

Difficult Conversations with Children, Families and Carers

Tips and Guidance

What Are Difficult Conversations?

As a Permanency Support Program (PSP) caseworker, you will need to have difficult conversations with children and young people (children), families and carers. Difficult conversations have a lot at stake. They are the conversations you need to have about the changes that need to occur to for the safety of a child or to achieve permanency.

These conversations can be heartbreaking for everyone involved and have life-changing effects on a child and their family or families. This factsheet will help you have these conversations with the dignity, kindness, and empathy they need.

Remember, regardless of the quality of your work, it is very normal for children, families, and carers to disagree on:

- the need for change
- the need for support
- the decisions you, your agency, Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) or the Children's Court makes.

A difficult conversation is tough on the issue, kind on the person

Examples of Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations with children may include:

- explaining to a child that they will not be going home to live with their parent/s
- explaining to a child that they need to move on from their carer
- talking with a child about their experiences of abuse and neglect
- informing a child that their parent has died

- talking with a child about their behaviour and the effect this is having on others or their own wellbeing.

Difficult conversations with families may include:

- telling a parent that you will be making a Helpline report about something they shared with you in confidence
- asking a parent to acknowledge something about themselves they are ashamed or unaware of
- advising a parent their child will not be returning to their care
- advising a parent that your agency has decided to support a permanency goal of guardianship or adoption
- informing a parent about abuse experienced by their child while in care.

Difficult conversations with carers may include:

- advising a carer that their request for guardianship or adoption is not supported by your agency or DCJ
- informing a carer that a child will be returning home to their parents
- speaking with a carer about a need to do more to meet the child's cultural needs, or to support family time (contact)
- addressing concerns you may have about their attitudes to the child's family
- addressing allegations of abuse or neglect about a carer.

For more information, see [Relationship-Based Practice](#), [Dignity Driven Practice](#), [Language and Working with Families in Preservation and Restoration](#).

Why Do We Need to Have Difficult Conversations?

Working in child protection and out of home care means you will have difficult conversations. They are often needed as part of achieving safety, permanency and wellbeing for a child. They can have a major influence on the child's life now and in the future.

Always remember that when a child can't live with their parents, our work must focus on achieving permanency and lifelong connections with family and kin for that child. To achieve this, you must be both the instigator of difficult conversations and the person who works with empathy and dignity to find a way forward for a child.

Tips to Get You Ready to Have a Difficult Conversation

Start by looking inward and keep an open mind

If you hold conscious or unconscious bias toward a child, parent or carer, they are likely to feel it from your tone, expressions and body language. You need to genuinely challenge your own perception of a child, family or carer before a difficult conversation.

Begin each interaction with an open mind and recognise that the person's response may be an act of resistance to protect themselves. Be open and in the moment.

The non-verbal elements are particularly important for communicating feelings and attitude, if words and body language disagree, one tends to believe the body language (Belludi, 2008)

For more resources on cultivating self-awareness see [Building self-awareness: 16 activities and tools for meaningful change](#) and [Group Reflective Practice](#).

Connect to the purpose of the conversation

Stay connected to the purpose of the conversation. Explain the purpose to the person or people you are having the conversation with. Stay focused on how the conversation supports the safety, permanency and well-being of the child.

Choose the environment

Think about where you are going to have the conversation and when. Try to have the conversation in a place where the person feels familiar and comfortable. Think about the timing. Is this a stressful time of the day? Is there something else that might be making them anxious at this time? Make sure you can both easily hear and are unlikely to be interrupted.

Prepare for the conversation

It might seem obvious but before you face a hard conversation have your facts and purpose ready. As Louis Pasteur said “chance favours the prepared mind”.

A difficult conversation may become spontaneous but preparing what you need to say will help calm you. You may like to write down the key messages you need to cover. Practicing the conversation with your manager or another colleague will help you be prepared and remain calm.

Being prepared also involves considering how the other person may think, feel and behave. What has happened in the past for them? What is their history of social response from you, your organisation and other organisations like yours? How might their culture, disability, age or other factors affect your conversation? What might you need to adjust to account for these factors? For example, in some cultures looking into someone's eyes is disrespectful or confronting.

Relax your body

If having a difficult conversation makes you feel anxious, try to relax your body, particularly your nervous system. This may include taking a big breath and releasing it slowly. You could repeat this action or 'shake it out' through your arms and fingertips.

For more resources on cultivating self-awareness see [Group Reflective Practice](#).

Tips When Having The Difficult Conversation

Be hospitable

Offering a child, parent or carer a glass of water, juice or warm drink with a biscuit at the beginning of a meeting demonstrates care and compassion. It can also help to reduce the power imbalance that can exist in PSP. If possible, have some toys or colouring materials available for younger children, as this can help them feel more relaxed.

Be mindful of how everyone is seated. If possible, sit on a slight angle or take a lower seat to help tend to the power imbalance. Try not to have a table between you, as this creates a physical barrier.

Apologise when needed

As part of a difficult conversation, you may need to acknowledge the historical poor practice of others, including people who were not even in your agency. Validating that some decisions, actions or conversations did not uphold a child or family's dignity and apologising for their experience, can help people move past an injustice and be focused on the present. It also role models accountability.

Acknowledge strengths and what is working well

Acknowledging strengths and what is working well for a parent or family not only honours them but helps diffuse defensiveness and a parent or carer's fear of not being truly 'seen'. In the same way, it is just as important to recognise the strengths of a child or young person during a difficult conversation.

Use your active listening skills

A difficult conversation involves more listening than talking. The person you are speaking with needs to know that you are hearing and respecting them. What do they think and feel? What change do they think needs to happen? How could they achieve this change? How could you and others help? Remember that people are experts on their own lives and have likely been thinking about the issue or problem for much longer than you have.

Listening for the other person's thoughts, feelings and demonstrating your empathy is key to healthy difficult conversations. Use tone, eye contact and body language to demonstrate you are listening and you care. Check you have heard them correctly by reflecting their thoughts and feelings and summarise where needed.

Use 'I' statements and specific examples to achieve understanding without raising defences. Keep the child at the centre of the conversation.

Language is key, the words you choose to say and write are powerful, they influence the meaning you and others give to situations. How do you feel when you hear the following statements?

'I am worried your child may be feeling scared, hungry or may get hurt when he is alone while you are at the club.' Or 'You could seriously hurt your child by leaving him home alone while you gamble.'

The first focuses attention on the child's needs and can be a 'common ground' of concern for both parties. The second focuses blame on the parent or carer and increases the likelihood that the conversation will become combative. For more information watch the 14-minute video [We speak only for ourselves using I-statements](#)

Stay calm if others become upset or angry

In a difficult conversation, it can be common for a child, parent or carer to become upset or angry. This may result in raised voices, swearing or a person walking out of the room.

Although aggressive communication is not okay, it is important to always empathise with the person's experience and understand why their emotions are heightened. It can help to not worry about smaller issues (e.g., swearing or raised voices) to keep the conversation focused on its purpose.

Sometimes the child, parent or carer may direct their anger at you personally (e.g. name calling, belittling comments, or remarking on your life). While these comments can be hurtful, they are not directed at you, it's the situation. Their display of anger may actually be fear. Stay calm and empathetic.

If you meet their seeming anger, with an angry personal comment like 'how dare you call me that, you're the one who's had their kids removed', you are likely to escalate the situation. If you can respond calmly with 'I can see you are really upset and hear how much you love your child/ren. I am hoping we might be able to continue to focus on ...' you are acknowledging the person's pain, whilst providing the opportunity to find a way forward. Remember we are not discussing our lives or our children, we are discussing theirs, and this can be very painful.

Some of the people have survived acute traumas, experienced mental health challenges or unhealthy relationships. We can't expect people to match our tone and disposition.

Difficult Conversations With Parents

Talking with parents about keeping their children safe

When talking about children staying with or returning to their parents, be honest, clear and compassionate about what needs to change for a child to be safe. Always keep the conversation child focused. Focus on your concerns for their child and how their behaviour may be affecting their child. Be transparent and always uphold the family's dignity.

Remember parents are the experts of their stories and need to feel heard. Let them know you believe in their ability to change. This can help motivate parents and start a change journey to ensure a child grows up with their family immersed in culture.

Help parents to understand their responsibilities, which may include the need to engage with programs and services. Ensure they understand they will have the opportunity to contribute to

assessment and planning processes, including Family Action Plans (or similar case planning tools).

In the case of restoration, it is really important to talk to children and their parents about family time and how they can remain connected to their child.

Clear is Kind. Unclear is Unkind (Brene Brown, 2018)

Talking with parents about guardianship or adoption

Always keep the conversation child focused. Actively create opportunities to talk about a parent's worries and validate their feelings.

Be prepared so you can give clear and responsive information about why you are supporting or exploring guardianship or adoption. Make sure you really know a child and the family situation when you are talking to parents. This can help create trust.

Take the time to try and understand how the parents are going to feel about being told their child is going to be adopted or be under guardianship. You will need to maintain composure and resilience to support them uphold their dignity. Explain what process you will be taking to ensure their child continues to have a connection with them, their family and community. This can lead to better outcomes for a child with more stable permanency and connection to family.

Difficult Conversations With Children

Barriers that stop children from talking

The child may:

- be embarrassed
- feel ashamed
- worried it is their fault
- be unsure who can actually help
- have had bad experiences in the past when talking to adults
- fear they will get in trouble or make things worse
- feel they are betraying someone they care about.

We have a unique and privileged opportunity to work with children to overcome these barriers and support their meaningful participation by:

- challenging assumptions about children's capacity
- building meaningful partnerships with children
- talking to children in the right way and place
- recording their views accurately and keeping them in the loop.

It is important to communicate with the child in a way that is engaging and suited to their developmental stage.

To have a meaningful conversation with a child, consider the following tips:

- Take time to **check how you are feeling** before speaking to the child. Think about the stress or pressures you are carrying with you and how this could affect your focus and manner when seeing the child. Then **consider what the child's day may have been like**, what pressures or fears they may also be carrying with them today and what their greatest need is at the moment.
- It is just as important to **be prepared** to talk to children as it is with adults. Know what you want to discuss and what you need to know from them. Whilst being flexible is important, have a good idea of how you are going to communicate with the child. For example, a conversation centred on a specific theme or open-ended questions such as 'what does it mean to feel safe?', as well as games and other activities that will promote rich discussion.
- Use **language** that is appropriate to the **age and development stage** of the child and be careful not to talk down to them. Explain why you are asking the questions, what is happening and why.
- **Tune into** what the child is telling you **verbally and non-verbally** about their experience.
- Be **flexible and creative** in how you communicate with the child. For example, for younger children consider using drawing, painting, song writing, photography or exploratory and imaginative play to tell you about their world.
- **Check in** with the child during your conversations to **help them take the lead** and feel that they are being listened to.
- **Validate the child's experience** and help them **name their feelings**. For example, 'I can see you are feeling really angry right now, I would be too' or 'this is really unfair. I

can see you are really frustrated and fed up with dad yelling and hitting you and mum'. Do not minimise what they are feeling by using words like a 'little' or 'a bit upset'.

- Be **fair in your expectations** of what children will share with you and **respect their need for privacy**.
- Be **honest and transparent** because if a child thinks you are being untruthful, they will not trust you. For example, you might say "I know you were hoping that you could go back and live with mum, but I've spoken to her and she is struggling to stop drinking alcohol and stop taking the drugs. I do not think it is safe for you to return. You will need to stay here for a bit longer - how do you feel about that?"
- **Ask them what they want** and be clear about the things you can or cannot provide.
- Try and **meet the child where they want to meet**. Sometimes young people like car trips where they do not need to make eye contact while they talk or eating out and going to a park. Be flexible, creative and responsive.
- Be aware that they may become angry, aggressive, or shut down and withdraw. **Have ideas on how you will handle challenging behaviour**. For example, when you see the child starting to get agitated and flushed, you might say 'I think we need to use the pause button and come back to this later'. You could also use the 'name it to tame it' technique rather than shutting down the conversation. As the child becomes more aware of their emotions, they may be able to tell you when they need time to themselves.

Self-Management After a Difficult Conversation

Difficult conversations are difficult for everyone involved, including caseworkers. If you find yourself feeling anxious or stressed after a difficult conversation, it is important you look after yourself. Debriefing with a colleague or manager and group reflective practice can be very helpful.

Exercise or other self-care practises can also be very effective at releasing built up stress. Look over the suggestions in [Some Simple Ways to Relieve Stress](#) for ideas on how to take care of yourself. Note the things you could do immediately and those you can incorporate into your daily life.

References:

Belludi, N. (4, October 2008). 'Albert Mehrabian's 7-38-55 Rule of Personal Communication'. Right Attitudes: Ideas for Impact. <https://www.rightattitudes.com/2008/10/04/7-38-55-rule-personal-communication/>

Brown, B. (15 October 2018). "Clear is Kind. Unclear is Unkind". <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2018/10/15/clear-is-kind-unclear-is-unkind/>

See Taking Us Seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns. A report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/file-list/research_report_-_taking_us_seriously_children_and_young_people_talk_about_safety_and_institutional_responses_to_their_safety_concerns_-_causes.pdf