

Having Difficult Conversations with Families

Communicating Mental Health & Social-Emotional Concerns in Early Childhood

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- I have no financial conflicts of interest to disclose concerning this presentation.



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Having Difficult Conversations with Families

Communicating Mental Health & Social-Emotional Concerns in Early Childhood

What is the hardest part about telling a parent you are concerned about their child?



Why These Conversations Are Difficult



When we share concerns about a child, parents may hear:

- “Something is wrong with my child.”
- “You think I’m a bad parent.”
- “My child doesn’t belong here.”
- “You’re labeling my child.”

Parents may respond with:

- Denial
- Anger
- Fear
- Guilt
- Sadness
- Defensiveness

Remember:

A defensive response does not necessarily mean a parent doesn’t care.
It may mean they are **worried, scared, or feeling judged.**

Observation vs Interpretation

Describe what you SEE – not what you ASSUME

Observation:

- “During the last three mornings, Mateo cried for approximately 20 minutes after his mother left.”

Interpretation:

- “Mateo has separation anxiety.”

Judgment:

- “His mother isn’t preparing him correctly.”



Avoid labels such as:

Aggressive
Manipulative
Defiant
Emotionally disturbed
Attention-seeking



Use:

“We’ve noticed...”
“We’ve observed...”
“We’re wondering...”

Behavior is something a child does — it is not who the child is.

Screening ≠ Diagnosis

A screening or assessment can help us:

- Identify areas of concern
- Recognize patterns
- Understand a child's strengths and needs
- Determine whether additional evaluation may be helpful
- Identify supportive strategies

**A screening does NOT automatically mean:
“Your child has a mental health disorder.”**

Instead say:

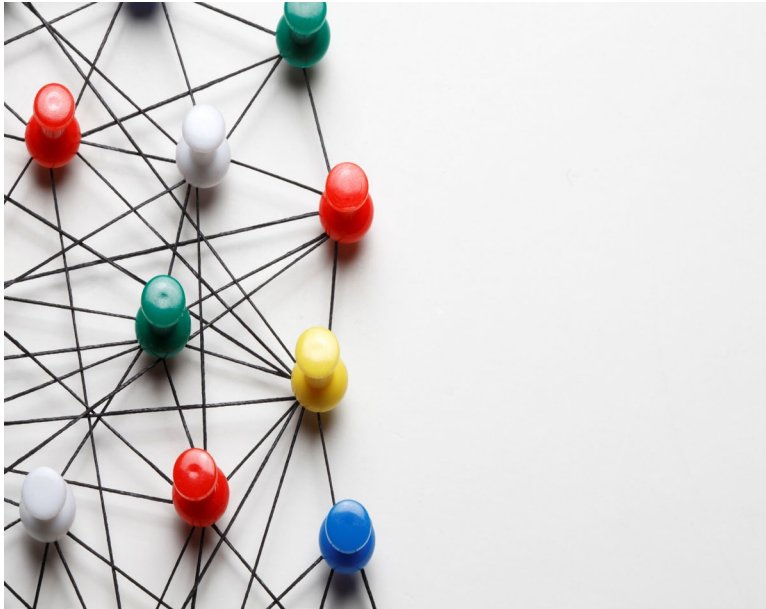
- “The screening gives us information about an area we may want to explore further.”
- “This helps us think about what support might be helpful.”



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The CONNECT Framework



C — CONNECT

Start with strengths and relationship.

O — OBSERVE

Share specific behaviors or examples.

N — NORMALIZE

Reduce shame without minimizing the concern.

N — NOTICE

Ask what the parent sees at home.

E — EXPLORE

Discuss possible supports.

C — COLLABORATE

Develop a plan together.

T — TAKE THE NEXT STEP

Agree on what happens next.



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What Does It Sound Like?

Instead of:

- “Your child has terrible behavior.”

Try:

- “We’ve really enjoyed getting to know Sofia. We’ve also noticed that transitions have been particularly difficult for her.”

Then ask:

- “Do you see anything similar at home?”
- “What have you found helps her when she’s upset?”
- “What are you noticing?”



The goal is not to convince the parent.
The goal is to understand the child together.

Responding to Parent Reactions

**“Are you saying
my child has a
mental health
problem?”**

“A screening doesn’t tell us that. It gives us information about areas where additional support or evaluation may be helpful.”

**“There’s
nothing wrong
with my child.”**

“We aren’t saying something is wrong with your child. We’re sharing what we’re observing so we can work together.”



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Responding to Parent Reactions

**“You’re labeling
my child.”**

“I understand why it might feel that way. We’re not trying to label your child. We’re trying to understand what they may need.”

**“He doesn’t do
that at home.”**

“That’s really helpful to know. Children can behave differently in different environments. Tell me more about what you notice at home.”



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When Parents Become Angry or Emotional

REGULATE → VALIDATE → RESPOND

1. REGULATE YOURSELF

- Slow down. Lower your voice.
Pause.

2. VALIDATE THE EMOTION

- “I can see that this is upsetting.”

3. RESPOND TO THE CONCERN

- “I don’t want you to feel that we’re blaming you or your child.”



Avoid:

“Calm down.”
Arguing
Becoming defensive
Over-explaining
Trying to prove you’re right

Remember:

Connection before correction.

Role Play: the Difficult Conversation

Scenario: “My Child Is Fine at Home.”

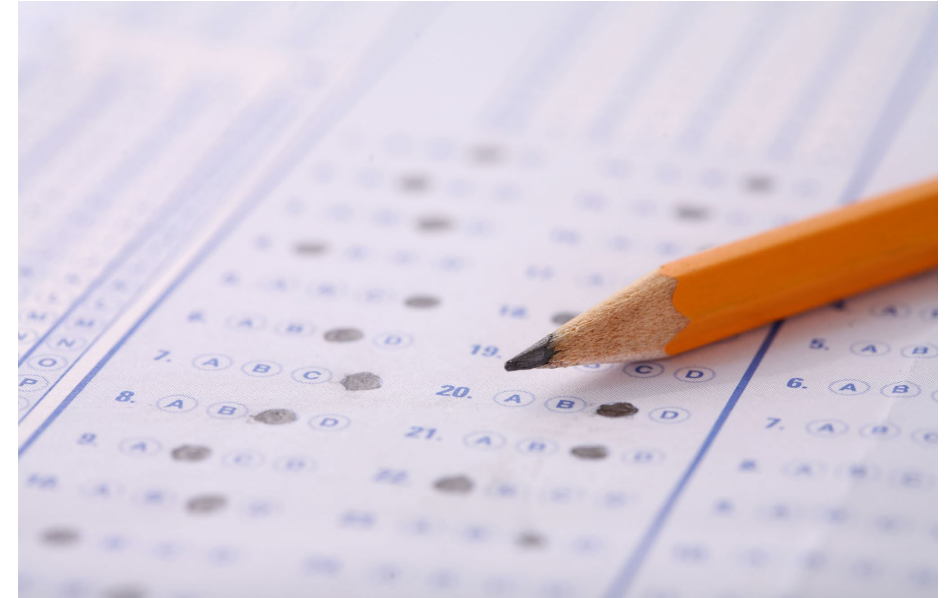
Child: Emma, age 4

Teachers have observed:

- Frequent tantrums
- Difficulty transitioning between activities
- Occasional hitting
- Difficulty calming once upset
- ASQ-3 and ASQ-SE was administered

Parent says:

“You’re making my daughter sound like she has a serious problem. She’s perfectly fine at home.”



The Conversation We Want to Create



Difficult conversations don't have to damage relationships.

We want families to leave thinking:

- **“They care about my child.”**
- **“They listened to me.”**
- **“They didn’t blame me.”**
- **“They didn’t label my child.”**
- **“We have a plan.”**



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Final Thoughts

Remember:

- “We aren’t bringing families a problem to fix. We are inviting them into a partnership to understand their child.”

Final reflection:

- *What is one phrase you will use differently after today’s training?*



Questions and Comments

Please complete the survey



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