

ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

Practical Tips

Having Honest Conversations

Professionals are required to have honest conversations with children, adults and their families, on a regular basis. It can sometimes be difficult to navigate these conversations and find the right words and approach to convey what you need to say in a way that will be understood and accepted by those receiving the message.

Here are some tips to enable professionals to have honest, and at times difficult conversations, so that communication is clear and easy to understand. These should be useful at times when you are having to share difficult news, or information that is likely to be disputed or not accepted.

1. Prepare

Preparation is only helpful when you know that the difficult conversation is coming and you are the one who will be facilitating it, however, the same principles can be applied to any interaction. Take some time to think things through—what are the main points you really want to make? If time permits, write down those ideas, keeping them basic. If you know the person is not going to agree with you, prepare some examples and factual information to support what you are stating. Be prepared for push-back and disagreement and know that it is okay to acknowledge the difference of opinions.

2. Practice

Practice requires preparation time. Practice on your own or with another colleague. This will help to make sure that you get the main points across that you plan to make. In the moment, particularly if it is tense, it's natural for our communication to speed up or for the words we want not to come, but if you've thought through what you want to say (and you take some deep breaths to calm yourself), you are more likely to remain a clear communicator.

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3. During the conversation

Share what you need to and then listen and be empathetic. Be open to the other person's view and interpretation of the situation. Remember that perception is a good portion of reality – and so you and whomever you are having the difficult conversation with may have very different perceptions (and realities). You can both learn from one another if you take the time to listen. We are more likely to reach a place of agreement if we approach the conversation with empathy, acknowledging the feelings that someone else has, and allowing those to be expressed without judgment. Remember - listening empathetically does not equate to agreement.

4. Allow silence

Silence during a conversation can often make us feel uncomfortable. But when having difficult conversations, which may evoke all kinds of emotions, allowing silence is sometimes key. You can use that time to refocus and centre yourself – breathe and allow that time for processing and keeping yourself calm. Try counting in your head to three, while noticing your breath before responding – especially if you are not sure what to say or are uncertain whether you should or should not be giving a response.

5. Decide on clear next steps

Almost always with difficult conversations, there is a “now what?” that needs to be answered. Sometimes that is as simple as “let's both take some time to think through what we each shared and come back in x amount of time to decide next steps”. Other times, more specific next steps are warranted (especially if you are delivering bad news). It can be helpful to end a difficult conversation focusing on the future and giving the person you are talking with as clear of a picture as possible about what happens next.

For further support also see the [Practical Tips](#) on Having Honest Conversations with Children and Young People.