



COMMUNICATING BEHAVIORAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNS TO PARENTS

Sharing concerns with a parent about their child's behavior can evoke an array of responses. The parent may have one or many of the following reactions: become angry with the provider; suddenly remove the child from care; cry or become hysterical; deny a problem; express their appreciation for the information; thoughtfully consider the provider's advice. Being prepared for all of these responses is the best way to cope with a potentially difficult situation.

While it is not the role of a child care provider to diagnose a child's behavior, he/she can make observations and voice concerns. Providers have the unique opportunity to watch children interact in a group setting. A child's behavior may differ in the family home. So, it is important to validate the parents' experience.

A parent who has been approached with concerns about their child may face a variety of emotions including fear, guilt and anger. Parents may fear their child will be expelled from your program, particularly if the child's behavior has led to this situation in the past. In fact, many children who attend "Special Needs" preschools have been removed or expelled from one or more mainstream settings prior to being referred for special services. A strong provider-parent relationship can help ease this uncomfortable situation. Let the parent know you are there to support them through this, no matter what happens.



There are ways to help prevent a parent feeling singled out:

- Give parents a great deal of information to help their children succeed
- Prepare a lengthy assessment of each child's progress over the year
- Let the parent know what they can expect in the coming year
- Avoid jumping to conclusions about the child's problem because it can backfire
- Be ready to serve as a sounding board for parents showing care and respect for the family

Resources for providers and parents

There are resources providers can use to identify if a child requires more than just extra hugs and attention. Again, both the provider and parents should avoid making a diagnosis, but certain behaviors may help determine if assessment is needed. The Family Resource Network advises providers to understand that some undesirable behaviors a child may exhibit do not necessarily mean the child has a disability. However, some behaviors *are* an indication that there *is* a special need. In addition, there are resources available if the need is not significant enough to merit special services.

A brochure produced by The California Department of Education in collaboration with the California Child Care Health Program entitled, "*Early Warning Signs That Your Child or a Child in Your Care May Need Help*" is very useful. The brochure stresses that if you suspect that a child in your care may have special needs, you should help the parents contact the local school district or the special education program of the county office of education.

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Representatives of these agencies may schedule an assessment to see if the child qualifies for services. Parents' written permission is needed, and all services are confidential and provided at no cost.

The "Early Warning Signs" brochure also reminds us that all children develop at different rates and in different ways. However, if a child does have special needs, early detection and getting the child help are important to future development. The brochure breaks down an observation of a child into categories/risk factors: General Behavior; Hearing, Moving; Seeing; Communicating; Thinking; and Playing. You can contact the California Department of Education at (800) 995-4099.

In addition, the Family Resource Network can provide support, resources and referrals. Call the Family Resource Network at (510) 547-7322

The Bottom Line

The child care provider is doing the right thing by addressing concerns with the parent if a child in their care appears to need more help than she can give. Remember to be as sensitive, supportive and understanding as possible. A provider should take care that they appropriately communicate their observations to parents. Every parent wants his child to be successful and happy; breaking the news that there may be a problem can be earth shattering. However, the provider's observations may make the difference between a frustrated child struggling through his early years and a happier child on the road to successful treatment.

A provider who feels there is a need to approach a parent about concerns should consider the following:

Does the child care provider even have the right to discuss their observations and suggest that the

child is assessed? Absolutely. Providers not only have the right to discuss a child's needs with a parent, some would say that he or she has an *obligation*. According to the California Department of Education and California Child Care Health program, early detection of a child's problem is crucial to preventing more serious problems later in life. As difficult as it may be, the provider must be able to speak openly and honestly with the parents. Refrain from describing a child as "special needs", "abnormal" or "emotionally disturbed", or any other label when speaking with the parent. Focus on the individual behaviors and avoid making assumptions about what the diagnosis may be. Perhaps there is some information not previously known that would help the situation greatly. The provider should speak with the parent *before* seeking outside advice, and do so only with their permission.

Are the child's special needs too much for the provider to handle? It's important for the provider to be in touch with her own limitations and abilities. The provider may end up having to discontinue care if the behavior is extremely disruptive and the parent is unwilling to seek advice from their pediatrician or other professionals. In this case, providers should write a termination letter to the parent that includes appropriate referrals.

Is the provider willing to obtain outside advice or training to deal with the child's behavior? Sometimes a provider reassuring the parent that they will support them can make a big difference. Support may consist of anything from "check-ins" to taking some training to assist in giving the child the specialized care they need. However, special training is not always required for providing excellent care. A nurturing, caring environment may be all a child needs to thrive.

Information for this handout was provided by Kate Warren, Family Resource Network, and providers Ellen Gray and Julie Moeller

