

Parent Aware Tip Sheets

Discussing Development with Family Members

Why is it important to have conferences to discuss child progress with family members?

Throughout the week caregivers have many opportunities to have informal conversations with the family members of children in care. However, these informal conversations do not provide time to discuss topics in depth so providers also offer conferences at least twice each year. Conferences are planned meetings between caregivers and family members. These meetings are longer conversations than daily, informal conversations and are usually held at a time when the caregiver is not also responsible for supervising children. Planning dedicated time for conferences allows caregivers and family members to focus on any issues that need to be addressed in order to provide the best care possible for the children.

How often should conferences occur?

Licensed programs and providers are required to offer conferences at least twice each year to discuss children's progress in the program and their overall development. Caregivers may choose to offer more frequent opportunities or may have the need to ask for a conference with a family to address issues at other times. For example, a provider may offer regular conferences each year in November and in May. She may also ask a parent to attend a conference in February to address a concern that has developed about a child's language development.

What should the goals of these conferences be?

Typically, conferences address all or some of the following:

- **Sharing information about development.** Throughout the year caregivers observe young children and gather information about their physical, social, emotional and intellectual (or cognitive) development. At the same time, parents have valuable information about their children and their development. Conferences are a perfect time for caregivers and parents to exchange information about what the child is able to do, what skills have been mastered, and what things the child is just starting to work on or will work on next. When caregivers prepare for conferences one of the first things to review is the observation notes that have been gathered since the last meeting with family members.

Caregivers can share information about children's development most effectively by using observation notes, examples of children's work, and, if available, results from assessments the program conducted. This makes children's development more concrete and easy to picture.

In addition to discussing overall development, a caregiver might also use conference time to explore concerns about the child's development. For example, if a caregiver has noticed that a child has trouble hearing directions, responding to sounds, or answering when his name is called, the provider might refer the family to the pediatrician or an audiologist to have the child's hearing evaluated.

Or, if a caregiver has a more general concern about the child's development, she might suggest a screening to determine if the child has needs that could be addressed through special services or other activities. **Screening** is a type of assessment designed to identify potential special needs. Screening is conducted by local school districts and other specially trained practitioners. Nearly all children attend a screening session prior to entering kindergarten. However, screening can also be arranged at other times if there is reason to believe that a child might have a special need. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the family to secure services for the child, but a **referral** from the caregiver, suggesting and explaining the kind of services that might be needed, can be very helpful to family members. Conferences provide the time to discuss important and sensitive topics related to a child's development including referring families to services related to child development.

- **Developing goals.** In addition to sharing observations and information about children's development, conferences are an excellent time for caregivers and family members to agree on goals for the child and next steps in achieving those goals. Based on the child's current level of development, caregivers and family members can agree on the abilities that are likely to emerge next and what each will do to help support ongoing development. For example, once caregivers and family members observe that a child is beginning to use a few recognizable words, they might agree that the next step is to focus on building new vocabulary by continuing to frequently read to the child and by naming objects in the environment. Discussing goals and next steps helps caregivers and family members work together to support the child's development.
- **Getting to know families better.** Although caregivers and family members get to know one another through informal daily conversations, conferences can also help in developing relationships. Because conferences allow longer, focused periods of time, they present a great opportunity to talk about the family's goals, interests and preferences for the child. Caregivers can also learn more about the family's culture as well as their hopes for their child.
- **Negotiating differences.** Caregivers and family members do not always agree on the way in which care should be provided for the child. Conferences are the best time to discuss concerns and to agree on how they will be addressed by providing dedicated time to focus on the situation until a solution is agreed upon. Problem-solving conferences can be scheduled whenever a situation arises that cannot be solved through casual conversation at the beginning and end of the day. Also, conferences are the best time to address situations that require confidentiality or when an issue is best discussed without the child being present.

What are some tips to effectively implement a conference?

Conferences are a two-way communication between caregivers and family members. However, the caregiver is responsible for planning and implementing the conference. Although holding parent conferences may sound difficult, following a few practical tips will help to develop and implement effective conferences that improve the program and the care provided to children.

Before the conference:

- Schedule conference times well in advance and provide a number of flexible blocks of time so that families can make arrangements to meet with caregivers. Take into account the times of day and days of the week when family members are free to come to a meeting.
- Plan for a private location, away from children whenever possible.
- Arrange for an interpreter for family members who do not speak the same language as caregivers. Other family members or staff members in the program may be able to serve as an interpreter.

- Work closely with families to share information with all family members. In some cases more than one conference may be required.
- Gather materials such as observation notes, examples of the child's work, or formal assessments and create written notes of the important points to be shared. A script is not required but a basic outline of the important points to be discussed will keep the conversation on track.

During the conference:

- Welcome family members and tell them that you are happy to have this chance to talk about the child's development. Use each family member's name.
- Share good news first. This sets a positive tone for the meeting and may lessen any fears that family members have about the meeting.
- Allow plenty of time for conversation.
- Ask questions to get family members involved in the conversation. Listen to what family members have to say. You do not have to agree with suggestions offered by family members but it is critical to listen and to accept the insights of others.
- Take notes. This practice shows that you take the information provided by family member seriously and reminds you to follow up after the conference.
- End on a positive note. Even if there has been discussion of difficult topics it is important to end with something positive such as plans for the future. This strengthens the relationship and reinforces your interest in working together with family members.

After the conference:

- Review the notes and complete any follow-up activities you have agreed to.
- Continue daily conversations and communications with families.