

Building Bridges with Families: Transforming Difficult Conversations Into Family Partnerships

Faith Rivera, M.Ed.
Alo Civitas Consulting
April 10th 2026



Unconscious Bias Disclosure

- UT Health San Antonio ECHO recognizes that language is constantly evolving, and while we make every effort to avoid bias and stigmatizing terms, we acknowledge that unintentional lapses may occur in our presentations.
- We value your feedback and encourage you to share any concerns related to language, images, or concepts that may be offensive or stigmatizing.
- Your input will help us refine and improve our presentations, ensuring they remain inclusive and respectful to participants.



Disclosures

- The views and opinions expressed in this presentation are those of my own and do not reflect the official views or policy of UT Health San Antonio.
- I have no financial conflicts of interest to disclose concerning this presentation.



Conversations that Build Trust Not Fear

- Objectives
- Use Family Engaged Developmental Monitoring (FEDM) framework to guide conversations
- Build trust while discussing developmental concerns
- Apply to real world scenarios



The roots of the divide

Provider Fear
Anxiety about
hurting parents or
sparking conflict.

Unconscious Bias

Operating on
assumptions rather
than objective
observations.

Parental Emotions

Navigating natural
responses like fear,
denial, or guilt.

Cultural
Disconnects
Differences in
background,
expectations, or
communication
styles.

“Most difficult conversations aren’t about the child.
They’re about emotions, trust, and relationships.”



Redefining our role with families

The Old Model

Focus: Identify problems and deficits.

Approach: Historically focused on diagnosing delays.

Dynamic: Provider as the unilateral expert.

The New Model

Focus: Partner with families.

Approach: Focus on the whole child and the entire family's well-being, not just concerns.

Dynamic: Shared expertise and mutual support.



Two streams of expertise merging into one

Provider Observation

Family Insight

Family-Engaged Developmental Monitoring (FEDM)

An ongoing partnership between families and providers.

Families are recognized as the absolute experts on their child.

We gather a holistic picture of well-being, not just a checklist of behaviors.

The mindset shift that changes everything

Traditional Approach		FEDM Approach
Role: Expert	→	Role: Partner
Action: Telling	→	Action: Listening
Focus: Problem-finding	→	Focus: Strengths & Growth
Timeline: One-time meeting	→	Timeline: Ongoing dialogue

We're not delivering news. We're building understanding together."

Principle 1: The family holds the most critical data

Families are the foremost experts on their child.

We must actively ask for their insights before we begin telling them our observations.

We must honor their perspective as valid and essential, even if it initially differs from our own.



Educator

Parent

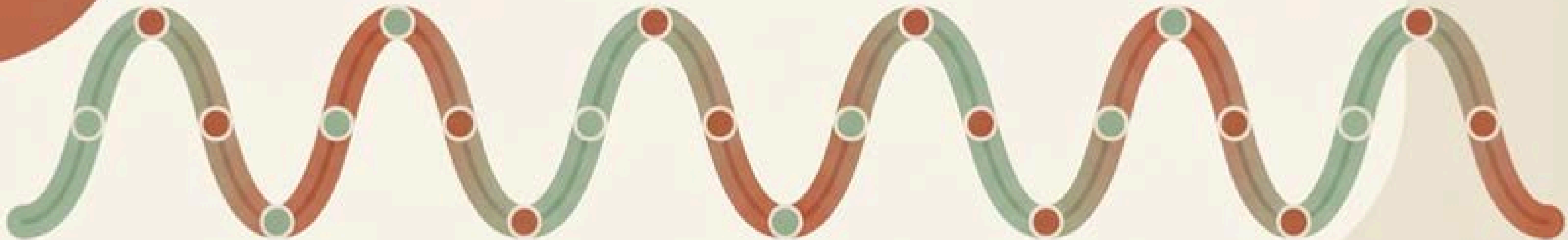
“When these foundational principles are in place, difficult conversations become natural and less confrontational.”

Principle 2: Development is a timeline, not a snapshot

The Snapshot (Surprise Meeting)



The Timeline (Ongoing FEDM Dialogue)

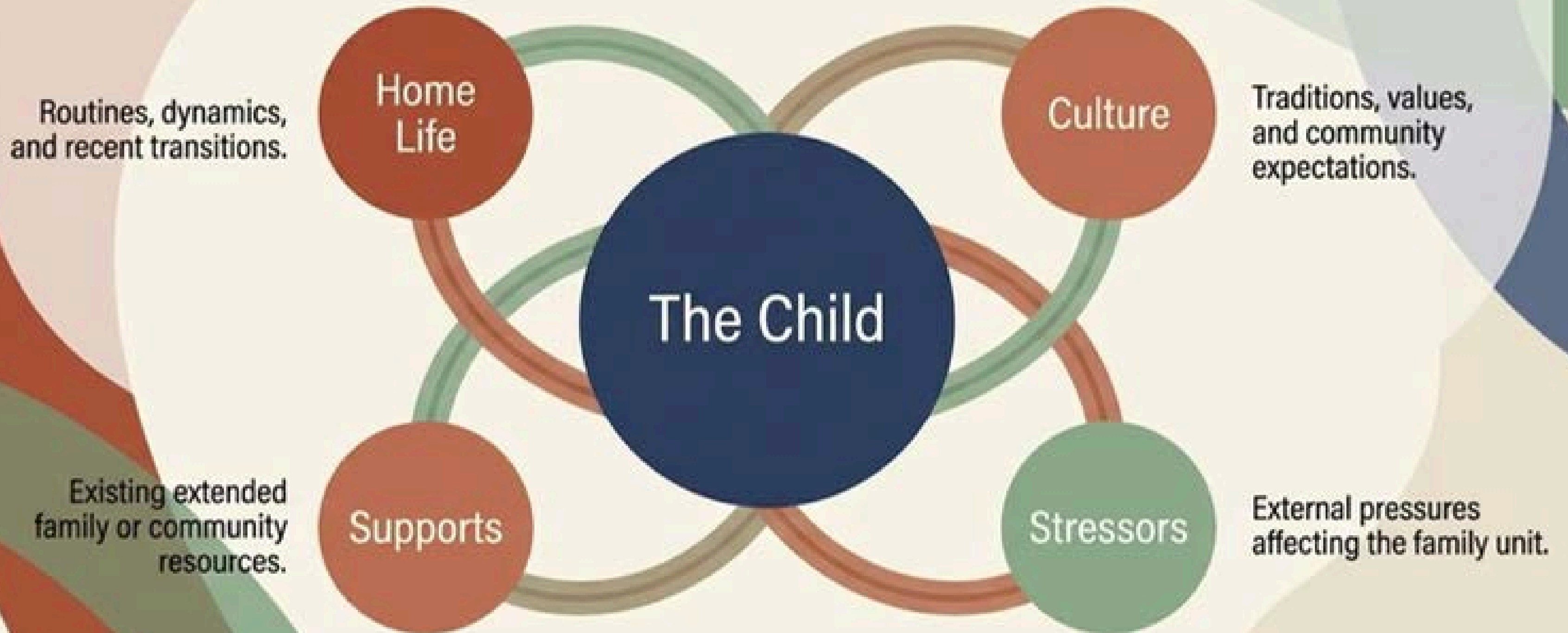


Development must be discussed continuously, during regular interactions.

Ongoing check-ins replace formal, anxiety-inducing sit-downs.

The Golden Rule: There should never be surprises when discussing a child's progress.

Principle 3: View the whole child in their world



Opening the door with curiosity

1. Begin with Strengths

Anchor the conversation in what is going well.

2. Ask Open-Ended Questions

Invite their narrative first.

- Example: *What are you noticing at home?*
- Example: *What are you most proud of right now?*

3. Be Curious, Not Assumptive

Leave room for their reality to shape the discussion.

“The goal is to invite parents into the conversation, not surprise them with it.”

Words that build bridges, not walls

Instead of:
He can't...

Let's try:
He's still developing...

Instead of:
I'm concerned

Let's try:
Let's explore together...

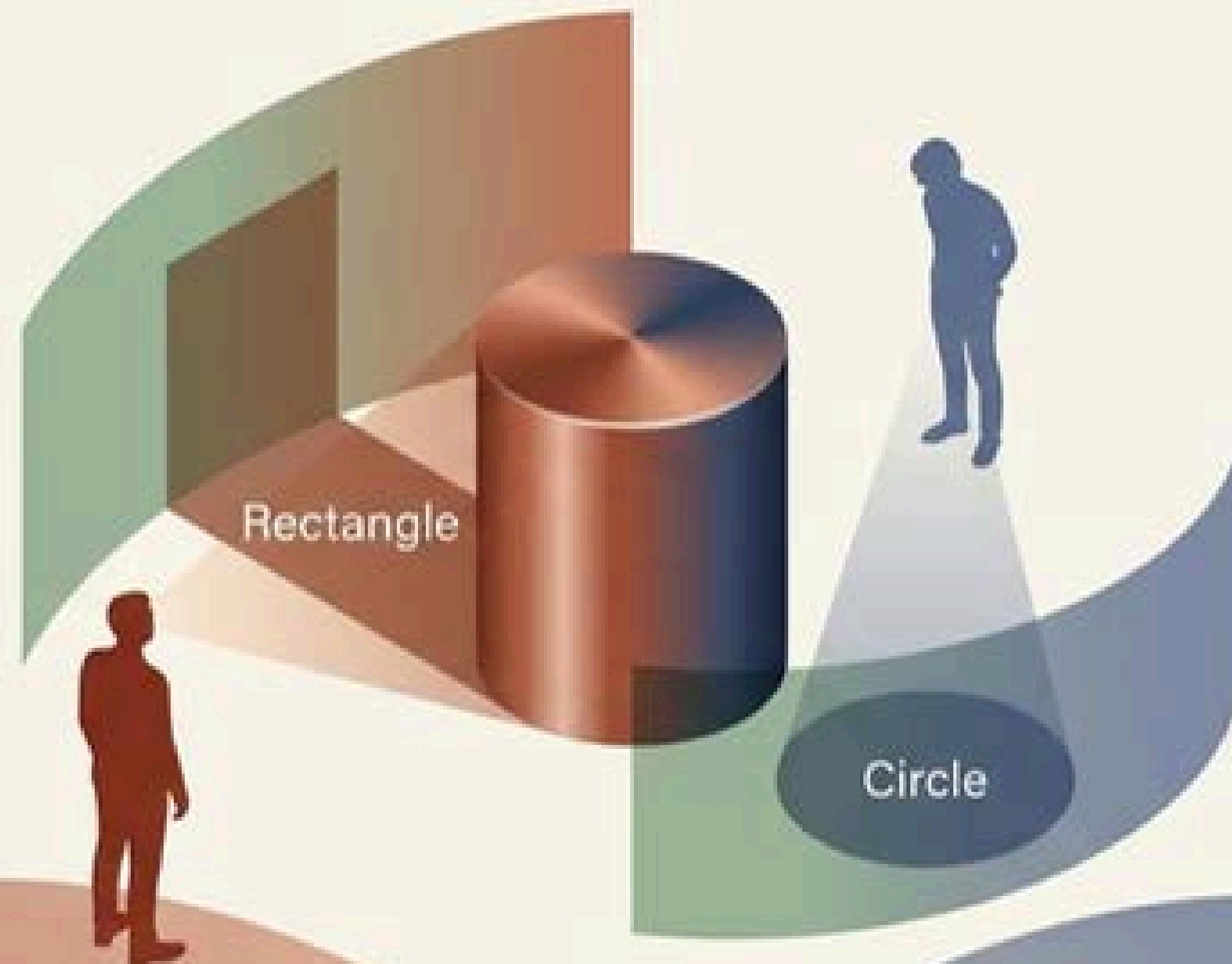
Instead of:
He should be...

Let's try:
Many children at this age are...

“Our words can either build walls or build bridges.”

When perspectives differ, stay curious

Avoid the urge to correct the parent immediately.



Ask clarifying questions:

- Tell me more about what you're seeing.
- What does that look like at home?

“If a parent disagrees, that’s not resistance. It’s information.”



Grounding concerns in shared reality

Be specific and objective. Connect directly to development, not personality.
Use direct observations, avoiding clinical or judgmental labels.

Subjective Label

He's hyperactive and can't pay attention.

Objective Observation

During group time, I've noticed he has difficulty staying engaged for more than a minute.

“This keeps the conversation grounded in what we actually see, not what we assume.”

Our role is to support, not to fix



Offer Resources

Connect the family with community or programmatic supports.

Share Tools

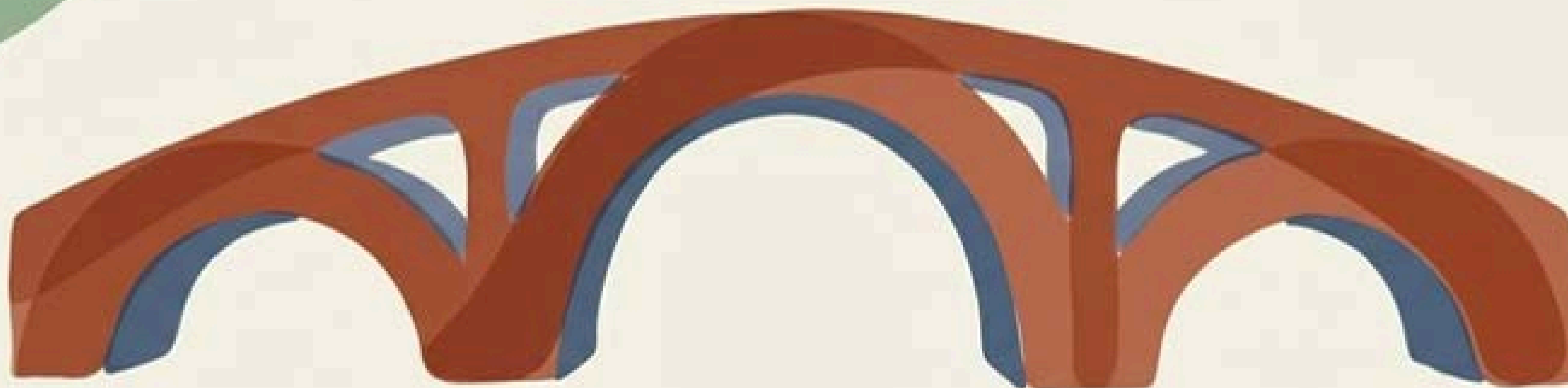
Provide objective developmental milestones milestones and checklists so families can monitor progress at home.

Invite Collaboration

Ask, "How can we work on this together?"

We're not there to fix the child; we're there to support the family.

Rebuilding trust across systemic barriers



Recognize Systemic Barriers

Acknowledge that not all families have had positive, equitable experiences with educational or medical systems in the past.

Honor Background

Intentionally adapt to and respect cultural differences in child-rearing and communication.

Build Trust Intentionally

FEDM is an active tool to heal and rebuild institutional trust with marginalized families.

Applying the framework: A real-life scenario

Based on the FEDM mindset, how would you begin this conversation without using problem-focused language?

A child in your program is not speaking as much as their peers. You need to initiate a conversation with the parents.

What open-ended questions would you ask first to gather the family's insight?



The continuous cycle of partnership

1. Start with Strengths

Anchor the relationship.

2. Ask, Don't Assume

Gather family insight first.

3. Share Observations

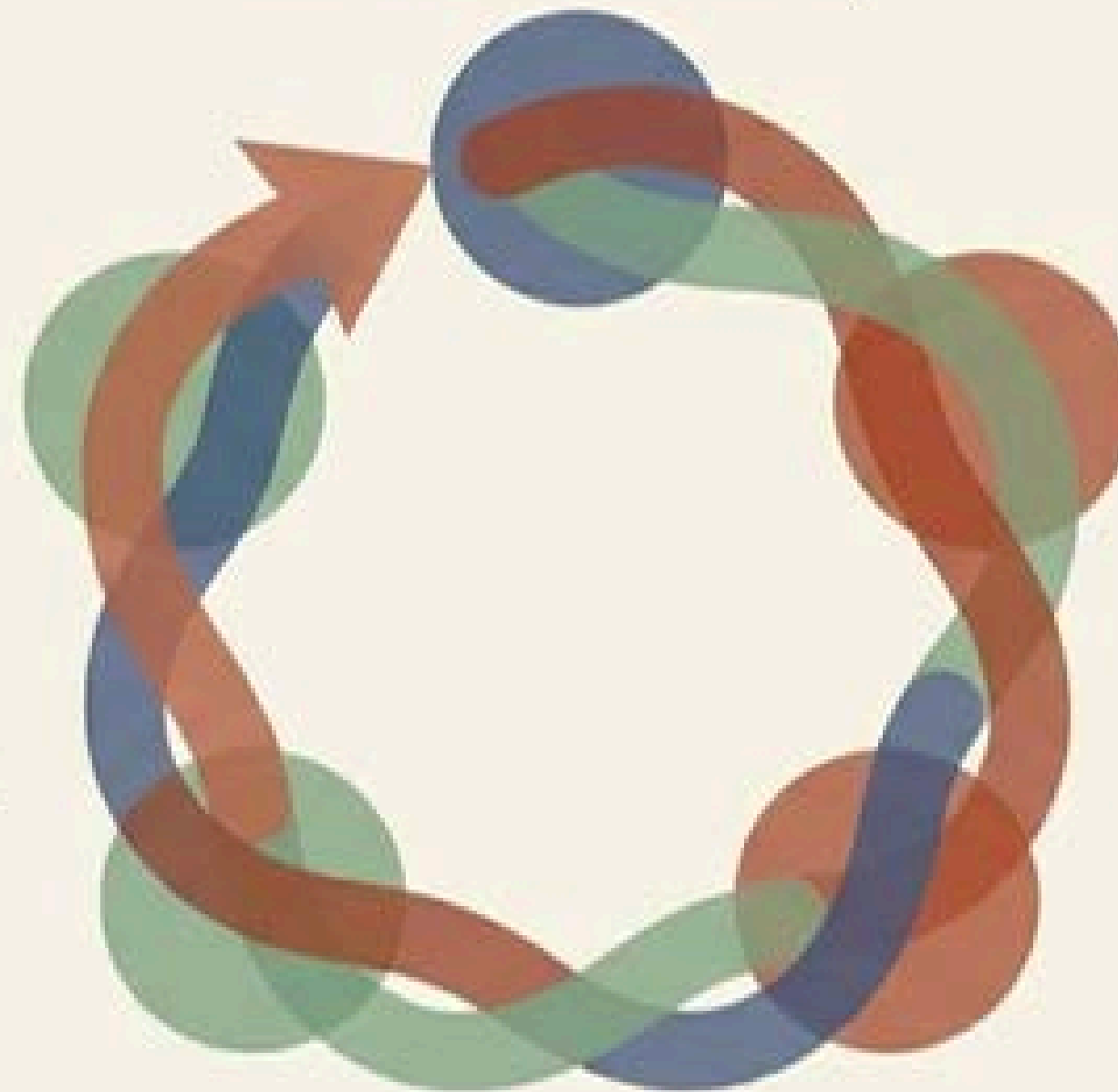
Provide specific, objective data.

4. Collaborate on Next Steps

Build a shared plan and offer tools.

5. Follow Up Over Time

Continue the timeline; monitor together.



Empowering the family system

“Difficult conversations become meaningful when families feel seen, heard, and valued.”

“When we lead with partnership instead of authority, we don’t just support children—we empower families.”

Connect with me!

Faith@alocivitas.com

**Find us on instagram or
LinkedIn**



TEXAS
Health and Human
Services

Texas Department of State
Health Services

