage families in positive, goal-oriented relationships.

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Simulation Series

Practice using collaborative strategies for having challenging conversations with families. Explore these and other simulation games in the series:

- Starting with Strengths in Challenging Times
- Talking with Families About Developmental Concerns

Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five

Explore this resource to learn about the ten multicultural principles. This resource updates the information and research presented in the Office of Head Start's original Multicultural Principles handbook published in 1991. Available in Spanish.

Practice-Based Coaching Video Series

View this series to learn more about Practice-Based Coaching, a professional development strategy to support positive child and family outcomes.

Mentor Coaching

Watch this video to learn about mentor-coaches and how they support staff professional development.

Head Start Coaching Companion

Explore this video application for coaching and sharing feedback with staff and providers.

Effective Coaching in Early Care and School Age Settings

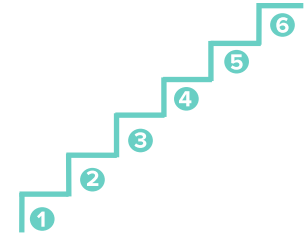
Watch this video to learn how coaching can be an effective way to help enhance the quality of care and child outcomes.

What Is Motivational Interviewing?

Learn about how Head Start and Early Head Start staff can use motivational interviewing to help themselves and families sort through the thoughts and feelings they may have about making a change.

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Six Steps to Prepare for Challenging Conversations with Families

- Step 1** **Reflect before talking with the family—on your own, and with supervisor or staff you trust. Reflect on what you think and feel.** Think about what you know about the challenging topic, the family, and your ideas for the conversation.
- Step 2** **Prepare your questions about the challenging topic.** Think specifically about the topic and what you are prepared to ask the family, and why.
- Step 3** **Prepare questions to learn about the family’s perspective on the challenging topic.** Prepare questions to help you understand the family’s perspective. This is important for your ongoing positive, goal-oriented relationship with them.
- Step 4** **Prepare the family for the conversation.** Let the family know why you will be talking together, and what you will be talking about. This helps prepare them for the topic and the conversation you are planning to have.
- Step 5** **Prepare the physical and emotional environment for talking with the family.** Think about how you will prepare the environment where the conversation will take place. Keep in mind privacy, sense of comfort, and safety. How you prepare will also depend on the topic and where the conversation will take place.
- Step 6** **Practice with other staff or a supervisor. Share your reflections and questions.** Choose a challenging conversation to role-play with another person to help you reflect and prepare. You can share what you are thinking about and feeling. You can also talk about what you are worried about or struggling with. Refer to the Areas for Reflection in Step 1 (p. 5 in this resource) to spark your thinking.

Consider these strategies to manage moments that feel challenging in conversations with families:

- Focus on self-regulation
- Focus on the family
- Work through your own feelings
- Take time for yourself
- Seek support



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