

Something's Not Right With This Kid—Now How Do I Share This With Parents?

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One of the most difficult tasks a teacher can face is sharing concerns with parents about the lack of expected development or the behavior problems a child might be experiencing. One reason sharing this information might be difficult is questioning ourselves as to whether we are right about our concerns. The second difficulty may lie in the best way to share those concerns with parents.

Knowing whether we are right about our concerns comes with gaining knowledge about children and their development. It also comes with having experiences with children in different settings and over time. This happens as we become knowledgeable about the expected behaviors, the abilities, and the language skills of different ages.

The basis for our concerns about children may come with observations and then making the statement, "Something just isn't right with this child." To confirm our insights, systematic observations should be made. Observations should be made at different times throughout the day as the child is involved in different activities. They can be documented with notes made on index cards or by using a checklist. Index cards can be placed on a ring and carried in a pocket. The checklist can be placed on a clipboard that is placed on a handy hook for updates as we observe. Other ways to document include audio or

videotaping the child. Another approach is to photograph the child during different activities.

During these observations, the child needs to be compared to others in his or her class. Times to make observations include during circle time, during center time, during lunch, on the playground, and on different days. It is helpful to note the date and the time of day the observation was made of the child exhibiting the behaviors or lack of behaviors about which there is concern.

Before sharing these concerns with parents or asking for a professional to assess the child, certain steps should be taken in the center. One step is to adjust the level of activities for the child. If there is a developmental lag, the activities may need to be made easier. If the child appears to be advanced for his or her age, offering more difficult activities may be appropriate. This would allow you to make confirmation at the level at which the child may be functioning.

If the child's behavior is of concern, placing him or her with different groups of children than those with whom the child appears to end up with for different activities may be appropriate. At times, this may alleviate the behavior problems. If the child appears to be having difficulty adjusting to the classroom, placing that child with a particular child with whom he or she seems to relate to best may be a solution. Allowing the child to remain just with this child for a period of time and gradually adding one or two children to the group may allow the child to adjust and his or her behavior to improve.

If any of these approaches or others you have tried don't alleviate the concerns about the child, the next step would be to ask another teacher to observe the child. Perhaps you and the other teacher could be asked to trade classes for a day. It is also possible to have another teacher observe the child during lunch or on the playground. The notes taken by the other teacher can then be compared to yours to see if your observations are verified.

If the observations do confirm the difficulties noted in a child, it is time for a parent conference. It is also time to go to the director with your concerns and your observations, along with any materials you have. After discussion with the director, the routine for calling a conference needs to begin. This should include making the conference as convenient for the parents as possible. It is best if both parents can attend, even when there is a divorce. However, if there is antagonism between the two parents, a separate conference may have to be scheduled.

The initial contact in regards to a conference can be by telephone or in person. However, when contacting the parents, the reasons for having the conference should be shared. Be honest and tell them about your concerns so they won't be wondering and building up anxiety. This will also let them have the chance to think about the concerns and be prepared to offer more information or confirmation.

Preparing for the conference is as crucial as having the conference itself. It is important to begin with the setting and to have all materials ready to

display. This should be an adult-sized setting with adult chairs and tables available.

If a table is used, it is important for the staff to sit on the same side of the table or to be on an opposing corner. The diagram below shows this setting. At a round table, sitting on the same side is once again important. If only chairs are used, they should be placed in a circle format.

Any materials, such as the checklists, index cards, along with photographs and the child's work should be ready for display. This should be organized in a sequential manner to readily show the basis for the concerns.

Be prepared to talk about the child's difficulty. This means you should be knowledgeable with information you have gained from an expert or from research you have performed. This will allow you to be able to converse with the parents in a more detailed and professional manner. It will also allow you to have as much information as you can and it should include the names of physicians, psychologists, community agencies or other experts in the area.

The director of the center should always participate in these conferences. Any other staff with confirming information can be asked to attend as well as

any experts for the area of concern. However, the number of participants should be small in order to keep the parents from becoming overwhelmed.

If the child and any siblings need to be with the parents, make arrangements for their care. Arrangements for phone messages and any other interruptions that might occur should also be covered. This will allow the conference to be a continuous dialog which is important for getting the information across and for gaining consensus on the next steps.

As the conference begins, thank the parents for coming and make sure everyone is introduced. Give the parents the time frame and then begin with a set agenda. This will assure that all information is reviewed. However, neither the time frame nor the agenda should be so restricted that parents don't have the opportunity to voice their concerns or to ask questions. It is also important to emphasize that the purpose for sharing these concerns is to get the best assistance for the child possible.

Before the end of the conference, review the steps that have been agreed upon. Make sure that everyone understands what those steps are and that the parents are comfortable with them. Assure the parents that contact will be made on a regular basis and that if they have any concerns, they are free to initiate contact with you or the director.

The most important factor in making this entire process successful is the individual who directly cares for the child. The second important factor is gaining the confidence and cooperation of the parents. By making this intervention for the child a collaborative effort, the assessment results can be

used to develop better intervention plans and the child to make greater gains. This whole process begins with a teacher trusting his or her instincts followed by systematic observations. However, it must continue to be a collaborative process between the teacher and parents for the child to make the gains we want to see. The answer to the question in the title of this article can then be answered because we have kept the child as the focus. This allows everyone involved to assist this child in becoming a successful learner and human being.