

# Conversation Starters

## *Welcoming parents and families into schools and early childhood settings*

Children grow and flourish within the context of positive relationships. A positive relationship between the people caring for the child, including teachers and early childhood staff, is important for the child's development. Empathic, inclusive communication is the key to building positive relationships. Getting the relationship off to a good start is important but can be difficult.

The following Conversation Starters may help.

### The First Meeting...

A relationship is based on both parties sharing information. Often the first meeting, especially if it is about enrollment, can be very one sided and clinical. Families have forms to fill in and are required to give a lot of personal information. To connect successfully with the family, this information exchange needs to be much more balanced.

- ⇒ Ask about their child and their family
  - e.g. "Tell me about your child."
  - "What are your child's likes/dislikes?"
- ⇒ Talk about their goals, long or short term
  - e.g. "What are your hopes and dreams for your child?"
  - "What role do you see the centre/school playing in your child's life?"
- ⇒ Ask about other members of the family
  - e.g. "Who does 'Amy' love to hang out with?"
  - "Does 'Amy' have siblings?"
- ⇒ Seek out interesting things about the family, things you have in common
  - e.g. "What is your best/worst/funniest memory of school?"
  - "What was your favourite book as a child?"

## Day to day interactions...

The purpose of day to day communication is to continue to build on the relationship and to increase the families feeling of connection to you and the centre/school in a positive way.

Families will avoid you if the only time you speak to them is when the child does something wrong or there is a problem.

- ⇒ Always greet parents by name when you see them  
e.g. "Good morning Mrs ..." or use their first name
- ⇒ Remember things that you know about the family  
e.g. "How's your new baby?"  
"I bet you're happy that Richmond finally won a game"
- ⇒ Seek out and discuss things you have in common  
e.g. "Did you drive down Furlong Road this morning? Wasn't the traffic terrible?"

## Parent—Teacher meetings...

This is a time when both teachers and parents can discuss what is going on for them and the child. Don't just use this as a time to give information and opinion. Set up a welcoming space and use the prompts below or open questions to seek out the parents perspective. The aim is to have a caring, open conversation about the child.

- ⇒ Ask for the parents input & listen  
e.g. "What would you like to talk about?"
- ⇒ Talk about what you enjoy about teaching/caring for their child  
e.g. "I enjoy the way 'Johnny'..."
- ⇒ Ask about their perspective of the child's experience  
e.g. "How does Johnny feel about coming to school/the centre?"
- ⇒ Give them the opportunity to discuss worries  
e.g. "What do you think about ...?"

## When problems arise...

This is an opportunity for addressing challenges. Start by looking at what the child/family is doing well, and discuss whether the same skills could be used to overcome the challenge. Set up an open safe space for a caring conversation about the child. Remember the things you have already learnt about the family and use these to begin a friendly conversation.

- ⇒ Use "I" statements to discuss the issue  
e.g. "I am really worried about ..."
- ⇒ Acknowledge feelings of embarrassment, anger or disappointment  
e.g. "You sound really disappointed about ..."
- ⇒ Gently reiterate your point  
e.g. "How do you think we can resolve this issue?"
- ⇒ Let parents develop solutions. If they "own" the solution they are likely to put it into practice.  
e.g. "What would you like to happen next?"