

# Conversations with Children, Families and Carers

## Tips and Guidance

Having meaningful conversations with children, families, and carers is a critical part of your everyday role as a Permanency Support Program (PSP) caseworker.

In meaningful conversations, you actively listen and communicate in an honest, considerate, and positive way. They are essential in supporting families and carers to make changes.

Meaningful conversations uphold the dignity of children and families. Upholding a family's dignity and believing in their ability to change, develops self worth and autonomy.

## Why Meaningful Conversations are Important

Meaningful conversations:

- help you build positive connections with children, families, and carers
- increase a child, family, and carer's desire to want to work with you
- support the sharing of information to build a better picture of a child and their family's story
- instill hope, which helps motivate change in families and carers
- give children, parents, and carers the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them
- help you gather information about a child to share with your colleagues, providers, DCJ, the Court and other agencies
- help achieve better outcomes for a child and their permanency goal.

By getting to know the children, families, and carers, you will have a better understanding of:

- why they might be behaving in a particular way
- what is important to them
- how they like to participate
- what particular experiences mean to them.

Remember when you preserve the dignity of people, and listen to their story, you build trust. Children, families, and carers are then much more likely to share their concerns and needs with you.

## Meaningful Conversations Help Families Achieve Change

Your conversations with families and carers have a significant impact on their ability and willingness to achieve meaningful change. Meaningful conversations should:

- uphold fundamental human rights
- seek solutions
- provide clear reasons for your work and decisions
- identify a child, parent, or carer's strengths.

The way you have conversations with children and families is likely to influence whether they seek help in the future. If a family experiences a sense of disempowerment, they are unlikely to trust you and engage in the future. See [Children's Responses to Violence: Resisting Misunderstanding](#).

Negative experiences may also create a sense of shame, diminish the families' self-worth, dignity, and identity. If they feel unheard, shamed, or blamed, they are likely to keep self-blaming and respond negatively, even aggressively, as an act of resistance. This may result in parents or carers minimising or concealing safety and risk concerns.

It is important you ask a child, family, or carer whether they have had negative experiences with past services or caseworkers. The family can tell you what has worked well, and what hasn't. Consider how a family's past experiences will influence your next steps.

## Key Elements of Meaningful Conversations

Meaningful conversations are about:

- being **attentive, active listening** and **allowing time for the conversation** to occur/flow
- being **open and curious** in exploring what may be happening for a child and their family
- **being an advocate** for the child when they cannot express their views or needs to their family, carer, community, a provider, another agency or professional
- **taking your time to understand the family network**
- understanding **who else might be working with the child or family** (colleagues, schools, other services) and what obligations they might already be meeting
- keeping **conversations focussed on specific issues**. If families want to talk about other issues, reassure them that this is important and make a time to discuss this later
- being **clear, honest**, and using plain English, **avoid jargon**
- **finding out what** the child, parent, carer, family, and community already know about an issue
- **considering** what **children of different ages** can understand and how long they can pay attention in a conversation
- **reassuring** a child, parent, or carer that there is **no right answer**, that it is **important they share what is on their mind** and that they are not alone
- **naming feelings and emotions** and if appropriate, sharing your feelings to open a conversation - this applies whether it is with the child, parent, carer, family, your colleagues, or other agencies.
- acknowledging that if something comes up that you cannot address, the issue is important, and you will **follow up**
- being **aware of your own feelings and biases, reflecting** on the experience and following up with your manager.

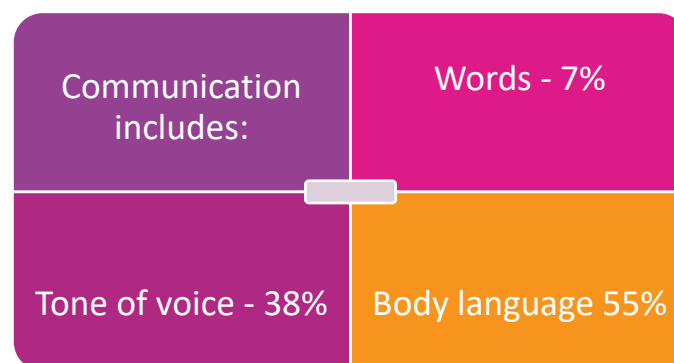
Recognise that there is an imbalance of power between families and the child protection system, of which you are a part. Be aware and carefully tend to the power you and your

organisation holds with families. Make sure that children, families, and carers have every opportunity to participate and make decisions about their lives.

For more information see [Dignity Driven Practice](#), [Reflective Practice](#), [Reflective Practice – Practice Tips](#), and [Working with Families in Preservation and Restoration](#).

## Body Language and Tone

Psychologists Mehrabian and Wiener (1967) found that when someone is uncertain about how to interpret something, they will pay more attention to body language or tone than spoken words. Your body language, tone of voice and words need to communicate a single, clear message. Reflect on your beliefs about the family. Think about whether you hold any biases or judgements that may be unconsciously showing through your tone or body language.



See [Difficult Conversations with Children, Families and Carers – Tips and Guidance](#), [Relationship-Based Practice](#), and [Dignity Driven Practice - Recognising Resistance Practice Tips](#) for more information.

## Practice Tips

There is no script for how to hold a meaningful conversation. However, there are some key points you should consider.

## Active Listening

- Give people your full attention, use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.
- Encourage people to speak.
- Acknowledge their story and experience e.g., nod your head. Use motivational interviewing reflective statements.
- Stay in the conversation with a child, their parents, carer, and family, rather than anticipating or thinking about what you will say next.
- Look at the person you are speaking with (if culturally and age appropriate).
- Avoid distractions (e.g., phone calls or texts).
- Be mindful of your facial expressions and note your posture – is it open or closed?

## Test What You Heard and Respond Appropriately

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing and checking what you heard e.g., ‘what I’m hearing is...’ or ‘sounds like you mean...’ or “let me see if I’ve understood”, “you’re feeling angry because... have I got that right?”
- Ask questions to clarify certain points, e.g., ‘what do you mean when you say...?’ or ‘is this what you mean...?’
- Use summary statements to check in, but also to reiterate helpful messages.
- Ask for more information in needed.
- Be open and honest in your response. Ensure your response is age and developmentally appropriate if you are speaking with a child.
- Set aside your assumptions, judgements, beliefs and understand what is being said from the person’s perspective.
- Do not blame or shame the child, parent, carer, family, or community member.
- Share your perspective without discounting or minimising the person’s views.
- Treat everyone in a way that models respectful, and dignity driven practice.
- If you find yourself responding emotionally to what is being said, say so.

## Minimise Interruptions

- Interrupting is unhelpful. It may frustrate the child, parent, carer, family, or community members. It may also limit your full understanding of the message
- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions
- Avoid interrupting when someone is speaking and allow them to talk.

For more information about active listening, please see [Mind Tool](#).

## References:

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