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Childcare and children's health

An information sheet for parents

Talking with Childcare Professionals about your Child



A good experience for children in an early childhood program happens when professionals get to know them in the context of their family, particularly paying attention to their relationships with their main caregivers. You and the early childhood professionals in the program you use have a primary interest in common: the happiness and wellbeing of your child. Strong positive relationships between parents and professionals are crucial in providing high quality care to children, and they can also make a positive difference to your family's daily life. Knowledgeable and experienced professionals who respect parents and genuinely want collaboration can give you support, encouragement, information and advice on child development and parenting.

Professionals need particular skills and knowledge to work effectively with parents, and many professionals, whose training and experience focused on working with children, find relating to and communicating with parents to be a major challenge. Besides, parent-professional communication can be complicated if parents expect to be blamed for their child's problem or afraid of finding out that something is wrong with their child.

Parents are emotionally at their most vulnerable when it comes to their children. Many have highly developed 'threat detectors' as well. This is why you may infer criticism or concerns from even seemingly innocent comments from professionals. Busy early childhood professionals may occasionally talk to you in ways that may unintentionally make you feel anxious or uneasy.

A collaborative relationship between parents and professionals is very different from the traditional 'expert' based model that used to be common in health and community services. A brief summary of these models highlights some of the differences.

In the *expert model*, professionals make assumptions about parents' experiences, take the lead, do most of the talking and give advice and instructions, often giving the impression that parents' incompetence or character flaws have caused the child's problem and that the professional has to solve it. Advice is based on the idea that there is one best or right way to parent, leading them to impose their values and beliefs and judge parents according to their own standards. When problems cannot be solved quickly and easily, parents' lack of motivation, effort or consistency may be blamed. When parents ask questions or disagree the professional may become defensive.

In a *collaborative model* professionals respect parents' values, beliefs and goals for their child and use their expertise and wisdom. They believe that parents want what is best for the child and that the best outcomes occur when parents' knowledge and skills combine with theirs. They understand that there are many different good ways to parent. They appreciate that causes of behaviour problems are many and often involve factors that are beyond the parents' control (for example, child's temperament, disability, social and family factors). Although they do not blame parents, they always view them as part of the solution. Together professionals and families identify strengths and resources for resolving situations. Professionals respect the problem-solving capacity of parents and aim to empower them through suggestions, resources and strategies aimed at achieving realistic goals for their child, always leaving decisions up to parents. Professionals understand how hard it can be for parents to change their behaviour and show optimism about their capacity to change and succeed. Professionals do more listening than talking. Parents' ideas and contributions are actively sought and used. Parents are encouraged to voice reservations, doubts or concerns, and these are responded to non-defensively. Families deserve to have access to services that take collaboration seriously and that put the collaborative model into practice every day. When that happens everyone benefits.

This Parent Fact Sheet is available in different community languages and can be downloaded for printing from the Early Childhood Connections website. www.ecconnections.com.au

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