Learning Outcomes

To develop relationships with child, family members and relevant professionals.

**Audience**  Groups 1-8 (Working Together 2010)  **Time**  30 minutes

**Key Reading**


**Links to Common Core**

Common Core 1 Effective communication and engagement with children, young people, their families and carers (skills: consultation and negotiation). Understand the key role and value of parents and carers; know when to refer them to further sources of information, advice or support.
How many times have we asked or even told someone to do something and they have not done it or completely done the opposite?

Just because we tell somebody something, how do we know that they have understood what is required?

It is important to consult with a wide variety of professionals and agencies in contact with the child or family, but this should supplement the vital information given by the child and family members themselves.

Consider the communication barriers that children and families might face as a result of lack of confidence or a lack of experience in communicating with professionals, for example, a lack of understanding about what information you need or fear, anxiety, suspicion.
Be clear about what you want the outcome of the communication to be: to inform, persuade, shock, praise, criticize, shame, please, inspire?

**Actively listen to the person** that you are trying to communicate with – echo their words back to them to make sure that you have understood what they mean.

Get **feedback** from the person that you have communicated with to ensure that they have understood you.

**Interpret other signals** as well as the words that are spoken back to you – arms folded, eye contact, disinterested or interested, unresponsive, using specific language or vague?

**Respect** – for the other person’s position or views (Townsend-Hall 1999).

Although these key principles were taken from a business context, they are the basic principles of communicating with people on all levels.

**Discussion point:** Explore with the group what makes it difficult to talk with parents, and what helps. Do you see how the principles just discussed apply to your communications with children, families and other professionals?

Which combination of factors makes communication more difficult, and which factors make it easier? Also, explore with the group the strategies individuals have developed that help explain to parents:

- concerns about their children
- concerns about their parenting and lifestyle
- when conversations become difficult.

Give some examples of how parental problems such as substance misuse exacerbates social problems such as poverty and isolation, prevents access to community resources and limits impact of professional interventions such as obtaining parenting advice and guidance.

**Discussion point:** You might ask participants to think of a family member that they know who has a particular need such as a learning disability and ask them to consider how this might exacerbate their social problems, their uptake of community resources and the impact of any professional intervention.
Never just give a leaflet. Always accompany the giving of written information with a discussion. In some cases you might need to read the leaflet to the person and clarify each point as you go. Never assume that the person can read or understand what is given to them.

It is important because you cannot conduct a thorough assessment of the situation and this is vital if the welfare of children and young people is to be effectively safeguarded and promoted.

Take parental preferences into account – taking note of the things we know about parental preferences can enable us to build more effective and respectful relationships.

If we take the time to build effective relationships during periods of relative stability, we can draw upon this at times of difficulty/stress/crisis when we need to effectively communicate with parents despite the difficult set of circumstances.
Relationship building. The first task is to establish a working relationship between the parents and the worker, and this is possibly the most important of all the tasks, as the nature and quality of this relationship will affect everything that happens subsequently. This involves the parents and worker getting to know each other and agreeing whether and how they are going to work together. This will depend upon the extent to which the parent feels able to trust the worker and thinks that she/he has something to offer. If workers are unable to engage parents for whatever reasons in an effective relationship, there will be severe limits to what can be achieved at any subsequent stage in the process.

Exploration. The second task involves the parents and professional working together to explore any difficulties identified by the parents. The focus of the exploration may be very specific or more broadly based depending upon the nature of the problem, but it occurs within the context of the parents as individuals with all the complexity involved in their physical, economic, personal, social, family and spiritual lives. The word exploration is deliberately chosen to include the notion of formal and informal assessment by the professional where necessary, but is also used to emphasise the equally important role the worker plays in enabling parents to think carefully and in-depth about their problems in order to make sense of the difficulties they are facing.

Understanding. The third task is to derive a clear understanding of the issues, difficulties or problems parents are facing, and this is achieved through the task of exploration. Ideally this involves the parents and worker developing a clear picture of the nature of the problem (for example, who is involved, how they are affected, how it arose, what caused it). Although the worker may directly provide this understanding, if careful attention is given to the tasks of building the relationship and exploring the situation, it is remarkable how often parents derive their understanding with help to think through the problem.

Goal setting. The fourth task is to help parents determine what they would like to achieve. To be effective in managing problems, it is crucial to agree the aims, goals or objectives of the work together through discussion. Without making these explicit, it is difficult to proceed to the next task of deciding strategies.

Strategy planning. With clear aims and goals agreed explicitly in the previous stage, the parents and worker can then work together on the next task of putting a plan together or a set of strategies in order to achieve them. This can mean working together to develop as many options as possible and selecting from these what is likely to be the most effective.

Implementation. The fifth task is to implement the chosen strategies with the worker providing appropriate support and intervention.

Review. The final task is to review or evaluate the outcomes in terms of the extent to which the goals have been achieved, to consider the process, and to decide upon further actions.

These tasks have been set out as a sequence of steps, but they each interact; the process is not necessarily linear as implied above.
Utilise a mix of methods of communication and find the one that works best with the family. Communication difficulties might include visual or hearing impairment, English not their first language – find alternatives: braille, sign, interpreter.

The home environment may be too distracting and it may be more productive to book a room at a local community centre.

Write things down to leave with the family, appointments, leaflets.

Histories are a way of understanding how the person got to where they are now, and what historically may have impacted on their capacity to meet their child’s needs. This might include their own relationship with parents, loss of significant others, previous relationships and significant events or conditions in their medical history.

Scales and questionnaires are often an approach that allows the person to focus their thoughts and communicate using discussions about what the instruments are designed to do and the scores.

Skill in the task of communicating does not always come automatically, so you may need to rehearse or practice some of these techniques on others.

If you are aware that you have a particularly difficult conversation coming up with parents, discuss this in supervision or with colleagues to help you work out the best way of introducing the discussion and how you might respond to the information or explanations that parents may give you.

It is important to engage with parents and carers during every important stage of the process so that they feel fully included and engaged. It is vital to family members are fully motivated to achieve the plan.