

Effective communication between families and early childhood staff

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'All of us find it difficult to communicate about certain things.'



¹Greenspan, S. (2000). *Building healthy minds: The six experiences that create intelligence and emotional growth in babies and young children*. New York: Da Capo Press, p. 126.

Effective communication

Communicating together involves a two-way sharing of information and helps to develop a common understanding, meaning it is easier for parents, carers and staff to support one another. Effective communication also helps families and staff to build a trusting partnership and develop honest and respectful relationships. When families and staff have a genuine interest in one another, people are able to be open about their thoughts and feelings. When families communicate effectively, this allows early childhood staff to understand what is happening at home or how they would like their children's behaviour managed in the service. When staff communicate effectively, parents are able to understand what is happening in their child's day and how they are progressing at the service. When families and staff share information, everyone can be aware of children's strengths and challenges and can work together to support children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Communication occurs verbally and non-verbally. Verbal communication can be spoken conversations (e.g., face-to-face, phone calls) and written messages (e.g., letters, email, newsletters). Non-verbal communication is less direct. We can usually observe this from people's body language (e.g., leaning forward, arms crossed), tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions.

In many instances, we rely more on non-verbal communication than words to convey what we mean. This is especially so when we are trying to communicate complex feelings, ideas and concepts as non-verbal communication assists to convey meaning and understanding throughout a conversation. Non-verbal communication can also indicate a willingness to engage in conversation and can help create pathways for communication between adults.

It is important for families and staff to feel comfortable with each other in order to initiate communication. Families and staff might have different ways of communicating with each other and continuing to be flexible helps families feel comfortable.



Diversity and communication

Diversity refers to differences between individuals. Differences may be in life experiences, family circumstances, family values, languages spoken and cultural and community backgrounds. Effective communication can help to acknowledge, understand and respect diversity.

When families and staff share information about children, for example, languages spoken at home, it assists in creating connections between home and an early childhood service. This helps staff to understand what is important to families.

It is a good idea for staff to find out how the families at their service would like to be told about their child's day. Face-to-face communication is important and can give the most information because people can read each other's body language. Some families may prefer face-to-face contact while others prefer telephone or regular email which may lead to face-to-face communication. Communication decisions may be related to individual, family, cultural or community values, priorities and commitments. Families may begin their communication with staff in small steps. It is important to acknowledge it can take time for families to become comfortable and friendly with other families and the early childhood service. This is where different methods of communication can play an important role in easing the process. Most families will usually find a combination of communication methods will be comfortable and best able to meet their needs.



Effective communication benefits children, families and early childhood staff

Effective communication helps families and staff share important information about children. Families benefit from effective communication with staff as:

- ▶ Effective communication helps build relationships between families and staff through respectfully sharing information and observations.
- ▶ Families and staff are more likely to share information if they feel listened to and understood by each other.
- ▶ Families feel more involved in their child's experiences at the early childhood service.

Staff benefit from regular, effective communication with families by:

- ▶ Building a deeper understanding of the children in their care.
- ▶ Feeling appreciated in their role (e.g., when families talk and share information staff provide about children).
- ▶ Understanding what is happening with families and children (e.g., when families share information with staff, this knowledge helps them support children).

When families and staff reflect together, they develop a shared understanding of children.

When families and staff reflect together, it helps them develop a shared understanding of children. A shared understanding allows for meaningful support to be given to families and children.

Children benefit from effective communication between families and staff because:

- ▶ It helps both families and staff to be mindful of children's needs on a particular day.
- ▶ A model of communication is demonstrated to children, which may help them in their own social development.
- ▶ It helps children build good relationships with staff when they see their families and staff communicating well.
- ▶ Their family may wish to become more involved in the early childhood service, which helps them better understand and contribute to children's social and emotional development.
- ▶ The early childhood program and curriculum can build more effectively on children's interests and developmental needs.
- ▶ It builds connections between home and the early childhood service which is an important part of developing a high-quality early childhood environment.



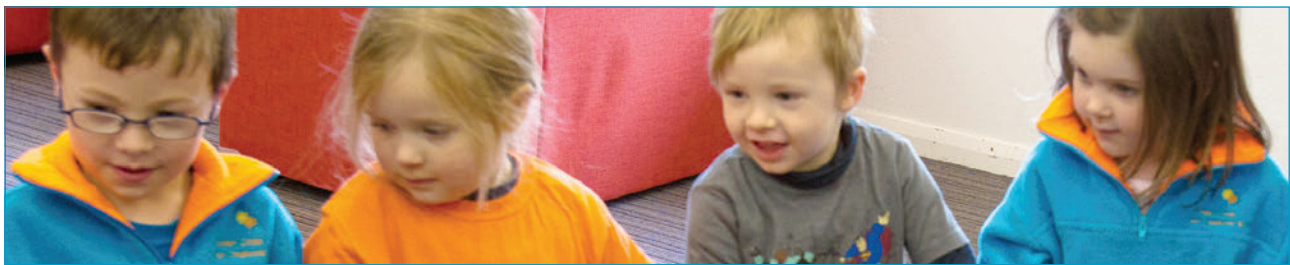
Building effective communication

Sometimes communication can be difficult. The table below shows some common situations and suggestions for families and staff to work through.

When things are difficult	What families might do	What staff might do
Not feeling comfortable with each other.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Reflect on what might be occurring to make you feel uncomfortable. This might help you to develop a different way of communicating together. ▶ Sometimes getting to know each other can help. Share information about your own day and interests. Relationships develop as people start to share personal information. ▶ Think about the most comfortable way for you to communicate (e.g., telephone, email). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Reflect on what might be occurring to make you feel uncomfortable. This might help you to develop a different way of communicating together. ▶ Sometimes getting to know each other can help. Share information about your own day and interests. Relationships develop as people start to share personal information. ▶ Think about the most comfortable way for you to communicate (e.g., telephone, email).
Having different values or opinions about children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Try to see things from the other person's perspective. ▶ Try to find a common understanding if possible. If not, acknowledge and accept your differences. ▶ Demonstrate respect for the other person's values or opinions. This may be an unspoken message, for example, by showing genuine interest in the other person's beliefs and understanding. ▶ Ask questions that increase your understanding of the other person's position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Try to see things from the other person's perspective. ▶ Try to find a common understanding if possible. If not, acknowledge and accept your differences. ▶ Demonstrate respect for the other person's values or opinions. This may be an unspoken message, for example, by showing genuine interest in the other person's beliefs and understanding. ▶ Ask questions that increase your understanding of the other person's position.
Being hesitant to approach someone based on their non-verbal communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Consider the messages you might be communicating through your non-verbal communication (e.g., crossed arms, rushing between responsibilities, tone of voice). ▶ Be aware of other people's non-verbal communication which could tell you whether or not it is a good time to talk (e.g., rushing might mean you need to plan a time to catch up, tone of voice might indicate privacy and sensitivity are needed). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Consider the messages you might be communicating through your non-verbal communication (e.g., crossed arms, rushing between responsibilities, tone of voice). ▶ Be aware of other people's non-verbal communication which could tell you whether or not it is a good time to talk (e.g., rushing might mean you need to plan a time to catch up, tone of voice might indicate privacy and sensitivity are needed).

When things are difficult	What families might do	What staff might do
Feeling as though you can't find the right words to express yourself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Spend some time thinking about the message you would like to communicate. ▶ Talk it over with someone you trust prior to planning the conversation. ▶ If it is a planned meeting, you might like to bring along a support person. ▶ Allow yourself to take time. If you need to come back to the conversation at a later stage, this is ok. ▶ Check in to see if the other person understands the conversation. This way, you will know when you are conveying information in an effective way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Spend some time thinking about the message you would like to communicate. ▶ Discuss with other staff in the service the ideas you want to communicate and together you might be able to come up with a helpful approach. ▶ Ask another staff member to help you at the time when you feel stuck. ▶ Allow yourself to take time. If you need to come back to the conversation at a later stage, this is ok. ▶ Check in to see if the other person understands the conversation. This way, you will know when you are conveying information in an effective way.
Feeling confused about the message you are hearing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Allow yourself to say you do not understand and ask for clarification and examples. ▶ Ask for further information if you think this will help. ▶ Summarise what you have heard to check with the other person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Allow yourself to say you do not understand and ask for clarification and examples. ▶ Ask for further information if you think this will help. ▶ Summarise what you have heard to check with the other person.

For more information on forming partnerships, refer to *Component 3: Working with parents and carers 'Building partnerships between families and early childhood staff'*.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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