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You might recall having sensitive or difficult conversations with families as an early childhood professional. These conversations may have been about the care of their child, an interaction with a staff member, or other family concerns. Often, these conversations occur without the time or resources to prepare. After the interaction, you might reflect on how a sensitive or difficult conversation could have gone differently. Recognizing when a particular conversation could negatively impact your relationship and rapport with a family is essential. As a practitioner, attempting to prevent conversations that may cause a family to feel misunderstood or unheard is also important. It is essential to consider how families may feel harmed by how you share information with them or by the content of the conversation itself. As a practitioner, consider how differences in culture, race, beliefs, social identities, and life experiences can contribute to families feeling hurt or confused.



If you feel disappointed that a conversation with a family did not go as planned, remember that no relationship is perfect; miscommunications are common. If you have a conversation you are concerned about, it could be because the family perceived it as insensitive or unintentionally disrespectful.

- ▶ When you wish a conversation had gone differently, consider taking the time to step back and reflect. Acknowledge that although you had the best intentions, you may need to address your interaction. Think about the situation and review what happened and what you intended to communicate. Recognize that your intentions may not have aligned with what the family experienced. Ask yourself how this could be a learning experience and reflect on what you might do differently next time. It can be uncomfortable to consider how your communication might be misinterpreted by others. However, reflecting on our role in miscommunication can help us increase empathy for others and lead to stronger relationships.

*If the family indicates they want you to share your perceptions, remain intentional about how you share this information, and remember that the purpose of the repair is to center the family's experience and feelings, not yours.*

- ▶ Once you recognize your mistake, prioritize connecting with the family as soon as possible. Consider offering an apology. Often, the family will share that the interaction was not negative and did not impact their perceptions. Allow time and space for them to express how they felt. As families feel comfortable, they may share different feelings over time. Work with the family to resolve any impact or harm to the relationship.

Partnering with the family provides an opportunity to feel empowered to discuss further or share their perceptions, needs, and feelings about the conversation. Practicing self-awareness, recognizing your strengths and areas for improvement, being open to learning, and considering other perspectives are important qualities that will support repair and help you reach positive outcomes with families.

To address your concerns about the interaction and acknowledge and repair any hurt or missteps that occurred, you can use the 4Rs. You can use these skills sequentially, independently, or adapted. This flexibility further allows you to build rapport and strengthen your relationships with families.

Recognize

Regulate

Reflect

Repair

## Recognize the Power Dynamic

As a practitioner, you have an inherent power imbalance in relationships with families. You have greater authority in the relationship due to your professional expertise and ability to make recommendations and choices impacting families and their children. Families rarely have the same type of power as practitioners and programs, which places the responsibility of repair on you (even when the conversation may have also led to feelings of hurt for you). As a practitioner, you can access other supports (e.g., talking to a coach, an infant early childhood mental health consultant, or a reflective supervisor) to process your thoughts and feelings. If the family indicates they want you to share your perceptions, think carefully about how you will share this information, and remember that the **purpose of the repair is to focus on the family's experience and feelings, not yours**. To build or rebuild trust, you can:



- ▶ **Name it.** When power dynamics are in play, you are responsible for recognizing and describing the dynamic for and with families. You can use phrases such as:
  - *I realize that some decisions we make as a program based on our policies might not align with what you want for your child. I know that is frustrating.*
  - *We made this plan without getting your input. I can see how you feel left out and that your experiences do not matter.*
  - *I remember you shared early on how your family did not have a positive experience in your last program. I am concerned that our last conversation might have made you feel bad or even worried that what happened in your last program might happen here.*
- ▶ **Continue to Reach Out and Check In:** Because of the power dynamic between practitioners and families; it is up to you to initiate continual check-ins and reach out to families following hurt or difficulties in a previous conversation. Check-ins can start with phrases such as:
  - *It seems like our last conversation might have been hard or frustrating for you. Do you want to talk about it again?*
  - *Is there another way I can provide the information we discussed that would be helpful?*

- *Your feelings about this conversation are real and valid.*
  - *If you want to share, I would like to learn more about what this experience was like for you so I can do better next time.*
- **Ask About and Hold the Family’s Experience:** Families may have had previous experiences with education, care, and other systems and providers that resulted in the misuse of power. As a result, a family’s emotions, concerns, or boundaries from past experiences might come up in current conversations. Knowing more about families’ experiences in other situations can help you understand how to work toward building trusting partnerships.
- You might acknowledge the family’s experience by saying something such as, “I wonder if the conversation we had was not the first time you have felt hurt/harmed/disconnected/unheard,” and then ask questions such as:
    - *What is the most important thing we can do/remember/focus on for your child and family?*
    - *How have conversations like these made you feel in the past?*
    - *How can we work together to make conversations like this feel better in the future?*
    - *What resources or referrals can I help with?*
  - **Exercise empathy.** Remember that if a family shows strong emotion, there is a deeper meaning or feeling behind their visible frustration or anger. For example, while a family member may display anger, they may be worried or scared about their child’s future. Using empathy to focus on their deeper emotions (e.g., fear, worry, sadness) can help you stay more connected and present.
  - **Practice cultural humility.** How can you deepen your understanding of a family’s culture, values, funds of knowledge, communication style, approaches to making decisions and solving problems, attitudes towards others, and norms around body language like eye contact? Remaining open to learning, being interested, and respecting cultural identities can help strengthen your relationship with the family.

## Reflect

Every practitioner has conversations or interactions with families they wish they could do over. While going back in time to change what was said is not possible, you can use reflection to consider how to move forward with strengthening your relationship with a family.

**Self-reflection can help you understand how your feelings, experiences, and priorities influence your interactions during a conversation.** You can use self-reflection before, during, or after conversations with families. To use self-reflection:

- **Be curious!** Remove judgment and blame (of yourself and others). Recognize that self-reflection is part of learning and growth.
- **Pause and name the feeling.** Take a moment to stop and ask the question, “How do/did I feel?” Write down the situation and how it made you feel. Reviewing this information can help you identify what situations cause you to feel certain emotions.



- ▶ **Notice how your body is feeling.** As you stop to consider how you feel emotionally, notice how your body feels. Are your shoulders raised? Is your heart racing? Does your stomach hurt? Are you breathing faster than usual? Write down the situation, how your body feels, and your emotional state. Emotions and physical responses can help you recognize when your past experiences might be impacting your current experience in conversations with families. Sometimes, you may even respond in a certain way due to your personal responsibilities or programmatic challenges without being aware of their influence.
- ▶ **Review your observations and recognize any patterns.** As you write down your emotional and physical responses to specific situations, notice any patterns and consider how your beliefs and experiences might influence your communication with families. You might learn that due to your own past experiences of feeling unheard, you feel and respond in certain ways. You might realize that when your opinions differ from a family's priorities, the disconnect causes you to have a strong emotional response. Strong emotions can make staying present and genuinely listening to what the family is communicating more difficult.

## Regulate

Sensitive conversations can cause many emotions and responses for families and you. As you become aware of your feelings and physical reactions to these situations, just as we teach children, you can learn strategies that help you feel more regulated. To regulate before, during, or after difficult conversations, you can:

- ▶ **Repeat an affirmation.** Silently repeat a mantra or short phrase that helps you stay calm during tense situations and conversations. Some mantras you might try include:
  - *This conversation is hard. Their emotions are valid. I can offer support.*
  - *I am here to listen and understand.*
  - *Challenging conversations are an opportunity to build trust and find solutions.*
- ▶ **Remind yourself to breathe.** Using breathing strategies like those we teach children will also help you to remain regulated. Consider taking at least three deep breaths during which the exhale is longer than the inhale.
- ▶ **Write it down.** Instead of immediately sharing a strong emotion or opinion, try writing it down first. Then, read it to yourself and decide if the information would be helpful to share or if writing it down on paper helped you regulate enough.
- ▶ **Ask permission to check in later.** If you become upset and notice it is difficult to regulate your emotions, ask permission to step away if appropriate. For example, “I value what you say and want to think about what you just told me. Would it be ok if we plan to check in again about this later today?”



## Repair

The process of repair can help you build or rebuild your connection with a family. Repair enables you to address any hurt or harm a difficult conversation might have caused. Some phrases you might consider using to repair your relationship include:

- *I was thinking more about our conversation and want to apologize for \_\_\_\_\_. I could have \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., said that differently, answered your question differently, given more space for your voice and experience to be heard).*
- *You are the expert on your child, and what I said did not make you feel that way during our conversation.*
- *I want you to know I hear you and take your concerns seriously.*
- *Thank you for pointing out that important part of your experiences as \_\_\_\_\_'s parent.*
- *Thank you for sharing how that made you feel. Your experiences are the most important part of our relationship.*
- *Would you be open to talking more? I do not feel good about how we left things after our last conversation, and I apologize.*

Repair is a skill that takes practice! As you work to get better at repairing with families, remember:

- ▶ Controlling the past is impossible, but managing your current and future actions and intentions is.
- ▶ Once you recognize your response patterns, you can learn how to respond differently during future conversations.
- ▶ As conversations occur, you will undoubtedly reflect and wish you had said or done something differently. This is to be expected!
- ▶ We all make mistakes sometimes. Acknowledging mistakes, taking responsibility, and practicing humility will deepen your compassion, empathy, and connection. This process will lead to stronger relationships.

