

Western Child and Family Services Alliance Having that Difficult Conversation with Parents and Families

Discussions with parents require planning and sensitivity. All parents can be resentful when they interpret your discussion as threatening or critical of their parenting skills or life style choices, so it is advisable to plan ahead. As Early Years Professionals you will have engaged with parents and families in a social non threatening manner when they drop their children off or pick them up. Developing these relationships is imperative to promoting a positive support system if and when you identify that the child has become vulnerable and there are extra concerns regarding the family as a whole.

Your responsibility

Whilst Early Childhood Professionals(ECP) are not mandated to make a report or referral it is always assumed that ECP follow the guidelines of “Duty of Care” and will without exception place the best interests of the child before all else.

What constitutes a vulnerable child

Within your role as an Early Childhood Professionals consistent observations will be taken of children within your care in areas regarding their development. Any area of development that you identify as having a delay would be defined as vulnerable. However within the context of Child First and Child Protection vulnerability has a wider scope and definition.

The Strategic Framework for Family Services states that vulnerable children, young people and families are likely to be characterized by:

- Multiple risk factors and long-term chronic needs, meaning that children are at high risk of developmental deficits;
- Young people and families at high risk of long-term involvement in specialist secondary services, such as alcohol and drugs, mental health, family violence, homelessness services, and Child Protection.
- Cycles of disadvantage and poverty resulting in chronic neglect and cumulative harm; single/definable risk factors that need an individualized, specialized response to ameliorate their circumstances;
- Single/definable risk factors that may need specialized one off, short term, or episodic assistance to prevent or minimize the escalation of risk.
- Family Violence- physical, verbal and emotional.
- Parental alcohol and substance abuse/gambling.
- Homelessness.
- Poverty.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse and indigenous backgrounds.
- Parental health – physical and mental health issues/disability.
- Parental Education- lack of knowledge of child development/poor parenting skills.

Identify your concerns

- Be fully aware of your concerns and discuss with other colleagues and centre coordinator, to verify concerns.
- Keep written records of occasions when these concerns occur. This can be helpful to you during discussions to refer to notes.
- If you wish to discuss professional referrals have appropriate information with you to pass on to parents/families.
- It would be appropriate to contact ChildFIRST to discuss your concerns, this can be done anonymously and they will be prepared to offer advice or recommend pathways for you to follow.

Planning to begin the conversation

Be mindful that any conversations that you have with parents/families occurs in a private area and that you can continue this conversation without interruption. It is essential to remember the privacy of all clients at all times. You may find that the inclusion of the Centre Coordinator may be helpful or alternatively identify who the parent/family has the most positive rapport with and arrange to include this person in the discussion.

If you work in a multi- disciplinary environment you may be able to include a social worker in the discussions, (with the parents/families permission). Advise other staff with whom you work of the time of the meeting and ensure that your absence is covered.

Being knowledgeable about the family will help you to plan for the conversation, you may wish to discuss sensitive issues with only one parent eg. If you suspect Family Violence may be occurring and one person in particular is the perpetrator you may not wish to have the initial conversation with this person present.

Find common ground to begin the conversation, highlighting positive traits or experiences of the child will engage the parents/family in conversation initially, then explore concerns regarding the child. Often where there are changes within the family environment you will see changes within the behavior of the child. Identify where the impact is occurring for the child.

Remember to start a conversation positively, follow with concerns and finish the conversation on a positive note. You may need to raise the topic gradually on consecutive occasions, be guided by the parents responses as we wish to promote collaborative practice with the parent/family not alienate them so that they leave the service.

Utilizing family-centered, strength based practices promotes a partnership and collaborative approach between you and the family. Remember parents/families are usually the ones who know the child best. You may wish to begin highlighting the changes you observe with the child and the date it first became apparent, and invite the parents to express their thoughts as to why the changes or behaviours have occurred. Also invite the parents to identify any actions or solutions that they may wish to utilize.

If parents are from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background you may need to explore the option of utilizing an interpreter. It is advisable that you do not utilize a family member, friend or member of the cultural community. Confidentiality is paramount as it reinforces your professionalism and respect to the parent/family.

Referral Procedures:

Western Child FIRST can be contacted and you can speak to the Duty Worker if you are at all unsure about the circumstances surrounding your concerns

Tel. Number; 1300 775 160

Monday – Friday , 9.00am-5.00pm (excluding public holidays)

Referring to Child First is a voluntary procedure and parents will need to assist in completing the Child First form and signing it.