

Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

Learning Outcomes

To develop relationships with child, family members and relevant professionals.

Audience Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010)

Time 30 minutes

Key Reading

Collins, S. (2010) *Effective Communication - A Workbook for Social Care Workers*. Part of the *Knowledge and Skills for Social Care Workers* series. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Good practice guidelines in working with parents with learning disabilities*. Available online only: <http://dh.gov.uk>

Lishman, J. (1994) *Communication in social work*. Birmingham: British Association of Social Workers/Macmillan.

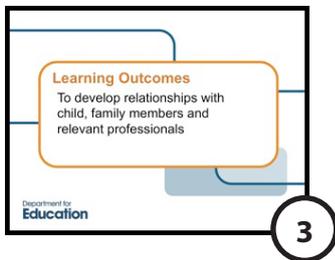
Links to Common Core

Common Core 1 Effective communication and engagement with children, young people, their families and carers (skills: consultation and negotiation). Understand the key role and value of parents and carers; know when to refer them to further sources of information, advice or support.

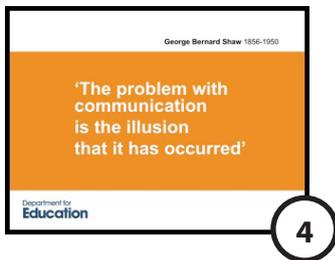
further

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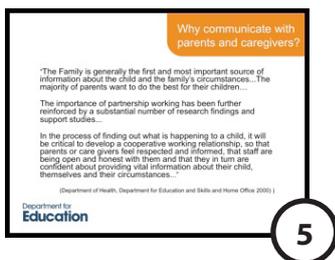


Learning outcomes.



How many times have we asked or even told someone to do something and they have not done it or completely done the opposite?

Just because we tell somebody something, how do we know that they have understood what is required?



It is important to consult with a wide variety of professionals and agencies in contact with the child or family, but this should supplement the vital information given by the child and family members themselves.

Consider the communication barriers that children and families might face as a result of lack of confidence or a lack of experience in communicating with professionals, for example, a lack of understanding about what information you need or fear, anxiety, suspicion.

Key Principles of Communication

- Desired outcome
- Listen
- Feedback
- Other signals
- Respect

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Be clear about what you want the **outcome of the communication** to be: to inform, persuade, shock, praise, criticize, shame, please, inspire?

Actively listen to the person that you are trying to communicate with – echo their words back to them to make sure that you have understood what they mean.

Get **feedback** from the person that you have communicated with to ensure that they have understood you.

Interpret other signals as well as the words that are spoken back to you – arms folded, eye contact, disinterested or interested, unresponsive, using specific language or vague?

Respect – for the other person’s position or views (Townsend-Hall 1999).

Although these key principles were taken from a business context, they are the basic principles of communicating with people on all levels.

Barriers to Engagement

- Families may be especially fearful of stigma or suspicious of statutory services (Thoburn 2005; Stanley et al. 2009)
- Worker may lack confidence
- Professionals/staff fear of getting it wrong
- Anxiety in do the right thing for the child and family
- Fear of potentially violent family members
- Concern about future working relationship with the family members
- Pressure of work – limited opportunities to spend time with parents or to reflect on events

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Discussion point: Explore with the group what makes it difficult to talk with parents, and what helps. Do you see how the principles just discussed apply to your communications with children, families and other professionals?

Which combination of factors makes communication more difficult, and which factors make it easier? Also, explore with the group the strategies individuals have developed that help explain to parents:

- concerns about their children
- concerns about their parenting and lifestyle
- when conversations become difficult.

Explaining assessment

Some local authorities have developed leaflets or share written material with parents and families that have been produced by organisations such as Family Rights Group. It is good practice to have something written that covers:

- What is an assessment?
- Why is an assessment being carried out?
- What will happen?
- What will be expected of you?
- What can you expect of us?

A good template example can be found within Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families

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Give some examples of how parental problems such as substance misuse exacerbates social problems such as poverty and isolation, prevents access to community resources and limits impact of professional interventions such as obtaining parenting advice and guidance.

Discussion point: You might ask participants to think of a family member that they know who has a particular need such as a learning disability and ask them to consider how this might exacerbate their social problems, their uptake of community resources and the impact of any professional intervention.

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Communication with parents and caregivers

Why is it important to get it right?

- Often working with the most vulnerable people in our society
- They may struggle with communication generally
- Previous experience may make it hard for them to trust authority figures – for example, housing officer, police officer, social worker, health worker
- Likely to have previous experience of breakdown in relationships and communication
- Contact with agencies in relation to their failure to meet the needs of their children likely to lead to feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment, fear (all barriers to effective communication)

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Never just give a leaflet. Always accompany the giving of written information with a discussion. In some cases you might need to read the leaflet to the person and clarify each point as you go. Never assume that the person can read or understand what is given to them.

Communication with parents and caregivers

Why is it important to get it right?

- History may have impaired their ability to be honest and open – it may appear that they are just being difficult, oppositional or resistant
- It is important to understand their views and motivation
- Enables you to capture vital information to inform your assessment of the child and family's situation
- Supports the building of a relationship with parents or caregivers
- Safeguards children and young people from neglect

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It is important because you cannot conduct a thorough assessment of the situation and this is vital if the welfare of children and young people is to be effectively safeguarded and promoted.

What do parents tell us?

They want workers who are:

- Courteous
- Turn up on time
- Speak directly to them
- Don't use jargon
- Listen and 'really hear' and accept what is being said
- Give clear explanations for what is happening and why
- Do what they say they are going to do and don't over-promise
- Are open and honest
- Are patient and make enough time to understand
- Treat them with respect and dignity

(SCIE Guide 9 - Teaching and training communication skills in social work 2010)

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Take parental preferences into account – taking note of the things we know about parental preferences can enable us to build more effective and respectful relationships.

Basis for building effective relationships and communication

- Be reliable, trustworthy and consistent
- Don't be late for appointments as this can be an indication of unreliability and can send message that other things are more important
- Take time to explain why you/others have made decisions/ assessments affecting them and their children
- Share as much information as possible in a language that is clear and simple
- Make sure they have understood what was said in a meeting, in court or in a letter to them
- Listen to their views and make sure you know that you have listened and understood, even when you don't agree with their point of view
- Give your undivided attention – switch off the mobile!!!!

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If we take the time to build effective relationships during periods of relative stability, we can draw upon this at times of difficulty/stress/crisis when we need to effectively communicate with parents despite the difficult set of circumstances.

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Communicating with parents

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Davies and Meltzer (2007) have summarized the process of helping into clear stages and although there may be many other activities contained within each stage, this is a useful point of reference to help focus interventions and review.

Davies and Meltzer's full document is included within the Background Reading.

Relationship building. The first task is to establish a working relationship between the parents and the worker, and this is possibly the most important of all the tasks, as the nature and quality of this relationship will affect everything that happens subsequently. This involves the parents and worker getting to know each other and agreeing whether and how they are going to work together. This will depend upon the extent to which the parent feels able to trust the worker and thinks that she/he has something to offer. If workers are unable to engage parents for whatever reasons in an effective relationship, there will be severe limits to what can be achieved at any subsequent stage in the process.

Exploration. The second task involves the parents and professional working together to explore any difficulties identified by the parents. The focus of the exploration may be very specific or more broadly based depending upon the nature of the problem, but it occurs within the context of the parents as individuals with all the complexity involved in their physical, economic, personal, social, family and spiritual lives. The word exploration is deliberately chosen to include the notion of formal and informal assessment by the professional where necessary, but is also used to emphasise the equally important role the worker plays in enabling parents to think carefully and in-depth about their problems in order to make sense of the difficulties they are facing.

Understanding. The third task is to derive a clear understanding of the issues, difficulties or problems parents are facing, and this is achieved through the task of exploration. Ideally this involves the parents and worker developing a clear picture of the nature of the problem (for example, who is involved, how they are affected, how it arose, what caused it). Although the worker may directly provide this understanding, if careful attention is given to the tasks of building the relationship and exploring the situation, it is remarkable how often parents derive their understanding with help to think through the problem.

Goal setting. The fourth task is to help parents determine what they would like to achieve. To be effective in managing problems, it is crucial to agree the aims, goals or objectives of the work together through discussion. Without making these explicit, it is difficult to proceed to the next task of deciding strategies.

Strategy planning. With clear aims and goals agreed explicitly in the previous stage, the parents and worker can then work together on the next task of putting a plan together or a set of strategies in order to achieve them. This can mean working together to develop as many options as possible and selecting from these what is likely to be the most effective.

Implementation. The fifth task is to implement the chosen strategies with the worker providing appropriate support and intervention.

Review. The final task is to review or evaluate the outcomes in terms of the extent to which the goals have been achieved, to consider the process, and to decide upon further actions.

These tasks have been set out as a sequence of steps, but they each interact; the process is not necessarily linear as implied above.

Find the best way to communicate

- In person
- By letter
- E-mail
- Consider communication impairments
- Via an interpreter
- At home
- At your office
- Meet on neutral ground

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Utilise a mix of methods of communication and find the one that works best with the family. Communication difficulties might include visual or hearing impairment, English not their first language – find alternatives: braille, sign, interpreter.

The home environment may be too distracting and it may be more productive to book a room at a local community centre.

Write things down to leave with the family, appointments, leaflets.

Eliciting vital information

- Interviews with individual parents or carers
- Discussion with pairs or family member groupings
- Taking parental/care giver histories
- Standardised instruments for example, Scales and Questionnaires
- Regular telephone contact – updates

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Histories are a way of understanding how the person got to where they are now, and what historically may have impacted on their capacity to meet their child's needs. This might include their own relationship with parents, loss of significant others, previous relationships and significant events or conditions in their medical history.

Scales and questionnaires are often an approach that allows the person to focus their thoughts and communicate using discussions about what the instruments are designed to do and the scores.

Using your skills

Active listening
Concentrate on what the person is saying, listen carefully and try to understand. Indicate both verbally and non-verbally that you understand what they are communicating to you

Prompting and exploration skills
Pick out the important points that the person is making and ask them more about this particular area – for example, the way they describe a person or a relationship

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Skill in the task of communicating does not always come automatically, so you may need to rehearse or practice some of these techniques on others.

If you are aware that you have a particularly difficult conversation coming up with parents, discuss this in supervision or with colleagues to help you work out the best way of introducing the discussion and how you might respond to the information or explanations that parents may give you.

Using your skills

Empathic responding
Comment on your understanding of how the person might be feeling – for example, "It seems that you felt that you let your child down..." This may provoke relief at being understood, and gives the signal that it is ok to show feelings

Summarising
A powerful way of communicating to the person that you have listened and understood. Also a good way of checking out that you did understand their meaning

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Using your skills

Enabling change
Seek permission to explore alternative ways of looking at things – for example, "You said that Danny is deliberately winding you up... but I wonder whether there may be a different way of looking at his behaviour? Would you mind me suggesting an alternative explanation?" pause for approval "I wonder whether he was distressed due to ...?"

Negotiation skills
This is not straight forward and will rely on the building of the relationship and utilisation of the skills above before compromising and reaching agreement with the family about the best way forward

Problem solving
Will involve listening and prompting, summarising and challenging, negotiating decisions about priorities, goals, timescales and strategies

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Ensure effective communication at each key stage

- At referral stage
- Planning the assessment
- Undertaking assessment
- Analysis of information
- Forming judgements
- Reaching decisions
- Formulating plan
- Setting goals
- Agreeing timescales
- Reviewing progress

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It is important to engage with parents and carers during every important stage of the process so that they feel fully included and engaged. It is vital to family members are fully motivated to achieve the plan.