

**The ABC of**  
**Working with**  
**Families**  
**Effectively**

Education and Childcare

## The ABC of Working with Families Effectively

Working with families is crucial to our roles of working in Childcare and Education, building effective relationships with parents/carer and wider family will benefit the children's positive outcomes immensely. Working together for the best outcomes possible is a journey that all parties need to be invested in. However, this is not always easy, and it is a skill that is challenged throughout our careers in this sector. To move forward we need to constantly and consistently evaluate our practice, increase our knowledge and awareness, and try new approaches. Here is our ABC of Working with Families Effectively, as an approach to refer to, revisit, and reflect upon.



### **Always be ready to listen.**

Effective communication is so important when working with families, actively listening, and listening to hear are skills that are sometimes difficult to perfect. We are all human and so there are days when the noise in our own heads is loud enough to make listening to others difficult. So, on those days, schedule a time to speak to the family if they have something to share and discuss and maybe enlist a colleague for support. Effective communication with the families

that we support is not just for the big issues and complications, of course, it is a highly enjoyable benefit of the role, engaging, connecting, and building relationships is what we are built to do as humans. The simple 'Good morning' and open ended, genuine 'how are you?' can make a difference to our day and goes a long way in making us feel welcomed. Parents and carers are leaving a part of themselves with you, they need to feel comfortable in doing so. Taking an interest in what they have to say, and a genuine concern as to how they are will contribute to that overall relationship.

It is crucial that during times of listening to what may be going on in families lives, that you remember your own limits and have an available, up to date signposting process in place. As much as we enjoy helping in our caring roles, some of the issues are best dealt with by specialist professionals who are trained to support in these instances. Maintaining professional boundaries in settings is something that we need to have an awareness of- A professional boundary is the right balance of engagement and friendliness while maintaining a barrier that protects you and the setting.



### Be confident.

Easier said, than done. Confidence will grow the more that you practice engaging with families, not every family are going to welcome you with open arms for various reasons, one of which being past experiences and their own anxieties. This does not mean that we stop trying to engage though, it is very similar to being a key person for children, you are key person to the family and so you find different ways to connect and involve

the family, these are the families that may need you the most, don't give up! I liken this to having a child who doesn't like to participate in creative activities, as an example, do you stop trying to encourage them to join in? No, of course not, you find the creative elements that they do enjoy and adapt your practice. If a parent or carer is reluctant to attend a parent consultation, could you communicate with them in a different way? If the parent or carer answers your question of 'how are you?' with an 'I'm fine', find out more about them and ask more specific questions, ask about their children and what they love to do with them-find a common ground.

You are an expert in your field and supporting your own continuous professional and personal development is going to ensure that your confidence grows. Reminding yourself of your strengths will increase your confidence when communicating with families. Try new ways of engaging and if it is something you have done before and it hasn't worked, reflect on why it didn't work but also, will it work for this new cohort of families? It is worth evidencing the journeys that are taken with families, as sometimes when you look back and reflect, you realise how far you have travelled and how much you have achieved with that family. We are so very hard on ourselves at times and by celebrating the successes that we have; we can learn to 'flip the script- 'finding the positives in the weaknesses that we think we hold. For example, a family that moved to the UK from India attended a setting that I managed, and their English was very limited, they would be fearful when staff approached them as they did not understand some of the messages that were being relayed. Over the course of 6 months, trust was built, and new words were learned, subsequently the confidence of staff increased. The family was happy engaging with us and felt comfortable and safe. Whilst we could not have a long conversation or consultation with the family, we celebrated that trust that we had built with each other and focussed on nurturing that connection instead of dwelling on the things that we couldn't do.... yet!



### **Celebrate all families.**

Make sure that all families feel seen in the setting. This is something to really think about and ensure that the representation is genuine and not tokenistic. There are so many different makeups of families, and it is important that the message is received loud and clear that we may all be different, but the love is the same. Every family should feel celebrated in your setting by having a sense of belonging. The Birth to 5 Matters guidance (2021, p29) states that 'practitioners need to get to know the families and understand the challenges they face, and then be prepared to adapt the way they work in order to accommodate diverse families' needs.' The families that attend our settings have so much to offer too, we can learn from them and have a reciprocal relationship that benefits the child. For example, during an observation of a student, the class were looking at places we live. The student had arranged the resources well with lots of cartons, glue, paint and so on-with photos of different types of houses on each table-flats, terraced, bungalows, semis and detached-all good until she asked the children to find a photo that looked like the house they lived in.....one little boy looked around, he was clearly upset and said he couldn't see a house like his.....when the pictures were looked at the pictures with him, he just shook his head. He drew his house and added wheels, making it obvious that it was a caravan. His parents were building a house and were living in the caravan during the build. An important lesson in being aware of the children and their families, ensuring that they are represented or that the staff are mindful of how they can adapt in the moment.

### **Useful resource: In discussion with Dr Eunice Lumsden**

Health Review: 1001 days - A discussion around relevant aspects of child and family holistic health and wellbeing with a post Pandemic focus, where we will hear from Dr Eunice Lumsden: Associative Professor and subject leader for childhood, youth and families at the University of Northampton.

<https://cache.org.uk/childcare-and-education-careers-toolkit/education-and-childcare-careers-toolkit-webinars>



### **Reflective Questions**

Are there areas where families can speak to their key person in confidence?

Do you have local information and service offers signposted to parents and families?

Are you able to speak confidently with families? If not, how can you be supported?

How do the families you work with communicate and how can you adapt your approach to make them feel supported?